

Chapter 4

The Strengths of Complementary Therapies

Although making dietary changes, exercising, relaxing and taking nutritional supplements are the prime factors in our health, it is also undoubtedly valuable to explore the world of complementary therapy. Unlike orthodox medicine, holistic medicine looks at the *whole person* – the mind, the body and the spirit, and how they interact.

The years of abusing our bodies eventually takes its toll. Strains that are placed upon the body over time – not eating the right diet, consuming too much alcohol and tobacco, coping with stressful situations and for women being pregnant and breast-feeding, premenstrual syndrome and symptoms of the menopause – may well be more than we can easily tolerate, and the stresses can affect the smooth running of our bodily processes. If your symptoms are severe, it may well be worth investigating what acupuncture, acupressure, cranial osteopathy, herbal medicine, homeopathy or indeed the powers of healing or self-healing have to offer. They are powerful tools that can sometimes help to speed up the recovery process.

Acupuncture

Chinese medical thinking is quite different from that in the West in that it considers symptoms rather than named conditions, and the diagnosis and subsequent treatment address the whole person; the mind, body and lifestyle. Acupuncture can be a useful tool in the treatment of health problems and is appropriate for severe symptoms. You should always consult a properly trained and registered practitioner. Information should be available from your public library, and a register is published by the British Acupuncture Council, listing all members of the five recognised and affiliated professional bodies (see Useful addresses on page 513).

The philosophy

Chinese medicine, of which acupuncture is a part, works on the premise that a universal energy known as *chi*, which has two complementary qualities (*yin* and *yang*), must be in perfect balance in order for good health to exist. The term *yin* encompasses the feminine principle (cold and the state of rest) whereas *yang* includes the male principle (heat and activity). These principles are active to appropriate degrees in both men and women, and when the balance is upset, illness is the result.

Chi flows through the twelve meridians or channels of the body, which are each associated with a particular organ, such as the lungs, liver or spleen. Herbal remedies and acupuncture are used to restore the balance of *yin* and *yang*, and thus promote healing.

What treatment to expect

As well as taking an in-depth medical history, the practitioner will take your pulse at six different points on each wrist to get the measure of each of the twelve vital organs of the body. Your tongue will also be inspected closely, as its texture reflects the condition of the vital organs.

Acupuncture uses stainless-steel needles, which are inserted into specific points along meridians or lines, in order to affect the energy flowing to an organ. The needles, which remain in place for approximately 20 minutes, don't actually hurt, but they may cause a tingle, mild ache or heat sensation.

Chinese medicine also encompasses the use of herbs rather than drugs, which are aimed at keeping the *yin* and *yang* in constant harmony. Many of the herbal remedies used by Chinese doctors are available in pill form and are relatively inexpensive. They should only be used with the guidance of a qualified practitioner, as taking a *yang* preparation when a *yin* medicine is required will further exaggerate the imbalance and may well make your problem worse.

Acupressure

The Japanese finger pressure method, otherwise known as *shiatsu*, is more appropriate to minor or occasional problems than acupuncture. In this system the body is influenced in various ways by the stimulation of key points, found along the course of energy channels circulating near the surface of the skin. These are the same as acupuncture meridians, but the points are stimulated by pressure rather than needles.

In order for *shiatsu* to be effective it is important to apply the right kind of pressure for an appropriate length of time. Some professional instruction would be useful initially so that you can recognise the correct method. Once you have mastered the art of applying pressure to appropriate points, you can self-administer at home.

Cranial osteopathy

Many of us suffer with subtle back or neck problems that occur as a result of general wear and tear. Long-standing headaches can sometimes be totally cured by some good osteopathic treatment. It is certainly worth consulting a cranial osteopath if you feel the tension building up in your back or neck, or if you suffer from regular headaches.

The philosophy

Cranial osteopathy, or cranio-sacral therapy as it is also known, is a specialised form of osteopathy which is gentle yet potent. The aim is to gently coax the muscles, tendons, joints and connective tissue to establish correct function and release restriction, thus restoring normal circulation, the flow of energy and glandular secretions.

The cranio-sacral mechanism is made up of the cranium (the skull), the sacrum (the bone at the base of the spine), the membranes surrounding the brain, the spinal cord and the fascia, a continuous clingfilm-like sheet that surrounds the muscles, organs, joints and bones. The tension of this fascia is all-important. If you have ever worn an all-in-one pants suit that is too tight or too short, you will have felt somewhat uncomfortable. If the tension in the body's fascia becomes too tight, you can't just take it off, and it is possible that body functions can be affected in the long term.

