

Acupuncture for Anxiety

Different approaches have beneficial effects.

Posted Oct 30, 2018 By **James Lake, MD**



Overview.

Animal and human studies suggest that the beneficial effects of acupuncture on health, including mental and emotional functioning, are related to different mechanisms of action, including changes in neurotransmitters involved in emotional regulation such as serotonin, modulation of the autonomic nervous system, and changes in immune function. Some researchers have argued that the [placebo](#) effect plays a significant role in clinical response to acupuncture; however, sham-controlled studies do not support this hypothesis.

Research findings support acupuncture as a treatment of anxiety.

Acupuncture and acupressure are widely used to treat anxiety in both Asia and Western countries. Extensive case reports from the Chinese medical literature suggest that different acupuncture protocols reduce the severity of generalized anxiety and [panic attacks](#) ([Lake & Flaws 2001](#)).

In a small double-blind sham-controlled study, 36 mildly [depressed](#) or [anxious](#) patients were randomized to either an acupuncture protocol traditionally used by Chinese medical practitioners to treat anxiety or to a sham acupuncture protocol (i.e. acupuncture points believed to have no beneficial effects). All patients received three treatments. Heart rate variability (HRV) and mean heart rate were measured at 5 and 15 minutes following treatment. Resting heart rate was significantly lower in the treatment group but not in the sham group, and changes in HRV measures suggested that acupuncture may have changed autonomic activity resulting in a reduction of overall anxiety. The significance of these findings is limited by the absence of measures of baseline anxiety before and after treatment.

In another double-blind study, 55 adults who had not been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder were randomized to either a sham acupuncture point or a bilateral auricular (involving points on the ears) acupuncture protocol called the “shenmen” point. That protocol is believed to be effective against anxiety. In all subjects, acupuncture needles remained in place for 48 hours. The “relaxation” group was significantly less anxious at 30 minutes, 24 hours, and 48 hours compared to the other two groups, however, there were no significant inter-group differences in blood pressure, heart rate, or electrodermal activity ([Wang 2001](#)).

Reviews report mainly positive findings.

An early narrative review of controlled studies, outcomes studies, and published case reports on acupuncture as a treatment of anxiety and depressed mood was published by the British Acupuncture Council. Sham-controlled studies yielded consistent improvements in anxiety using both regular (i.e. body) acupuncture and electro-acupuncture. The authors remarked that significant differences existed between protocols used in both regular and electro-acupuncture, suggesting that acupuncture may have general beneficial effects or possibly placebo effects. Although most controlled studies reviewed reported a general anxiety-reducing effect of acupuncture, the reviewers regarded these findings as inconclusive because of study design problems, including the absence of standardized symptom rating scales in most studies, limited follow-up, and poorly defined differences between protocols used in different studies.

A recently published systematic review ([Amorim 2018](#)) compared findings of studies on traditional (body) acupuncture, ear acupuncture (auriculotherapy), and electro-[therapy](#) in the treatment of anxiety. Some studies included in the review reported that acupuncture enhances response to prescription anti-anxiety medications and may also reduce [medication](#) side effects. The authors found good evidence that different styles of acupuncture reduce symptoms of anxiety in general, and recommended additional sham-controlled studies to help determine whether certain protocols are more beneficial than others.

For more information about complementary and alternative treatments of anxiety, read my e-book "[Anxiety: The Integrative Mental Health Solution](#)."

Few mild adverse effects

Uncommon transient adverse effects associated with acupuncture include bruising, fatigue, and nausea. Very rare cases of pneumothorax (i.e. a potentially life-threatening condition caused when an acupuncture needle results in the collapse of a lung) have been reported.

References

James Lake, M.D., is a Board-certified psychiatrist who completed residency training in psychiatry at Stanford University Hospital. He has served as a clinical assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral medicine at Stanford, and is currently a visiting assistant professor of medicine at the University of Arizona School of Medicine's Center for Integrative Medicine. He founded and chaired the American Psychiatric Association's Caucus on Complementary, Alternative and Integrative Mental Health Care from 2004-2010. Lake is also a founding member and former chair of the International Network of Integrative Mental Health.

James Lake has published peer-reviewed articles and chapters on integrative medicine and psychiatry, contributes a regular column on integrative mental health care to *Psychiatric Times*, and serves on the editorial review boards of *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, *Journal of the Association for Advances in Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*, and *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. He is the author or editor of four textbooks—*Chinese Medical Psychiatry: A Clinical Manual*, (with Bob Flaws); *Textbook of Integrative Mental Health Care*; *Complementary and Alternative Treatments in Mental Health Care* (co-edited with David Spiegel); and *Integrative Mental Health Care: A Therapist's Handbook*. His most recent writing project is a series of 10 e-books on integrative mental health care. His long-standing research interests include the role of culture in mental illness, the philosophy and history of medicine, and the role of consciousness and intentionality in healing.

Author of *Integrative Mental Health Care How to Get to the Best Treatment Plan* [Read now](#).

"Anxiety: The Integrative Mental Health Solution" by James Lake

MD <http://theintegrativementalhealthsolution.com/anxiety-the-integrative-mental-health-soution.html>

Acupuncture and electroacupuncture for anxiety disorders: A systematic review of the clinical research, Amorim et al. *Comp Therapies Clin Practice*, 2018 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29705474>