

Special Series: Treatment of Insomnia

Acupuncture and Moxibustion Treatment for Insomnia

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Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder. Everyone might experience short-term sleeping difficulty now and then, but when sleep disturbance becomes chronic and starts interfering with one's daily activities mentally and physically, it becomes a subject of treatment as insomnia. Insomnia includes the following four types:

- 1. Difficulty falling asleep:** One cannot fall asleep even after a half an hour or an hour of trying to sleep.
- 2. Difficulty staying asleep throughout the night:** One wakes up in the middle of night and cannot easily go back to sleep again.
- 3. Waking too early in the morning:** This is common among seniors over age 60.
- 4. Lack of deep sleep:** One has lots of dreams, or is so obsessed with sleeping well that he/she cannot feel satisfied with any sleep.

These four types can occur in combination.

The causes of insomnia are diverse, but the primary are the following:

- 1. Psychological causes:** unemployment, relocation, work related problems, divorce, severe stress caused by the death of a family member or close friend.
- 2. Physical causes:** asthma attacks, frequent urination due to enlarged prostate glands, itchy skin from eczema and hives, painful diseases such as sciatica or rheumatoid arthritis, nasal obstruction caused by colds or hay fever.
- 3. Psychiatric causes:** mental or psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and/or depression. In chronic insomnia, it is estimated that one third to half of the patients are suffering from certain psychiatric problems.
- 4. Pharmacological causes:** include anti-cancer drugs or chemotherapy, drugs or steroids that work on the central or autonomic nervous systems, drugs for asthma, hypertension, anti-

depressants, alcohol, caffeine or nicotine.

- 5. Physiological causes:** jet lag due to overseas travel or long trips, day and night reversal of the circadian rhythm due to the work shift and insomnia due to changes in lifestyle. Other environmental factors such as lighting and noise, mid-summer heat waves and mid-winter bitter cold can hinder sleep.

For the treatment of insomnia, it is important to clarify the cause first. Among these many causes, stress and anxiety are the most common contributing factors to insomnia, and the majority of insomnia cases we acupuncturists handle in daily practice belong to this type.

In modern medicine, medications such as sleeping pills and sedatives are predominantly used for the treatment of insomnia. However, drug-induced sleep can hardly make the patient feel refreshed on awakening in the morning, and usually a drowsy feeling lingers for a long time afterward. Also, long-term use of these medications often bring about various side effects such as tolerance or addiction to them, excessive fatigue during the day, difficulty concentrating or a decrease of cognitive function, etc. Therefore, many doctors do not recommend long-term use of these prescribed medications.

Fortunately, acupuncture and moxibustion can be effective for any type of insomnia as they work very well to restore the function of the autonomic nervous system, relax the whole body and enhance the calming effect on the brain to induce natural sleep. Especially for insomnia due to stress and anxiety, their effectiveness often shows immediate and drastic results.

Most of stress-related insomnia can be relieved after 3-6 sessions (twice a week) of acupuncture and moxibustion treatments. However, in the case of a neurotic patient or one who has been obsessed with having deep sound sleep, quite often it is very difficult to see any improvement despite long-term treatment.

Major Acupoints and Treatment

GV-20 or CV-21, BL-10, GB-20, GB-12, GB-21, TB-15, BL-43, BL-17, BL-18, CV-17, CV-14, ST-19, CV-12, ST-36, SP-6.

Apply only moxibustion (3-4 small cones of moxa of a rice size) on GV-20 or CV-21. Apply on the point which is more tender upon finger pressure. Apply acupuncture only on BL-10, GB-20, GB-12. Needle (gauge 0.16mm) insertion should be rather deep (1-1.5cm). Use jaku-taku (sparrow pecking) technique with 3-4 times of thrusting to cause *tokki* or *de qi* sensation in the back or posterior of the eye, which can be more effective for insomnia. Most stress-related insomnia can be relieved after 3-6

sessions (twice a week). However, in the case of a neurotic patient or the patient who is obsessed with deep sound sleep, the difficulties are the same as mentioned above, that is, it may be difficult to see any improvement. For the frontal acupoints CV-17, CV-14, ST-19, and CV-12, apply acupuncture only with shallow needle insertion (2-3mm deep) using either the *tanshi* (simple in-and-out) or 2-3 times *jakutaku* (sparrow pecking) technique. Apply both acupuncture and moxibustion on the points on the shoulder, back, and legs. Especially the area of BL-43, BL-17, BL-18 on the right side should be treated well as it usually manifests muscle stiffness and tenderness in almost every case of stress and insomnia. (Please refer to my article "Back Diagnosis and Theory" in NAJOM, Vol. 19, Number 56, 2012). In case of a chronic insomnia, the acupoints GV-10, GV-9, GV-8 on the upper spine often become quite tender upon finger pressure, and either acupuncture or moxibustion should be applied.

In cases of stress and insomnia, the area of CV-14, ST-19, CV-12 also often manifests muscle rigidity and tenderness upon finger pressure (**This sign corresponds to *shinka-hiko* (心下痞硬) in Japanese *hara* diagnosis and the spot *manipura chakra* or "the second brain" in yoga). I believe this symptom can be attributed to excessive tension in the solar plexus, which is a complex network of visceral and autonomic nerves behind the stomach. In other words, the sympathetic nerves are over-activated. If this condition gets worse, it can cause digestive problems such as gastritis, stomach ulcer or duodenal ulcer, and the patient is likely to complain of nausea, epigastric distress, or hunger pains. In that case, in addition to BL-43, BL-17, BL-18, it is better to treat BL-20, BL-21, and BL-50.

Some female patients who suffer from insomnia due to chronic severe stress may complain of irregular menstruation or other menstrual disorders, as chronic stress can cause an imbalance not only of the autonomic nervous system but also of the endocrine system.

In that case, you should treat specific points on the belly, lower back and the legs for gynecological disorders as well.

When you treat an insomniac patient who has been on medications such as sleeping pills or sedatives for many years, the patient should not try to stop taking these medications suddenly. A sudden cessation of these medications often causes various withdrawal symptoms or severe anxiety. Therefore, it is better to decrease the dosage of medication gradually or taper off for about two months up to complete cessation.