

Ask the Acupuncturists  
Oriental Medicine on the Side Effects of Quarantine

**Staying Home to Protect Our Health**

In March and April of 2020, the US Government began to issue stay at home orders and nonessential business closures to prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in a strong, concentrated effort to halt the spread of the disease, highly contagious and transmissible through the air, particles, and surfaces. We did well to stay home for the first month and well into the second month. For preventing the spread of the coronavirus, it was a good thing. Staying home in this prolonged manner did, however, come with side effects of its own, many of which are stress related, discussed here.

**What to Expect with Prolonged Quarantine**

A prolonged quarantine has emotional and physical side effects. Family tension, social tension, financial stress, disruption of the routine and adjusting to more time either at home or isolated creates new stress. Compound this with the fact that all of our pre-quarantine projects and commitments are still in place, and you have stress due to derailment and disruption of timing. These are not even yet taking into account grief for those affected by the pandemic.

Emotional symptoms of quarantine may involve: mood swings, depression, stress, stress-related syndromes, anxiety, sadness, or apathy. Mental symptoms: Feeling lost, bored, or disorganized, vivid or disturbing dreams, and worry. Grief and anger are common.

Physical symptoms might include: Cravings, perhaps for drugs, sugar, or alcohol, desire to eat unhealthy foods, excessive snacking, insufficient exercise, disruption in the sleep-wake cycle, alternating high and low energy states, and weight gain.

**Positive Effects of Quarantine**

We have slowed the spread of a deadly virus around the country, saving many lives. That alone is something to be proud of. Though our health may suffer in some aspects due to the quarantine, there are many silver linings, positive aspects to consider. Here are a few:

- More time for the family

- Quality time with your partner and reconnecting
- Opportunity to reflect and meditate
- A “pause” space to review your life and think on your dreams and aspirations
- More time to catch up on sleep if you were lacking it before :)
- Open time to pursue a hobby, refine your skills, or read books
- Renewed focus on your home base
- Taking care of some of the home’s needs like repairs or gardening
- Time to focus on your health through nutrition, exercise, and sleep.

For many of us, the quarantine is no vacation. This is something that has been put on us out of absolute necessity. But in a negative situation, looking for the positive aspects is essential for the balance of yin and yang. Obstacles can become opportunities, or as Marcus Aurelius said, “what stands in the way becomes the way.”

### **The View of Classical Oriental Medicine**

Oriental Medicine recognizes that emotions affect the five organs. Anger affects the liver, Joy affects the heart, Worry affects the spleen, Sadness affects the lung, and Fear affects the kidneys. The emotional climate of our surroundings has a direct effect on the body through the energy of the organs. Our organs in their mental / emotional aspects have a specific way of being that they prefer. When this natural order is disrupted, a pathological state could occur. The body will try to balance the Qi to neutralize pathological states. This is the body’s defense mechanism for keeping us balanced, but it also uses up Qi (energy) which can cause us to feel tired and depleted. Many of us are in this state right now. Stress drains energy.

The following list gives an illustration of the mental/emotional aspects of being related to Oriental Medicine’s understanding of the body, according to the 5 Elements.

### **Classical Five Element Emotional / Mental Aspects**

1. Wood Element: The Liver, creativity and expression, and the smooth flow of qi. The Liver is related to creating a smooth life path, and the Liver likes free, easy movement. In a pathological state: Anger, outbursts, shouting, frustration, and feeling “stuck”.
2. Fire Element: The Heart, mind and consciousness, joy and laughter, and the circulation. The Heart likes happiness and clear-thinking, and wants warmth

- and entertainment. In a pathological state: Mania, easily distracted, insomnia, or talking too much.
3. Earth Element: The Spleen (and pancreas), intellect and reason, transformation and experiencing the sweetness of life. The Spleen categorizes, reasons, thinks, and transforms. The Spleen likes positive change, the savors of food and drink, and brainy exercise. In a pathological state: Worry, rumination, overthinking, or loss of reason.
  4. Metal Element: The Lungs, awareness and sensitivity, organization and energy. The Lung is awareness of surroundings, the executive organizer, and the Master of Qi (determining factor in a high or low energy level). The Lung likes activity, organization, open space, acceptance, and freedom. In a pathological state: Grief, sadness, depression, loss of energy, lack of organization.
  5. Water Element: The Kidneys, will power, personal identity, strength of the body, and ancestral heritage. The Kidney is your will to live, “source” of being which is the link with ancestors, your personal signature or identity, and the power you need to face life’s setbacks. The Kidney likes strong, firm foundations, gentle work, personal confidence and a healthy (non qi depleting) lifestyle. In a pathological state: Fear, anxiety, feeling “blah”, loss of willpower, drained or low energy, discontentment with the self or low confidence.

