

Flu and Worry

It's been an interesting start to the cold and flu season. This year has the added feature of H1N1 contributing to the usual mix of assorted bugs and viruses. As of this writing (mid-Nov.) H1N1 looks like a wild card in the traditional poker hand of colds and flu's. It seems to more deeply affect a younger age range; it seems to transmit regardless of the season; and, at least now, it seems to be the only flu bug in the region.

Tracking people I know, colds and flu's started noticeably earlier and much stronger this year. Seeing numbers of people with deep lung symptoms in September is unusual. And, I also notice that as these more intense episodes are occurring earlier in the year, the recovery time seems a little shorter. Imagine if all this were happening in 20-30° January weather!

Put it all together with the many unknown factors surrounding H1N1, vaccines and the lack of reliable information, and we have a situation ripe for misunderstanding and lots of worry... worry... worry. There's not a lot we can do about reliable information. There is something we can do about excessive worry and these might be some of the most effective things we can do to relate to the current situation.

Wait a minute! Shouldn't we be worried? Look at the numbers, the transmission rate, hospitalizations and deaths. There's more than plenty to worry about, isn't there?

Yes, it's true there's plenty to be concerned about. And... I would suggest that excessive worry actually contributes to the intensity of the problems associated with the flu, instead of being useful.

In order to understand how too much worry negatively impacts health, it's helpful to take a look from a different perspective. I like to explore things from the energetic aspects illuminated by Chinese medicine. The Western medical approach doesn't have a lot to offer, as there is no way a to explore the impact of worry, an emotion, on immune system function (anti-bodies, T-cells, B-cells, etc.) That doesn't mean there isn't an impact; it only means that this particular medical model doesn't have a context or framework to explore the question.

The Chinese medical model can explore the effect of worry on the immune system because of the focus on energy—chi. Worry can be understood as a kind of energy, which if excessive, tends to spin continuously in an obsessive, fretful, repetitive circle like a dog chasing its tail. If too long-lasting the overall energetic effect can be a drain to vitality in a general way and also in some very specific ways. An energetic concept - the five phases (or elements)- can help explain some of these specifics.

Diagram 1 shows one general relationship between the five phases of energy as they relate to the organ systems. It is called the nourishing cycle, meaning the energy of one organ naturally flows to nourish another. We see that the fire of the heart nourishes the earth of the spleen, which then nourishes the metal of the lungs, etc. When the body is in balance, these nurturing relationships maintain good health and physiological functions. However, when there is a strong imbalance, such as excessive worry, these primary nourishing relationships are disrupted leading to less than optimal organ functioning.

The emotional energy of worry is associated

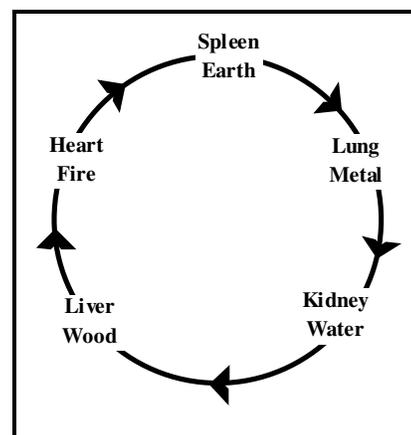


Diagram 1

with the spleen. In a continuous state of worry there are several noticeable repercussions. The intense nature of worry drains a lot of spleen chi, drawing much more from the heart and providing less to the lungs. Part of the nature of heart chi is to remain calm, centered and provide good decision-making. Part of the nature of lung chi is very similar to the Western immune system function. When a lot of this energy is consumed by the tail-chasing-dog nature of worry, these other important functions suffer.

It seems quite ironic that when overly worried about H1N1 we can actually be compromising the very internal physiological systems that are meant to protect us from flu viruses. And even if we don't get H1N1, the energy drain leaves us quite susceptible to many other situations: seasonal flu, common cold, sinus infections, headaches, ulcers, insomnia... the list is endless.

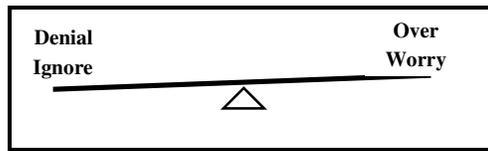


Diagram 2

Recognizing the detrimental impact of excessive worry in energetic terms can lead us to try some different approaches to the current flu situation. For example, we might notice some resistance to not worrying because the only other option seems to be denial: ignore the H1N1 situation. This is one type of thinking -

dualistic, black and white - that many of us have learned and operate from quite unconsciously. This generates a teeter-totter approach (Diagram 2) of bouncing between only two options. It seems quite reasonable to be worried if the only other option is denial. This is a very effective reinforcement of the whole pattern: "I'm dealing with this by worrying about it. I'm doing something!" In print it doesn't read very rationally, but it is not rational... it's an emotion. And it can be quite self-perpetuating until we consider the possibility that there are other options between the two extremes of denial and worry. This entails a shift in dualistic thinking to consider other options.

The spectrum of denial/worry may have a middle ground that could be described as **concern** (Diagram 3). Now there are more choices to consider, to evaluate if any may be more effective or appropriate. A concern approach can allow us to stay informed about H1N1, but not become obsessive about information, drama and hype. Concern can help prioritize the obvious hygiene aspects (washing our hands is still one of the most highly effective techniques!). Concern allows us to pay an appropriate amount of attention and energy to the situation without falling into the very draining energetic aspects of excessive worry.

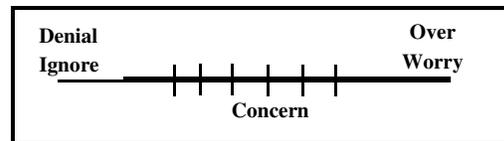


Diagram 3

Understanding the dynamic of worry and finding a balanced approach to H1N1 is a hot topic. What is learned from how we relate to this immediate drama can be applied to other parts of our lives that may have a tendency to produce excessive worry: economy, jobs, retirement, health care, parenting, aging parents, aging selves, relationships, war, politics... did I miss anything? H1N1 is just one current example, intense to be sure, of an always ongoing drama that we can relate to with excessive worry and reap all the predictable consequences. H1N1 can also be a way to help us notice our conditioned responses and experiment with different approaches.

Regardless of how H1N1 and this cold and flu season proceed, we can learn to cultivate a stronger sense of balance and harmony whenever an intense situation arises that seems ripe for lots of worry. And in some paradoxical way, there can be appreciation and gratitude for H1N1, for helping us along on our journey.

