

Addressing Emotions in Clinical Practice - A Five Element Acupressure Approach

By John Kirkwood

Our clients come to us with physical distress but working only at this level does not address the emotions, psyche or spirit. John Kirkwood shows us how to balance and harmonise these levels to help deeper healing.

As massage therapists, what do we do when our clients show strong emotions? How can we respond appropriately when our client becomes agitated, restless, confrontive or angry; trembling, anxious or fearful; hysterical or manic; cries uncontrollably with grief; or obsesses with worry?

Equally, what do we do when our clients come to us with a profound absence of emotion, presenting only physical symptoms? How can we treat the presenting condition and also address the emotions that might underlie them?

The practice of Five Element Acupressure addresses both emotional and physical imbalances. It provides a comprehensive system for facilitating, supporting and balancing the emotions, whether strong or absent, while simultaneously addressing associated physical conditions.

Five Element treatment patterns can easily be integrated into whatever bodywork modalities you are already using. Whether you do Swedish massage, Trigger Point, Myofascial or Craniosacral work, or use other techniques, the treatment patterns described in this article can be very supportive of your work and your clients' physical and emotional wellbeing.

Origins of Five Element Acupressure

Most acupuncture currently being practised in the West derives from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). However, there is another method developed by the English acupuncturist J R Worsley whose blend of Chinese and Japanese acupuncture emphasises the role of the Five Elements

and has significantly more focus on psychology, emotion and spirit than does TCM¹.

Five Element Acupressure owes much to the methods of Dr Worsley as well as to Iona Teeguarden's Jin Shin Do® technique which blends acupuncture theory with Taoist philosophy and Western psychology² and to Dianne Connelly³ and Bob Duggan of the Traditional Acupuncture Institute (Maryland, USA) whose SOPHIA work recognises the Five Elements in all of life, not just in the clinical setting⁴.

Emotions, organs and meridians

The 'Five Elements' are Water, Wood, Fire, Earth and Metal. Each is associated with two organs⁵, two meridians (energy channels) and a primary emotion. (Figure 1) In Chinese medicine, emotions are considered a major influence on health and disease. We'll concentrate here on the yin organs which house the emotions⁶.

We can use the correspondences between element, organs, meridian pathways and emotion to assess and treat our clients. We can infer imbalance in an element when its corresponding emotion is particularly strong, whether acted out or just reported, or conspicuously absent when we might have expected its presence. What we are looking for is evidence of abnormal emotional responsiveness⁷.

Similarly, physical signs and symptoms of dysfunction in the organs of an element can

indicate imbalance in that element.

A third way of assessing imbalance in an element is to observe conditions appearing along the pathways of the meridians of that element.

Many other characteristics and correspondences not included in this article can assist in creating a fuller picture of element imbalances. These include skin colour, voice tone, body scent, taste preferences and symptoms of the various sense organs. See Bennetts' article for a fuller description of these factors⁸.

In practice, we usually do not see a perfectly consistent picture of imbalance. You are unlikely to find all correspondences of one element, and you'll probably find correspondences of more than one element. What we look for is a preponderance of indications to guide assessment and treatment.

The Water element

The emotion of Water is fear. Imbalance in this element may appear as general anxiety or even panic; or fear may be covered over by abnormal fearlessness or a daredevil attitude. In both cases, fear is a dominant focus in life.

The associated organs of Water are bladder and kidneys. Dysfunction in these organs such as infections, weakness, incontinence, or related lumbar pain suggest imbalance.

Meridian pathway signs and symptoms include conditions of the inner eye, top of head and back of neck, back pain, sciatica, pain in the backs of the legs or outside of feet (bladder meridian); soles of feet, insides of legs, urogenital area, and chest tightness or fullness (kidney meridian).

The Wood element

The emotion of Wood is anger which may appear also as frustration, restlessness, agitation or passive aggression. Conversely, a person who shows a pronounced lack of anger in the face of provocation may be

Element	Emotion	Yin Organ	Yang Organ
Water	Fear	Kidney	Bladder
Wood	Anger	Liver	Gall bladder
Fire	Joy	Heart	Small intestine
		Heart protector	Triple heater
Earth	Sympathy	Spleen	Stomach
Metal	Grief	Lung	Large intestine

Figure 1, Elements, Emotions and Organs

actice roach

suppressing that emotion. Both can point to an imbalance in Wood.

The associated organs are gall bladder and liver. Conditions such as gall stones, upper right abdominal congestion, poor fat metabolism, poor detoxification, and jaundice are some indications of Wood imbalance.

Meridian pathway signs and symptoms include temple or occipital headaches, tightness in trapezius muscle, conditions along the sides of the body and legs, hip pain from piriformis muscle tightness (gall bladder meridian); conditions of the big toes, insides of legs, and lower ribs anteriorly (liver meridian).