### **Effects of Qi Stagnation**

Emotional effects on the 5 element aspects of our being have specific internal results on the body’s qi, which are visible in the pulses and physically along the acupuncture channels.

- Anger: Raises the Qi
- Joy: Slows down the Qi
- Worry: Ties the Qi in knots
- Sadness: Depletes the Qi
- Fear/Anxiety: Scatters the Qi

In classical Oriental Medicine diagnosis, the state of Qi of the body says a lot about the emotions and vice versa. The goal of acupuncture is to balance the Qi so that it returns to its natural, normal movement, which will alleviate mental and physical symptoms.

## Imbalances Arising from Qi Stagnation

There are a few common patterns which Acupuncturists and Oriental Medicine people will see more of due to the negative aspects of quarantine. If any of these sound like you, please make an appointment with your local acupuncturists sooner rather than later so they can locate the root cause of the imbalance and help you feel better faster.

- Liver Qi Stagnation: tight, stiff muscles, feeling very stiff after waking up in the morning, restless sleep, feeling depressed, tired, or “stuck, lack of creativity in a normally creative person, moodiness, irritability, chest stuffiness, menstruation difficulties, tightness of the diaphragm or upper abdominal region. Your acupuncturist may notice a Wiry pulse, red or toothy tongue sides, and tight muscles along the acupuncture channels.
- San Jiao (Metabolism) dysregulation: Weight gain, irregular digestion, urinary symptoms, feeling too hot or too cold in temperature, confusion, and sweating. Your acupuncturist may notice a weak pulse at the San Jiao location and tender acupuncture points along the San Jiao channel.
- Spleen Qi Deficiency: A sallow complexion, tiredness, a desire to lie down, weakness of the limbs, a reduced appetite, abdominal weight gain or a distended abdomen, loose stools, and an aversion to or intense craving for sweet foods. The acupuncturist will notice a swollen, tooth marked tongue, and a slow or sinking pulse at the Spleen location.
- Kidney Yang Deficiency: Sore back, low back pain, knee pain or joint pain, possible dizziness, tinnitus (noise in the ear), decreased libido or sexual performance, a general lack of motivation to “get stuff done”. The acupuncturist might find cold in the low back channels, deficient Kidney pulse, a pale tongue with extra coating at the very back.
- Heart Fire: Palpitations (any feeling of uncomfortable heartbeat or fluttering in the chest), insomnia, flushed face, thirst, bitter taste in the mouth, ulcers, urinary burning, a spell of mania, obsession, or extreme distraction. Insomnia, or inability to fall asleep. The acupuncturist will likely note a red tongue with a very red tip and heat dots, a rapid full pulse in the Heart location, and a red bright complexion.
- Stomach Yin Deficiency: Inability to digest regular foods, hunger with no desire to eat, “food fatigue” (you’re hungry but nothing sounds good), hiccups, dry mouth, constipation or dry stools, and thirst. The acupuncturist will probably notice a tongue with a peeled or absent coating that is red with little moisture, and thready, rapid pulses.

## **Solutions**

There are no one-size-fits-all answers, neither in Oriental Medicine nor in life itself. We must all take responsibility for our health and determine what works for us. It is more important now than ever to incorporate healthy practices into our lifestyle to avoid low morale and bodily illness. Examples include: Having natural whole foods and fresh vegetables at the table whenever possible, and decreasing the use of “junk” or processed foods.

Consuming alcohol with moderation (Alcohol is a catch-22. It may relax you in the moment or help you sleep, but wake you up later with a racing mind, joint pain, and disrupted digestion). [Please see our next article in Ask the Acupuncturists for more information].

Practicing gentle movement like walking meditation, qi gong, or tai chi. Going outside whenever possible to breathe fresh air. If you are having a problem with your health that you believe is related to quarantine, there is likely some Qi stagnation involved related to the imbalances described here. Acupuncture helps by re-establishing the normal balance of Qi in the body. It is essential to schedule your visit by calling your acupuncturist so that you are “all set” when they reopen. Visiting sooner rather than later will help the practitioner pinpoint the root cause of the condition, helping you to feel better, faster.

## **Conclusion**

We urge patients and practitioners everywhere not to take the coronavirus / quarantine situation lightly. At the same time, we must guard against despair which defeats the morale and blocks us from our full potential (in health and in life). Oriental Medicine stands ready to help with time-tested traditional methods, an emphasis on balance, and noninvasive healing techniques. Looking at the positives, focusing on health and on our top priorities, and cherishing the love of family and friends, even from afar, will pull us all through this unprecedented event.

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