Cranial osteopathy works on two basic principles: first, that structure can affect function, and second, that impairment in the structure, or reduced mobility, will affect blood flow. Blood flow is of supreme importance in osteopathy, and treatment is aimed at improving local circulation and freeing-up the supply of blood to the nerves.

Everything in the body moves with the cranial rhythm, which is the rhythm of the central nervous system. It's like a breathing rhythm, and is constant, even when we sleep. The movement helps blood flow generally and can help impaired local circulation after trauma.

If there are restrictions to soft tissue (like muscles) to the fascia or to the membranes, then blood, lymph and cerebral spinal fluid is restricted; as a result, nutrition to that area is affected.

What treatment to expect

Cranial osteopaths, like acupuncturists, like to take their time over the initial consultation, in order to take a complete history and to assess the problem fully. The patient/client lies on the osteopath's consulting bed whilst balancing takes place. It is extremely subtle. The treatment feels like mild finger pressure, but the effect is powerful. Often patients fall 'asleep' and experience a very pleasant sense of wellbeing. It is important to rest afterwards, and sometimes things feel worse the next day, but this

will pass. One treatment takes several days to work, and so you would not be required to attend more than fortnightly or monthly. Courses are usually short, although the course of treatment may be extended for chronic problems.

Herbal medicine

Curiously, herbal medicine is older and more ubiquitous than any other type of medication on earth. It is as old as food and people, and there is no place which has been inhabited by people and plants that has not had its own herbal medicine. The great majority of plant medicines in use today were discovered by the hunter-gatherers, and so pre-date history itself. There is very good evidence that in all past and present hunter-gatherer societies, the responsibilities for gathering and learning about plant medicine belonged to women. So perhaps we can take some comfort in knowing that afflicted women discovered their own remedies.

As civilisations emerged, men became involved with agriculture and medicine, and tended to form analytical systems. As China, for example, evolved the polar principles of yin and yang, so European medicine relied on the concepts of love and strife: these resolved into four elements which in turn were thought to be represented in the body by the four bodily fluids or humours. Many of these concepts still inform the best herbal medical practice in the West today, along with naturopathic ideas, many learned from native North Americans. Like Chinese medicine, European herbal medicine places great emphasis upon diet and exercise and other environmental factors.

The philosophy

While herbal medicine aims to treat your current condition, it takes into consideration your past history from the time you were born, and the health of your parents at the time of conception. So, even if your symptoms are the same as your neighbour's, your prescriptions are unlikely to be the same. In other words, while we are all subject to the same biophysical laws, each one of us has a unique tissue profile and therefore the treatment (by a once-living plant organism) needs to be unique.

What treatment to expect

The prescription you will receive may consist of a combination of a few or many different herbs. Sometimes you will be given herbs to take at different times of the day; and on occasions, herbs for different times of the month. Herbal medicine has been shown to speed up the healing of broken bones and to aid absorption of minerals from the digestive tract. It can be a very powerful tool. If you would like to consult a trained

herbalist, you will find the address of The National Institute of Medical Herbalists on page 517.

Homeopathy

The word homeopathy comes from two Greek words: *homoio* which means 'same' and *pathos* which means 'suffering'. It was developed by Dr Samuel Hahnemann in the eighteenth century, as a system of treating sick people with safe medicine. Whereas orthodox medicine (or allopathic medicine, as it is referred to) aims to treat symptoms with a drug that will produce an opposite effect, homeopathy treats 'like with like'.

A homeopathic remedy is designed to produce the same symptoms as those you are suffering, and in doing so aims to cancel them out. The dosages used are minute and may contain no substantial amount of the original material. In this latter case, it is thought that the medicine, pill or liquid contains an energy, or 'spirit', of the original medicine. Even these extreme dilutions have been shown to be effective for many conditions, including arthritis and hayfever.

The philosophy

Homeopathy is an approach to treatment which aims to assist nature with her own process of healing rather than by-passing her altogether. Like other holistic treatments, it treats each person as an individual. A trained homeopath takes an exceedingly thorough history before suggesting the most suitable remedy. It is very much a gentle, preventative, method of treatment which works best in conjunction with improved dietary and lifestyle measures.

Followers of homeopathy regularly use remedies to help themselves and their families for anything from coughs and cold to menstrual problems. The British royal family continue to be staunch supporters of homeopathy, and it will undoubtedly remain an option for us all.

What treatment to expect

Once diagnosed you will usually be presented either with little white pills made from lactose, which melt under your tongue, or a tincture, which is a liquid. You will be given instructions about how frequently to use your remedy, and advice about diet and lifestyle. The remedies are widely available, and they are reasonably priced. Sometimes it's trial and error until you find the remedy that suits you, but it may be worth persisting.

