Self-care for anxiety
tips from chinese medicine

In Chinese medicine, the body, mind, spirit & emotions are totally interconnected, and treated together. They are ALL different forms of ENERGY. So anxiety is just a type of energy moving around and changing in us. Chinese medicine uses nutrition, qigong (meditation & breathing exercises), acupuncture, herbs, and massage to balance energy.

We often have anxious thoughts with our anxious feelings (sensations). In Chinese medicine, we know our thoughts affect our bodies, and our bodies affect our thoughts. By learning to take care of our bodies, we take care of our minds and spirits. By learning how to shift our thoughts, we take care of our bodies and emotions. And eventually... we find it easier to manage anxiety!

Be patient! Practicing self-care literally means practicing - trying it out, developing a skill, slowly getting used to it. Step by little step, we breathe easier and have longer moments of peace.

A self-care guide compiled by pauline sok yin hwang, traditional chinese medicine acupuncturist

care for caregivers and changemakers
How does anxiety feel for you?

(a worksheet – you fill it in! Awareness + loving acceptance = the first step in self-healing)
What MIGHT be happening...

NOTE: Chinese medicine is VERY personal. 10 people with anxiety get 10 different treatments. To pinpoint your individual pattern, we’d look at everything from your tongue and pulse, to your headaches, bowel movements, menstrual periods, aches and pains, immune system, allergies, etc. We choose acupuncture points and herbs for you specifically. So, this guide is GENERALIZED and SIMPLIFIED. Remember – your experience is unique to YOU, so take the info that works for you & leave what doesn’t!

1. Is your FIRE Energy overheating?

The “Shen” 神 is our Spirit. It needs enough cooling Water or “yin” (Blood and other fluids in the body) to stay settled in its home in the “Heart”. The Heart is the Fire element in Chinese Medicine, so it easily gets overheated. If there’s not enough Yin fluids to keep the Heart cool and moist, or if too much Yang or “Heat” is in our upper body, our Spirit gets “unsettled” easily.

Emotionally, we might feel:
- agitated, restless, easily upset
- scattered, confused, forgetful
- easily distracted or unfocused

Physically, we might have:
- a racing heart (sometimes)
- heat or tension in our chest
- trouble sleeping, or very vivid dreams and feel unrested in the morning
- dizziness, blurred vision, ‘floaters’ in our eyes, or red eyes
- a red tongue tip, mouth ulcers, bitter taste, dry mouth, or thirsty
- worse anxiety/insomnia after lung infections, in hot weather, or when drinking “Heat”ing and dehydrating beverages like coffee and alcohol

**TIPS!** Modern urban life is frantic (overly Yang), and yin-depleting. Nourishing our Yin includes:
- anything that helps you SLOW DOWN / get quiet / focus inward
- stretching, deep breathing, yoga, tai chi, meditation, journaling, acupuncture, etc.
- walks near trees, water and nature
- minimizing time with electronics (computer, TV, cell phone) that “fry” our cooling Yin
- cooking our food with water (e.g. steaming, boiling, etc.), minimizing fried or hot foods, drinking enough water, and eating some bitter flavours (see list of food properties)
- rest more and do less, if possible (avoid overwork, over-exercise, pushing too hard, etc.)
- especially important after losing a lot of blood (accident, childbirth, heavy periods, etc.)
2. Is STRESS hardening your WOOD energy?

This is a big one! Often our bodies get caught in an old “stress response” from past situation(s) that might not be as helpful to us today.

Stress hardens the Wood energy of our body, known as the “Liver” in Chinese medicine. Our energy (“Qi”) flow stagnates, and doesn't circulate smoothly. Stuck energy can also create “Heat” because it's trying to move.

Physically, stuck energy can mean:
- body pains, stiffness and tension (including chest and abdomen)
- PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome) and painful periods
- digestive problems, constipation, irritable bowel syndrome, etc.
- a “wiry” (tense-feeling) pulse

Emotionally, we can feel:
- frustrated or irritable often
- emotionally up and down
- unable to express ourselves in a way that feels good
- stuck, uncreative, rigid and inflexible
- easily angered ... or depressed (if we suppress our anger)
- that it's hard to envision our life's direction and purpose

**TIPS!** [See Tips for Nourishing Yin above (#1), as Yin/water keeps Wood supple and flexible]
- RELAX OFTEN AND MUCH (see below). Laugh! Realize that fun is important.
- find friends & safe spaces where we can assert and express ourselves (creatively too)
- focus on being in the moment, not caught up in what we wish was happening that's not
- practice being thankful for what we have now, to counteract frustration/dissatisfaction
- seek support/ways to let go of, move through, or find peace with old emotions
- Yoga, tai chi, expressive movement, acupuncture, herbs and massage all move stuck Qi
3. Is your EARTH energy tired?