The Fire element

The emotion of Fire is joy. Signs of a Fire imbalance include joylessness, the life gone

from the heart, lack of warmth, inability to give or receive love, and a lack of humour. Alternatively, a person who is nervous, hyper-excited, exhibits a false joy, or inappropriate humour, may have a Fire imbalance.

The organs of small intestine and heart as well as the functions of triple heater and heart protector are associated with Fire. Conditions of the heart such as angina, arrhythmia or coronary artery disease; of the small intestine including dysfunction in digestion, absorption and assimilation; and those related to heat and the body thermostat, can all indicate Fire imbalance.

Meridian pathway signs and symptoms include conditions affecting the posterior aspect of arms and hands (small intestine and triple heater meridians); and of the anterior aspect of hands and arms (heart and heart protector meridians).

The Earth element

The emotion of Earth is sympathy. Earth out of balance can present as obsessive worry and as lack of sympathy both for self and others.

The associated organs are stomach, and spleen/pancreas. Dysfunction in these organs, food related issues, and fluid related conditions such as oedema and menstrual irregularity can all suggest imbalance in Earth.

Meridian pathway signs and symptoms include conditions of the eyes, cheeks, jaw, throat, chest, solar plexus, front of the legs and tops of feet (stomach meridian); arches of feet, insides of legs, and abdomen laterally (spleen meridian).

The Metal element

The emotion of Metal is grief. Imbalance can

Meridian	Source point	Shu point	Mu point
Kidney	Between medial malleolus and Achilles tendon (K3)	In muscle band lateral to L2 spinous process (B23)	At free end of 12th rib (GB25)
Liver	Distal to junction of 1st & 2nd metatarsals (Lv3)	In the muscle band lateral to T9 spinous process (B18)	In 6th intercostal space on mamillary line (Lv14)
Heart	Inner wrist, ulnar side radial to flexor carpi ulnaris (H7)	In muscle band lateral to T5 spinous process (B15)	Inferior to tip of xiphoid process (CV14)
Heart Protector	Centre of inner wrist crease (HP7)	In muscle band lateral to T4 spinous process (B14)	Centre of sternum level with 4th intercostal space. (CV17)
Spleen	In depression proximal to ball of foot (Sp3)	In muscle band lateral to T11 spinous process (B20)	At free end of 11th rib (Lv13)
Lung	Radial edge of inner wrist crease (L9)	In muscle band lateral to T3 spinous process (B13)	On chest at 2nd rib level, inferior to location 3/4 laterally along clavicle (L1)

Figure 2. Point locations (Note: all points are bilateral except CV14, 17)

result from unresolved grief, ongoing or repressed sadness or the inability to feel sad, living in the past, and loss of contact with spirit.

The associated organs are large intestine and lungs. Conditions of these organs such as constipation or diarrhoea, or breathing problems such as asthma, as well as skin conditions, can all indicate Metal imbalance.

Meridian pathway signs and symptoms include conditions in the sternocleidomastoid and deltoid muscles, elbow, forearm and index finger (large intestine meridian); thumb, inside of arm, and clavico-pectoral region (lung meridian).

Five Element acupressure techniques

Positioning the client

Treatment is best done with your clients supine on a massage table. This allows them to be relaxed, for you to see their facial expressions, and for easy dialogue between you. It also offers unhindered access to points on the front of their bodies, while points on the back are accessed by sliding your hand under them. However, if your

clients are already face down, it is not essential that they turn over before using these treatment patterns.

Pressure

Finger pressure can be quite firm, or as light as a few grams (the weight of a ten cent piece). However, too much pressure can create resistance, or even retraumatisation. Likewise, too little pressure can create resistance if it feels ineffective. It's best to use the pressure that is most comfortable to your clients, which can vary from point to point and time to time in the same person.

For hypersensitive or traumatised clients, any finger pressure may feel invasive. In these cases, you can instead gently place the centre of your palm (Heart Protector 8) over the point. To take this one step further, you can place your hand above your client's body and still maintain energetic contact. I have some clients for whom this 'off the body' work is preferable and more effective.

Timing

A common question is How long do I hold the points? Usually we hold points in pairs for several minutes. However, the time is influenced by how quickly the points come into harmony. We need to attune to the flow of chi (energy) and feel for a sense of harmonising between the two points. Typically, the points begin to 'wake up' with

sustained contact, then we sense energy moving or swirling or pulsing, and finally there is a quietening and harmonising that indicates that the points have released and opened. Feedback from clients can help guide the treatment. If you feel nothing happening in a point, asking clients how it feels to them can often move the chi as their attention is directed there.

Treatment patterns

There are 361 meridian points and many extra points, so the following treatment patterns, which use just a few, are an easy introduction to a complex system. However, they can be very effective and can be used to advantage by both beginning and advanced practitioners.

