

Sample material - Successful Management of the Low Back Pain Patient

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Low back pain is the most common reason patients seek-out acupuncture and especially for chronic or otherwise slow to respond to conventional therapy low back pain. While we will briefly cover acute low back pain at the end of this lesson, most the material presented here is focused on chronic low back pain patients.

Much of the advice I will be offering can be applied to other types of back pain as well as neck pain and other soft tissue or orthopedic type disorders. Actually, a good deal of the material covered here can apply to virtually all types of cases seen by acupuncturists as there are many fundamentals that apply to any application of this healing method.

I titled this course the “Successful Management of Low Back Pain Patient” rather than something like “how to successfully treat low back pain” because part of what I am trying to teach is that in private practice we don’t treat diseases or disorders, we manage patients who have diseases or disorders.

Often what is taught in the acupuncture/Oriental medical field has to do with how to treat disorders IN THEORY rather than how to manage real patients with real problems within a real private practice or clinic. Learning different theories is all well and good, but you need to know how to put that knowledge to use in the real world. It is kind of like learning martial arts where it is one thing to learn how to punch and kick for show and quite another thing to know how to street fight.

Running a private A/OM practice with all the difficulties this involves is like a street fight. You have to learn how to manage all different types of people with all different types of disorders. Even when treating just one type of disorder like low back pain you will be seeing many different variations. This course is based on my experience of more than 25 years treating thousands of low back pain patients and making my services work for the vast majority of those. I use the techniques described here every day in my practice and have found them to be as reliable as any other protocols I have learned and tried over my career.

Every Little Bit Counts

The essence of the protocol I use and want to teach here is that “every little bit counts”. By this I mean that the best approach for treating chronic or otherwise “stubborn” low back pain is one that works toward getting every bit of improvement stimulating a patients’ body’s efforts to heal itself and every bit limiting aggravating the condition. We want to worry about both sides of the tally – we want our patients to take more steps forward and fewer steps backward. This is important because there is usually a kind of ‘tipping point’ that gets passed in the treatment process – a hump to get over (I call this the “healing hump”). While progress can build slowly in the beginning, once you get over the hump, progress picks-up and you get more steps forward and less back. The goal then is to do all you can to get

your patients over this hump with the fewest treatments at the least expense. This is not only true for managing low back pain patients, the same basic goal applies to most all patients.

Some of what we will cover in this course to help our patients take more steps forward and less back includes:

1. Difficulties with diagnosis. How to deal with the fact that in most cases of low back pain a definitive diagnosis is difficult if not impossible to nail-down. I will be showing you how to manage a patient when you don't know just what is causing their problem.
2. The Intake. How to explain your treatment process so that your patient feels comfortable engaging your services and how to ask the right questions to get the information you need to begin treatment and get off on the right foot.
3. Acupuncture protocols. We will cover different point combinations but even more importantly, we will go into detail about how to space treatments to get the most benefit with the least number of treatments. We will also consider when to change the treatment strategy - how long do you stay with your plan A before changing to plan B?
4. Adjunctive therapies. As important as acupuncture is, it is not the only therapy you should be using to get the most benefit for the least cost. We will go over some of the more reliable and cost effective adjunctive therapies.
5. Patient self-care. Many patients with low back pain take steps backward and aggravate their condition between your treatments. In this section, we will consider how to reduce the backward steps your patients may cause themselves while teaching them safe practices that they can do to take steps forward.

Successful Management

I mentioned above that in private practice it is better to think in terms of managing patients successfully rather than treating medical conditions. But what should we consider to be successful management or even success in the case of treating our patients? I like to break this down into two primary categories. Of course our goal should be to help our patients with the problems they came to us for as much as possible. So one measure of success is how much we help the low back pain patient for their low back pain. But rather than trying to measure success in terms of whether or not we "cure" the patient of their low back pain or even reduce the pain by a certain percentage what I recommend is that you consider success to be what the patient considers to be successful. If the patient is happy with the amount of progress they make from your treatments that should be considered successful. Patients come to us seeking help for their problems and if they are happy with the help they received that is success in private practice.

However, another type of “success” in private practice can happen even if you are completely unsuccessful helping the patient for the primary problem they came to you for. Most patients will have more than one medical problem when they seek your services. We will go over the intake protocol in some detail a little later but for now I just want to mention on the subject of “success” that you should try to learn about other health issues your patients have in addition to the ones they sought your services for. This can be helpful because while you may not always be able to help every patient for the problem that brought them to you, you should be able to help most every patient for some type of problem that they have. Then, even if you are unsuccessful in helping their low back pain, they may still be happy with your services.

The above being the case, you should always strive for a high percentage of success in patient satisfaction even in those cases you are unable to be successful managing the problem that brought the patient to you. As we will consider, nobody cures or is even successful in the treatment of any specific problem for everyone they will treat. But that does not mean you cannot be successful in the broader category of patient satisfaction for nearly everyone that walks in your door.