



Acupuncture for Needle-phobes

by m.c. tapera

When Isabel Riley's chronic skin condition suddenly escalated from uncomfortable and annoying to intractable and disfiguring, needles were the least of her concerns. First-resort forays into Western medicine proved fruitless; her doctors were baffled and seemed unable to strategize

along pathways—called meridians—in the body. Needles are used to stimulate critical points on these pathways and re-establish healthy flow. Riley's acupuncturists went to work and were getting better results than her physicians had, but there was a problem: One of the practitioners applied acupuncture needles in a way Riley found particularly unpleasant. "She was the one who did make me kind of

tional style of acupuncture," Gracey says of Shakuju, a sub-variety he favors. He and Riley say the gentler, Japanese style allowed the rebalancing of Riley's *ki* (Japanese for *chi*) and helped restore her healthy skin without returning to the more manipulative needling she found disturbing.

"The energy balancing that acupuncture does with needles can also be done with non-needle techniques," says Mary Kinneavy, clinical supervisor at Pathways to Wellness, a Boston public health clinic that uses complementary therapies to treat patients with illnesses such as cancer and AIDS. Non-invasive acupuncture tools include acupressure pellets, which can be attached using adhesive and worn home; *teishen*, a kind of precious-metal toothpick with a rounded end that practitioners touch to meridian points; and

moxibustion, which is the warming of acupoints using smoldering herbs.

Even the needling is gentler: Japanese acupuncture needles are about 25 percent finer than typical acupuncture needles and about one fifth the thickness of standard hypodermic needles. "So these needles don't actually puncture skin, they move the membranes around," Gracey explains. "Let's say

Want to Unstick Your *Ki* Without Getting Stuck? Here's How

a diagnosis for the severe inflammation she was experiencing. Frustrated, Riley, an artist and interior designer in Somerville, Massachusetts, tried the gamut of alternative and complementary treatments, finally landing on acupuncture, a therapy that's nearly synonymous with needles.

An ancient Chinese practice, acupuncture is based on the concept that life force energy, or *chi*, can become blocked or unbalanced as it flows

scared of needles. She would put the needle in and turn it, and say, "Tell me when you feel it. It was extremely anxiety producing," Riley says.

Then Riley was referred to Robert Gracey, an acupuncturist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who specializes in Japanese acupuncture, which applies Japanese philosophy and technique to traditional Chinese meridian theory. "It is probably the most effective of anything I've tried, including the tradi-

I'm treating somebody who's really needle-phobic. If I have a balloon, I'll blow it up and say, "These needles are so thin, you can stick them right through a balloon and it will not pop."

Sharon Rubrake, M.D., an internist who practices acupuncture in Watertown, Massachusetts, agrees. "Because it is such a gentle technique, it's good for children and infants." She describes a key philosophical divergence from Chinese technique: "You don't want to

create any discomfort because that would be very [energy] dispersive, and most of the time you're trying to allow things to flow smoothly."

The Japanese technique requires exceptional focus from the acupuncturist, who checks the patient's pulse and abdomen throughout the session and addresses acupoints one at a time. The duration of a treatment course will vary by individual, but Gracey estimates that patients should notice significant improvement within a few sessions. Even after the first treatment "in many instances people will feel substantial relief. I don't let a patient off the table unless I sense that there has been some balance restored," he says.

Practitioners trained in non-invasive styles typically build their study of Japanese acupuncture on a foundation of Chinese technique, and it may take some extra effort to find one; the

Toyohari Association (toyohari.org) offers listings by state. Because every state requires acupuncturists to be licensed, state licensing agencies can verify practitioners' status, while the National Council for Chinese and Oriental Medicine (nccaom.org) can identify those who have additional certification.

The combination of government regulation and vetting by the World Health Organization and National Institutes of Health has facilitated acupuncture benefits: Recognizing that complementary medicine makes economic and therapeutic sense, many health insurance carriers offer some level of coverage for such treatments, often in the form of partial reimbursements or discounts.

All three practitioners say Japanese acupuncture can ameliorate conditions as diverse as perimenopause and

asthma. "In itself, it's a total system of medicine," Kinneavy says, "and as a total-body balancer, should be able to address most problems." Gracey frequently augments his hands-on work with nutritional counseling from an oriental medicine perspective, a combination essential to Riley's recovery; she recalls that Gracey's dietary tweaking supported the healing being accomplished by the acupuncture. In the end, Riley, who paid out-of-pocket for her treatments and uses energy-focused Kundalini yoga for maintenance, feels it was worth the effort and expense. "I have not had a single thing happen since. When I do feel off, I've learned the tools to rebalance." ❖

M.C. Tapera writes about health and education. She is interested in the role complementary medicine can play in solving increasingly complex human health issues.

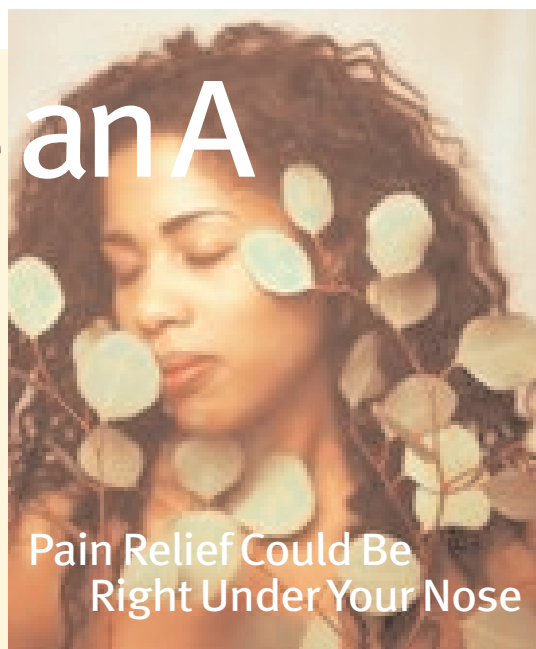
Gimme an A

by tamar suber leak

How do you spell relief? If you're like a growing number of us, it starts with an A and ends with a Y. That's right, aromatherapy; an alternative medical treatment that uses fragrant essential oils extracted from plants, aromatherapy is rising in popularity and being used in myriad ways to combat physical discomfort.

"Aromatherapy is very beneficial for pain sufferers," says Dawn Warner, owner of Skin and Body Harmony LLC, a Stone Mountain, Georgia, wellness center. "The most effective pain relieving oils include rosemary, for sore muscles; birch; clover; and peppermint, which is good for headaches."

If your head aches, you can rub the aromatic oil on your palms and inhale the scent. The substance stimulates the olfactory nerve. Users can also combine the lubricants with a



Pain Relief Could Be
Right Under Your Nose

carrier like sunflower seed oil or infused oil of yarrow and pat the mixture into specific areas of the body, such as the neck, forehead or temples.

While many massage therapists and chiropractors incorporate the use of hands-on techniques to deliver aromatherapy's healing properties, the methods used to deliver the sweet-smelling cure vary widely, from procedures that work in tandem with reflexology or acupressure, to mixing oil and water to soak afflicted areas in the

tub, to infusing the air with the beneficial bouquet using an aromatherapy ring.

Kimathi Card, of Brooklyn, New York, has used essential oils to combat muscle soreness and is adamant that using them in conjunction with a massage increases their efficacy. "I've used lavender on the tops of my feet to relieve shoulder and neck discomfort and improve my energy," Card says.