There are three sets of points which I highly recommend. (Figure 2) When used in combination, they can significantly improve chi flow and bring greater balance to elements, emotions and organs. These sets are source points on the hands and feet, shu points on the back, and mu points on the front of the body.

Source points (Figures 3 & 4) are great for beginning acupressurists since they are extremely powerful, versatile and balancing. The source points of the yin meridians most directly affect the associated organ but also have an effect on the yang partner organ⁹.

In addition, they are such balancing and harmonising points that you can really do no wrong in using them¹⁰.

Shu points (Figure 5) lie along the bladder meridian which lies bilaterally parallel to the spine. Mu points (Figure 6) lie on the front of the torso. These points are often tender when they are in need of treatment, and so are used in both assessment and treatment.¹¹ Besides balancing the yin and yang of the meridians, gentle holding of these points often conveys a sense of being held and supported, allowing the client to relax and open.

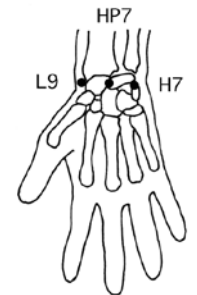


Figure 3



Figure 4

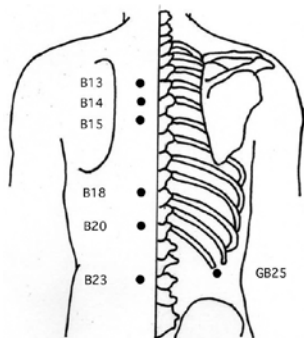


Figure 5

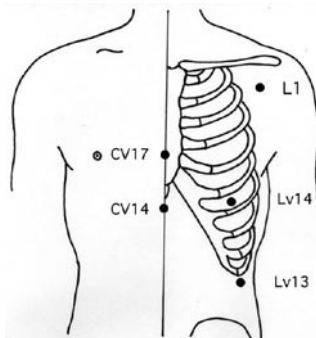


Figure 6

Point combinations

These three sets of points provide us with a treatment pattern for each of the yin meridians. Used in pairs, we have three point combinations:

- source point + shu point
- source point + mu point
- shu point + mu point.

The five treatment patterns use the following points on both sides of the body:

Water: K3, B23, GB25 **Wood:** Lv3, B18, Lv14

Earth: Sp3, B20, Lv13 **Metal:** L9, B13, L1.

Fire: HP7, B14, CV17 & H7, B15, CV14

Using these points, you can support the element/emotion/organ/meridian which is out of balance. In practice, it is common to find that as one element becomes balanced, an imbalance in another element reveals itself, so the treatment becomes an organic, unfolding process.

Case histories

Liz, a 40-year-old executive, presented with severe tennis elbow and deltoid muscle pain, both symptoms occurring along the large

intestine meridian. Inquiry revealed that the pain began around the time of her marriage breakup. She also had a history of asthma. All these symptoms suggested imbalance in Metal. After working large intestine points in the affected arm, I held lung points including L1, L9 and B13 while gently asking about her feelings about the breakup. She began to talk about her heartache around lost love as those points released. I had already noticed that Liz was nervous, even hyper-excited, and given her heart centred emotions, I moved to supporting the heart protector meridian with HP7, B14 and CV17. At the second session, Liz reported a lessening of her elbow pain, as well as experiencing a profound and unaccustomed sense of inner peace and stillness.

Mary, an 80-year-old widow, had insomnia and had suffered from severe sciatica for four years. Since the sciatic nerve lies on the pathways of bladder and gall bladder meridians, I began working with points on those meridians in the pelvis and leg. I

noticed that holding gall bladder points produced tremors in her leg and a strong restless agitation. This suggested further working with Wood. By holding liver related points Lv3, B18 and Lv14, this restlessness gradually subsided over several treatments as Mary talked about her difficulty expressing anger throughout her life. What then appeared was a pain in the right knee and fear of needing another knee replacement. Work with Water, including K3, B23 and GB 25 while talking about these fears, allowed the pain and emotion to diminish. After six treatments, Mary was completely free of both sciatic and knee pain for the first time in years, and sleeping well.

Carey, a 46-year-old mother of three, suffered from constipation and haemorrhoids. She was letting go of her middle child who was about to leave home. These presenting conditions suggested supporting Metal. Treatment included working with lung related points and talking about her feelings of sadness and loss. By the second session,

the presenting symptoms had improved, and an underlying issue of denying her own needs while taking care of others was revealed. It also became clear that Carey was often scattered, and ungrounded. This led to working with Earth, in particular spleen-related points. The treatment left her feeling far more grounded and centred, and more clear about her own needs.

As these examples demonstrate, balancing one element often reveals imbalance in another which may or may not be related to the presenting ailment, but also needs addressing. As practitioners, we need to be open to seeing and working with what is showing up moment by moment. For deeper analysis of this process, see Dolowich¹².