Our Earth energy is our digestive power. It's the source of most of our day-to-day strength and harmony, and also produces the “Yin” fluids that cool and calm our “Shen” (spirit).

Earth energy (a.k.a. Stomach-Spleen-Pancreas system) is very easily damaged by stressed-out Wood energy. It also gets tired by worrying, overwork, lack of good sleep, too much conflict in relationships, and especially our eating habits (e.g. eating irregularly, while rushed, or under stress).

**Physically, we could feel (worse with anxiety and stress):**
- low appetite, stomach knots, nausea, heartburn, bloating
- loose stools / diarrhea (or alternating with constipation)
- prone to allergies, food sensitivities, colds & flus, or blood sugar imbalances
- chronic tiredness and fatigue
- easy bruising, organ prolapse, muscle weakness
- dizziness, especially when standing up
- sweet cravings
- “Phlegm-Damp” build-up, e.g. Phlegmy lungs/sinus, heaviness in legs, yeast infections, “foggy” head
- a weak pulse, pale or possibly swollen tongue

**Emotionally, we may experience:**
- chronic worrying, over-thinking, over-analyzing
- feeling heavy or stuck, mentally and physically
- over- or under-nurturing (receiving or giving), e.g. putting others’ needs first and ignoring one's own needs
- emotionally, Phlegm can lead to more serious anxiety or panic attacks. It can “obstruct” the Shen (mind), meaning we can find it more difficult to be “rational” during an attack.

![Tips]

- nurture yourself, e.g. get massages, take time out to eat in a relaxed way, etc.
- spend time in nature, garden, touch the earth
- reduce Phlegm-Damp foods (see food list), if you have Phlegm signs or a thick tongue coat
- acupuncture and specific herbs help support your digestion/Earth and reduce Phlegm-Damp
- The Earth doesn’t like extremes, it likes the Middle Way, so...
  - eat foods that are warming or neutral in property, less raw or cooling foods
  - eat simple foods, with minimal seasonings and a mild, balanced taste.
  - orange and yellow foods, complex carbohydrates like vegetables, squash, whole grains
  - seek balance and harmony in relationship and within yourself

---

care for caregivers and changemakers  
5 ©  
www.paulinehwang.ca 416-890-7770
4. Does your piglet like running?

“Running Piglet Qi” is an actual term in Chinese medicine! It describes a feeling of “internal urgency,” that can be experienced as a panic attack: restless or throbbing in our belly, a feeling of energy rushing up toward our chest, throat and head, and great fear. We may feel hot in our head and colder on our feet.

Often this is related to having run low on “Original Qi”, (the energy we were born with), because of overwork, fear or trauma, or just our constitution (our individual tendencies). Our Original Qi is housed in our “lower Dan Tian”, i.e. our lower abdomen below the navel. This is area that martial artists and Qi Gong masters breathe into, to centre and build their energy. Original Qi lives in the Kidney-adrenal (Water element) system and when out of balance, the emotion of FEAR tends to arise.

**During a “Running Piglet” attack, we might feel:**
- difficulty breathing, chest pain / constriction
- nausea, choking sensations, heartburn
- irregular or racing heartbeat
- shaking, sweating
- a hot flash in your face
- possible cold feet or tingling feet/hands
- a fear that you might die or be seriously ill
- a sense of impending doom
- dizziness, headache

**TIPS!** Know the attack WILL PASS and you will be okay. The Piglet WILL GET TIRED!
- Stay where you are, find something solid and unmoving (a pole, wall, tree, etc.), grab on and count to 180 (for 3 minutes), until piglet runs outta steam (a tip from my friend)
- Breathe in and out of your belly, slowly and deliberately: e.g. Inhale for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 2-3, and exhale for 4-8 seconds. REMEMBER TO EXHALE!
- Breathe like this while holding acupressure points, e.g. Ren 17, Kidney 1, etc.
- Accept and watch the anxious sensations in your body. Act like a curious observer.