If you do decide to consult an holistic practitioner, use a recommended practitioner or find a properly qualified person from the register kept by each association. Sadly, there are many non-qualified people practising, and these should be avoided. The addresses and telephone numbers of the relevant associations can be found in Useful addresses starting on page 512.

Healing

Until more recent times consulting a healer for 'laying on of hands' was considered by the majority to be a pursuit only entertained by 'believers'. Suspicious was the term many polite folk would have used to describe their feelings about the practice. Despite this, if you care to look back in time, priests in ancient Egypt were said to have cured the sick by laying on of hands and there are many examples of similar miraculous cures in the Bible.

Today, at the start of the 21st century, a wide variety of styles of healing have become quite acceptable and it is not uncommon to be able to book an appointment with a healer with a practice in any High Street. We have even reached the point where medical science has begun to acknowledge the possible benefits of healing, and as a result it is sometimes offered in hospitals to complement orthodox treatment.

The philosophy

The term healing encompasses a wide range of belief systems. Healers often describe their work as the 'restoration of health by non-physical means'. Whilst there is no explanation as to how healing is induced, a variety of clinical trials demonstrate its beneficial effects. Many healers believe that therapeutic changes take place in the patient's soul during treatment, prompting biological responses. Some interpret this power as a form of 'energy', some refer to themselves as a 'channel' for healing and others refer to a 'guide', but it effectively adds up to the same thing in that their goal is to assist the body to heal itself. There are numerous brands of healing to choose from these days, which can be a little confusing. However, most healers are ordinary people who recognise their ability to heal others. Some consider that they possess a special ability, whilst others feel that it is a natural talent common to all. Healers usually consider that they are channels for, rather than possessors of, healing energy.

A variety of clinical trials have produced significant results. In 1993, 155 studies were reviewed by a US healer, Dr Daniel Benor. He found that some 60 per cent of the studies had positive results, particularly in cases of high blood pressure, wound healing and anxiety. In 1998 another American trial, this time on 400 heart patients at San Francisco General Hospital, claimed that absent healing seemed to aid patients recovery. Mathew Manning, a well-known UK healer, has extended the life of blood cells and accelerated plant growth in controlled studies. In addition to clinical studies, there have been numerous case reports, from many countries, of individuals who after being given only two months to live with terminal cancer, have been able to confound the scientists by visualising and healing their tumour completely.

Most of the sceptical doctors who refuse to acknowledge any likely

benefit to healing, would agree that it can do little harm, and may even be a comfort to patients.

What treatment to expect

There are so many types of healing to choose from, including spiritual healing, faith healing, absent healing and aura healing. Your consultation will take place in different environments, depending on the sort of healer you choose. It will ideally take place in a quiet, tranquil environment, perhaps with relaxing music playing in the background. After being asked for a brief history of your problem, your healer will usually invite you to sit or lie down, whilst he or she sits or stands beside you. Once attuned, the healer's hands will be placed in the area of the site of your problem, and in various other places. Some healers gently touch, whilst others hold their hands in space away from your body. One of the main aims is that healing energy flows through the healer into your body. Some individuals report being able to feel the warmth or chill of the energy, whilst others see colours or light. Some just drift off into a peaceful state and once fully conscious feel refreshed and energised.

Healing is generally a pleasant experience, but it may release deep and forgotten emotions. You will find contact addresses in the Useful addresses section for the National Federation of Spiritual Healers and for Reiki, which is a Japanese form of spiritual healing which has become popular in the last few years.

Self-healing

Those of us who have had success with self-healing will feel certain about the power that lies within to heal their own body. One of those individuals, Dr Lucia Capacchione, is an art therapist and psychologist, from America, who managed to heal herself from a life threatening illness in 1973. She has since gone on to write twelve books on this and related subjects, and regularly gives workshops that instruct individuals how to heal themselves.

Her methods involve keeping a journal and drawing, all with the non-dominant hand. In her experience this helps us to contact our 'inner child', and in doing so, deep-seated underlying causes for our illnesses. She believes that the inner child, which lives within us all, and who loves to play and discover, is often forced underground by the demands of the adult world. When we consistently ignore our inner child, we fail to nurture our heart and soul, and the body eventually gets sick. Implementing the simple steps laid out in her books which are detailed on page 494, as well following our suggestions of what you can do to overcome each condition covered in this book, may well help to speed your recovery, and give you a new perception about your life.