Going further

Practitioners who wish to add to the range of points described here can find further point locations in any standard acupuncture text. I would recommend adding the source, shu and mu points of the yang meridians, and the connecting (luo) points of all 12 organ meridians. Points along the central channel are also very helpful in supporting emotional work. Michael Gach's *Acupressure for Emotional Healing*¹³ is a valuable resource for those wanting to explore further.

Guidelines for supporting emotional process

It has been my repeated experience that when a client feels, talks or thinks about an emotion that is associated with a point being held, the energy begins to move more freely in that point. Holding the point also allows her to feel the emotion more deeply. Together, these two operations produce a positive feedback loop which deeply supports the processing of emotion.

As massage therapists, we are not psychotherapists, but by being aware of our clients' emotions, we can provide great support for physical and emotional healing. Of course we also need to be alert to referring on when necessary, and bodywork and therapy in conjunction can be very beneficial.

Basic communication skills can easily be incorporated into acupressure treatments in

ways that promote chi flow. It is not even necessary for clients to verbalise their processes, and clients should never be pressured into doing so. Some of the most profound shifts can occur with no talk at all. What is important is for clients to understand the connections between what they feel and what is happening energetically in their bodies.

Deep listening can feel wonderfully supportive. Listening that is attentive, non-judgemental and present provides your client with a feeling of space into which to speak. You can hold this space by being present to what your client is expressing both verbally and non-verbally, and by being present to yourself. This quiet awareness of yourself, your reactions, emotions and thoughts actually expands the field of listening.

Mirroring, also known as active listening and reflection, naturally arises from deep listening. It is the process of reflecting back to your clients both the content and emotion they express. This shows them when they have been truly understood. If you are not accurate, your clients will correct you so you can see when communication is really happening and when it is not. Good mirroring goes beyond reflecting verbal content to reflecting emotional. At the deepest level, you will reflect the core of your client's being.

Open ended questions can help to further your client's process without guiding it in any particular direction. Questions like, *How does this point feel?* or *What's going on for you right now?* or *Do you want to say more about that?* can invite further exploration without narrowing the inquiry with specifics. You also need to be sensitive to knowing when to remain silent and to realise when questions are taking your clients away from their present experience.

Compassion is usually defined as understanding someone's suffering and wanting to alleviate it. Most massage therapists are moved in this way. However, trying to 'fix' emotional hurt may actually prevent a deeper healing. The deepest level of compassion comes from allowing yourself to be touched by your clients' pain, holding the space for that pain, and being fully

present as they express it, all without trying to 'do' anything about it. This allows the suffering to become the pathway to deeper understanding and healing.

Conclusion

We humans are complex beings with physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Five Element Acupressure recognises all these dimensions and provides a modality for working with them in a clinical setting. While many of our clients come to us with physical distress, working only at this level does not address the emotions, psyche or spirit. It is the balancing and harmonising of these various levels of our being that allows the deepest healing to take place.

John Kirkwood, BA, DRM, is a passionate practitioner of energetic healing. He trained in acupressure and the Five Elements at the Jin Shin Do Foundation in California and the Traditional Acupuncture Institute in Maryland, USA. After 19 years private practice in the San Francisco area, he now practises and teaches in Adelaide and the Adelaide Hills.

REFERENCES

- 1 Eckman P. In the footsteps of the Yellow Emperor. San Francisco: Cypress; 1996.
- 2 Teeguarden IM. The joy of feeling. Tokyo: Japan Pubs; 1987.
- 3 Connelly DM. Traditional acupuncture: the law of the five elements. 2nd ed. Columbia: TAI; 1994.
- 4 Tai Sophia Institute [homepage on the Internet]. Laurel, MD: Tai Sophia Institute; c2007. Available from: www.tai.edu/
- 5 The Fire Element has four, including Triple Heater and Heart Protector which are not organs in western medicine.
- 6 Beinfield H, Korngold E. Between heaven and earth: a guide to Chinese medicine. New York: Ballantine; 1991.
- 7 Ortego NE. Acupressure: an alternative approach to mental health counseling through bodymind awareness. Nurse Practitioner Forum. 1994 Jun; 5(2): 72-6
- 8 Bennetts G. Constitutional element acupuncture. Journal ATMS. 2007 Sep; 13(3) :159-162.
- 9 Deadman P, Al-Khafaji M, Baker K. A manual of acupuncture. Hove: Journal Chinese Med. Pubs; 1998 p40
- 10 Teeguarden op cit 84.
- 11 Deadman op cit 42-44.
- 12 Dolowich G. Archetypal acupuncture: healing with the five elements. Aptos: Jade Mountain; 2003.
- 13 Gach MR, Henning BA. Acupressure For Emotional Healing. New York: Bantam; 2004.