

Chinese Medicine Perspective on SSRI Withdrawal Syndrome

SSRI is an acronym that stands for ‘Selective Serotonin Re-uptake Inhibitor’. These are drugs that are very commonly used to treat depression. There are a number of these drugs, trade names include Paxil, Prozac, Cymbalta, and Effexor. In recent years I have worked with clients who have had a really tough time stopping these medications. I have found that acupuncture can be quite helpful, and in this article I’d like to share my experience and ideas about how acupuncture can help.

If you google “SSRI withdrawal symptoms” you will find a host of articles and blogs devoted to this topic. Although the pharmaceutical companies would rather you not hear about problems when people stop these drugs, it is clear that many people have trouble with a sudden cessation, or even a gradual reduction, of these medications. I should also point out that the drugs that seem to cause the most discomfort are not just SSRI’s. Some of these drugs inhibit the re-uptake (and therefore increase available levels) of other neurotransmitters as well, including norepinephrine and dopamine. Effexor is one of these more complex drugs. When a drug has been altering your brain’s balance of several key neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine, it is completely upsetting when the drug is suddenly discontinued.

The symptoms of withdrawal of these medications can be very disturbing and even intolerable. People report dizziness, nausea, sweating, insomnia, and something many describe as “brain shocks” or “brain shivers”. It is important to taper your dose of these drugs very gradually, maybe even more gradually than the regular pill dosage allows. I have one client who tapered to 37.5 mg, and then when her doctor suggested she just stop at that point, the withdrawal symptoms became intolerable. She resorted to opening the capsule and using a portion of the little granules in the capsule each day. Her measurements were not precise but the withdrawal discomforts were lessened. It would be wise to consult a pharmacist about how you might create an accurate reduced dose.

The brain is amazing and complex, but sometimes a simple Chinese concept can bring insight into its function and health. In Chinese medicine we always come back to yin and yang. Yin is cool, moist, substantial, and still. Yang is hot, dry, immaterial, and active. Our brain is happiest when its yin and yang properties are balanced. Enough yin to allow us to rest and be calm. Enough yang to give us mental focus and energy.

These SSRI withdrawal symptoms sound like an example of either too much yang disturbing the brain (insomnia, dizziness, weird shock sensations) OR too little yin to give the brain the nourishment and quietness to cope with life.

Acupuncture theory discusses how several meridians “deliver water, or yin, to the brain”. When I first encountered this withdrawal syndrome I used acupuncture points to bring yin-coolness and yin-stillness to the brain. We found that this was a very effective strategy.

Another simple safe way to nourish the yin of the brain is to take a good quality fish oil supplement. The omega-3 fatty acids unique to fish are wonderful brain food, and work to nourish and stabilize the yin substance of the brain. Good brands are Nordic Naturals, Carlsen's, or the Costco brand Kirkland.

I want to emphasize that tapering these drugs over several months, or even for an entire year, may be necessary. Please work closely with your doctor and/or your pharmacist to assist you in developing a tapering schedule and help you calibrate the doses. Consider adding acupuncture to support the journey. And don't give up. You can get off these drugs.