**BETWEEN ATTACKS:**
- Practice deep breathing, belly breathing, self-acupressure, etc. This will help you apply them more easily when an attack starts
- Make a “Laugh kit” of silly YouTube clips, funny photos, bad jokes, etc. Laugh lots!
- Tai Chi and Qi Gong often focuses on grounding and connecting with the Yin of Earth and Yang of the sky: Feel your feet rooted, touching the Earth. Imagine sending Fire (Yang) down the front of our body and bring Water (Yin) up the back. As you circle it around, let balanced energy build in your lower abdomen.
- Get regular acupuncture, acupressure, tuina massage or herbal treatments for prevention
Cooks hookup: a breathing exercise for anxiety

credit to: Anthony Lipanovic

Best done sitting down, but can be done lying down.
1. Cross the left ankle over the right ankle.
2. Stretch the arms out in front of you with the thumbs pointing down, the backs of the hands facing each other, and the palms facing out.
3. Lift the right hand over the left hand and place it so that the palms are facing each other and the thumbs still point down.
4. Clasp (intertwine) fingers and turns hands inside out. Place clasped hands on chest.
5. While holding the hands on the chest do the following:
   - Place the tongue on the roof of the mouth on the palate
   - Breathe in through the nose, with the tongue still on the roof of the mouth, and rolling the eyes up toward the ceiling
   - Breathe out, placing the tongue on the floor of the mouth behind the bottom teeth, rolling the eyes down to the floor.
   - REPEAT 5 TIMES
6. Carefully unravel hands, fingers, and feet: and take a deep breath.
7. Repeat the whole procedure with the right ankle over the left ankle, and the left hand over the right hand.

It's okay to feel anxiety: 'deep thoughts'

“The five spirits are the dispositions of blood and qi. Elation, anger, pondering, sadness and fear have their foundation in the [personal] mandate of heaven. A person who does not possess these dispositions will be dull-witted, their personality dead.”
   - Zhou Xue-Hai, *Random Notes while Reading About Medicine*

“The experience of certain feelings can seem particularly pregnant with desire for resolution: loneliness, boredom, anxiety. Unless we can relax with these feelings, it's very hard to stay in the middle when we experience them. We want victory or defeat, praise or blame.”
   - Pema Chodron, 'Six Kinds of Loneliness,' in *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*

“If we immediately entertain ourselves by talking, by acting, by thinking – if there’s never any pause – we will never be able to relax. We will always be speeding through our lives. We'll always be stuck with what my grandfather called a good case of the jitters... Underneath all that, there's something very soft, very tender, that we experience as fear or edginess... It's a transformative experience to simply pause instead of immediately filling up the space. By waiting, we begin to connect with fundamental restlessness as well as fundamental spaciousness.”
   - Pema Chodron, 'Not Causing Harm', in *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*
Self-Acupressure for Anxiety Prevention

First shake out and relax your body. Get into a comfortable position. Then, gently press and hold these points, while breathing deeply, 3-5 minutes each point. In total, aim for 15+ minutes per day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ren-17 (“Chest centre”)</td>
<td>An excellent point during an anxiety attack, and for prevention too. It’s four finger-widths up from where the bottom of your breastbone meets your ribcage. Breathe into your heart. Good for anxiety, panic, depression, sadness, opening the chest, cough, tiredness, moving stuck Qi, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIDNEY-1 (&quot;Gushing Spring&quot;)</td>
<td>On the sole of the foot, where there's an indent when you point your toes (1/3 of the way to the heel). Massage with your hands, or step on a tennis ball to stimulate. Excellent for reducing panic and anxiety, bringing energy down, headache, nausea, insomnia, depleted Original Qi, chronic sore throat, low back pain. Can use during attack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUNG-1 (&quot;Middle Palace&quot;)</td>
<td>Use all of your fingertips to hold the upper, outer chest area on both sides, 3 finger-widths below your collarbone. Cough, asthma, breathing, emotional pain and numbness, heartache, sadness and loss, letting go, depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERICARDIUM-6 (&quot;Inner Gate&quot;)</td>
<td>Middle of the inside forearm, three finger-widths from the wrist crease. Widely-used point for many functions – nausea/vomiting, anxiety, insomnia, racing heart, opening the chest, moving stuck Qi, emotional balance, and relationship to self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YIN TANG (&quot;Hall of Impression&quot;)</td>
<td>Touch and hold gently. Between the inner ends of the eyebrows. At the 'third eye' and 'upper Dan Tian' – increases intuition, insight and peace. Calms the spirit, treats insomnia, anxiety, agitation, stress, headache, sinuses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIDNEY-27 (&quot;Shu Mansion&quot;)</td>
<td>Just under the collarbone, about 3 finger-widths out from the midline of your body. Good for panic and anxiety, nausea, coughing, throat, chest and back pain or tightness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Things that could Help / Relaxing the body & mind

Here's a page to jot down other random ideas for what might help you feel less anxiety today.

**listen to music**
- dance, shake, move (in private, if you want)
- spend 2 weeks ONLY hanging with nourishing, supportive people

**belly breathe, 3-5 min.**
- going for a walk or run in the park

Make 2 lists: what I can control and what I can’t

**Taking an epsom salt bath**
- self-acupressure
- acupuncture/massage treatment

**STRETCH**
- “what’s the kindest thing I can do for myself right now?”
- yoga

**journalling**
- fingerpainting

**laugh**
- enjoy something slowly & focus on it

Talk to myself: “I trust that I will be more than okay.” “I am safe and let go of what the future may bring.” “I am at peace with myself in the present moment.”

**talk about emotional stresses with friends or a counsellor**

“cognitive behavioural” work: identify thoughts that are over-focusing on what could go wrong, catastrophizing, over-generalizing, etc.

**hug a tree, gaze at a lake**

**drink some water**

ask myself: am I anxious? Or excited, or hungry, or over-tired?
Food as medicine: common examples

In Chinese Medicine, each herb or food is considered to have very specific properties. It's "hot" or "cold," and it has a combination of flavours (bitter, sour, sweet, salty, or pungent), which means it moves Qi/energy in certain directions around the body, and affects the "elements" (fire, water, earth, metal, wood) differently. Some herbs/food have specific effects on the Heart, Mind or Shen. Here are a few examples, but MOST IMPORTANT:

- **Relax, savour and enjoy your food**, eat with people who relax you (when you can), don't stress too much about WHAT you're eating! Earth element (digestive system) works best under harmonious, fun conditions, and this is MORE IMPORTANT THAN your DIET. (We can easily make food choices yet another thing to get anxious about)

- The chart below is just FYI, based on traditional Chinese medicine perspective & experience, but they're NOT RULES! EVERYONE is unique and has an individual balance, so the best thing is to SAVOUR AND ENJOY food, and bring a loving awareness to your body, and how you feel at all times (then you'll naturally become aware of what different foods do to you)!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food / Drink</th>
<th>Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BITTER foods (rye, romaine, asparagus, amaranth, quinoa, alfalfa, radish leaves, citrus peel, dandelion root, chamomile, etc.)</td>
<td>Bitter enters the “Heart”, lowers the “Yang” (hot) qualities in the head, cools an overheated heart (so the spirit can calm down), and tones a stagnant Liver (i.e. helps Qi and Blood to circulate). Bitter PARTS of foods (e.g. germ and bran of whole, unrefined grains) also do this. In Western science, essential fatty acids, magnesium, and B vitamins are also in the germ/bran of whole grain, and help the nervous system, stress coping, and relaxation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables, especially green ones (but best eat a variety of colours &amp; flavours)</td>
<td>Help to unblock stagnant Wood/Liver energy. Greens contain B vitamins and magnesium (again, good for calming). The cabbage family (cauliflower, broccoli, brussel sprouts, etc.) as well as beets, taro, cherry, strawberry, radish also improve Qi circulation and reduce stagnant energy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet foods</td>
<td>Why does sugar so often feed anxiety? In Chinese medicine, “whole” sweets (vegetables, e.g. beets, carrots, winter squash, sweet potatoes), or small amounts of “empty” sweets (concentrated/ refined sweets like sugars, refined grains like white rice/pasta), can support Earth. They build energy, harmony, and healthy yin. Excess sweets (especially “empty” ones) shock the Earth system, weakening it (and in turn, the Kidney-adrenal system and Lung system), and creating Phlegm-Damp (mucus) excess. Sweet makes energy rise and disperse, which can increase anxiety. If we have lots of salty foods (which makes energy sink), we might crave sweets (to raise it).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnamon, cloves, coriander, ginger, nutmeg, cardamom</td>
<td>Expansive, drying, warming. Reduces moistening aspects of sweet foods and dairy, helping Earth digest them, so less Phlegm-Damp gets produced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole wheat, brown rice, oats</td>
<td>Specifically calm the mind (&quot;gently but profoundly&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mushrooms</td>
<td>Generally help nurture the Heart, soothe the Shen, and calm the mind. Some mushrooms, e.g. ling zhi / reishi, are often used as an immune tonic (so they support Earth/Metal elements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mulberries, lemons, jujube seeds, dill, basil, chia seeds</strong></td>
<td>These all calm the mind and some have sedative effects. Herbs that calm the mind include: chamomile, catnip, scullcap, rosehip (vitamin C), passionflower, peppermint, lemon balm, hops, valerian root.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coffee</strong></td>
<td>Warming, stimulating, diuretic and purgative (makes you pee and poo, can be dehydrating). So if you're already warm/dry/stimulated, can increase anxiety. Bitter/sweet flavour. Mental stimulant. Helps with sluggishness or constipation from greasy foods. Can reduce nutrient absorption by Earth element.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tea (black/green)</strong></td>
<td>Can open acupuncture meridians, clarify the Spirit, improve digestion (Earth), clear the voice and eyes. Especially beneficial if mildly infused (not strongly steeped). Cooling, diuretic (makes you pee), astringent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unpasteurized vinegar</strong></td>
<td>Warming, unblocks stagnant Qi and Blood in small amounts. Can quickly move emotional stagnation as well. Sour and bitter flavours in vinegar cleanse the Liver and abdomen. Reduces toxins and Phlegm-Damp, stops bleeding, removes parasites. However, can weaken Earth, so use caution with loose stools, fatigue and muscle weakness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lemon juice</strong></td>
<td>Similar to vinegar in effect, but more cooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alcohol</strong></td>
<td>Alcohol is &quot;Hot&quot;, has some similar properties to vinegar. However it doesn't reduce Phlegm-Damp, it can increase it. It can be used medicinally in small amounts. In larger amounts, it can lead to more Qi stagnation, as it can damage the Wood element (Liver system).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Garlic and onion family</strong></td>
<td>Very pungent, dispersing energy. Helps move stagnant Qi energy, and cleanse body of the wrong bacteria (can use for colds). However, because pungent can disperse mental concentration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simple food combinations (less complicated meals and extreme tastes)</strong></td>
<td>“The motivation behind worry is an attempt to ‘figure things out’ from every perspective because of doubt and insecurity. But when one has faith in a unified life process […] the busy mind can relax. In relaxed awareness, there exists naturally a greater understanding, even wisdom. In this way the knowledge so keenly sought after through worry finally arrives when worry stops. Eating meals with simpler combinations of foods supports deeper, less busy thinking” - Pitchford, <em>Healing with Whole Foods</em>, p. 389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Silicon foods</strong></td>
<td>e.g. cucumber, celery, lettuce, celery/lettuce juice, oatstraw tea, barley gruel, oat groat tea. Improves calcium metabolism, strengthens nerves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fats and oils</strong></td>
<td>Unrefined, unheated sources of Omega-3’s (e.g. flax oil, hemp oil, fish oil) are very beneficial for mood and nerves. Heated (i.e. fried food) unsaturated oils, hydrogenated, saturated, or trans fats, “stale” oils/nuts easily clog and stagnate the Wood element, and add Heat to the body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black beans, chickpeas, lentils, kidney beans</strong></td>
<td>Sweet, benefits Kidney-Adrenal (Water) element, Earth, diuretic. Some increase yin, and benefit the Heart. Soak and cook thoroughly, adding seaweeds, fennel, cumin, hing and/or raw vinegar to improve digestibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mung Bean</strong></td>
<td>Cooling, sweet, detoxifying, benefits Wood (Liver), produces yin fluids that moisten Wood, cleanses Heart, reduce “Damp-Heat”, diuretic, good for bladder infections, edema, food poisoning, diarrhea, heat stroke. In soup, good for thirst, restlessness, impatience, and burning, difficult urination. Caution: don’t use too much if you have “Cold” signs (loose watery stools, cold limbs, low metabolism and energy, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference: Nutritional information mostly from Paul Pitchford’s *Healing with Whole Foods: Asian Traditions and Modern Nutrition.*