

Listening to the Common Cold

I think about the common cold a lot. A large part of my winter herbal practice revolves around cold symptoms, complications (sinus infections, coughs, bronchitis, pneumonia, fatigue), recovery and strengthening afterward. There is so much to learn from something referred to as 'common.' Now as we are, hopefully, moving out of another cold/flu season, it might be useful to explore the lessons of this year's experiences.

I feel like I have a front row seat to observe how we typically deal with colds. I most notice that we have a shared conditioned behavior that becomes an automatic reaction whenever cold symptoms arise. It seems that one part of this conditioning is determined by the parameters of Western medicine, which has been the dominant medical approach during our lifetimes.

It seems the general approach for the common cold is: wait until the symptoms are bad enough to accept the risks and side effects of medications, for example, antibiotics. A common cold must develop into a much worse case of bacterial infection (sinus, lungs) before using antibiotics. This is the first option on the medication menu.



Over our lifetime, and for generations, we've been conditioned to not pay attention to or do anything about mild symptoms. Within the parameters of antibiotic use this makes sense. However, this conditioned approach makes less sense, (and actually can impede the natural healing process) with the realization there are other ways to treat the common cold. (This is not just about Chinese herbs, but can be used with Western herbs (elderberry), tinctures, homeopathics (airborne), etc.)

The most difficult thing I find in my herbal practice regarding the common cold is not deciding which herbs or formula to use. The most difficult aspect is getting people to recognize a deeply conditioned behavior and try a different approach. Most of what I do is education or reminding. This becomes clearer when we recognize that there are many other approaches to choose from that involve awareness of symptoms at earlier times and less invasive early treatment with fewer side effects.

Clients new to the Chinese herbal approach to colds frequently call 6-7 days into a major cold or flu. By this time their symptoms already are very strong. Herbs are much more effective when they are taken earlier in the cold's development. Stepping out of our conditioned behavior/approach toward ourselves when we have a cold requires patience. It also requires increasing our awareness of the cold process. In meditation circles this is frequently called mindfulness. We become more mindful of the subtleties of the cold process. We began to notice earlier symptoms - a scratchy throat, feeling rundown, sniffles. These signs, messages from our

body asking for attention and care, were previously ignored or noted, but not attended to. Within the old conditioned pattern these signs weren't 'bad enough' to warrant Western medical intervention.

With a different approach, for example: using Chinese herbs, these earlier signs and symptoms are noted (mindfulness), listened to, attended to and cared for by starting herbs, resting, making sure we eat well and get enough sleep. I'm fond of calling this whole process an 'approach.' As in: What is my approach to this common cold? Or, How am I relating to this cold?

The old approach and conditioned behavior was heavily influenced by the available Western medical treatment. A different approach becomes possible when we recognize and learn about different ways to treat and care for a cold.

A variation on this theme is what I call 'substitution.' The strength of our conditioning becomes more apparent when we retain remnants of the old approach (wait until symptoms get bad enough) and just substitute herbs for antibiotics. Then, not surprisingly, the herbs 'are not effective.' This happens frequently. People use a different technique (treatment, therapy, ingredient) without changing the overall approach. Without being aware, we then conclude - the herbs didn't work. When in fact, it is the approach that didn't work.

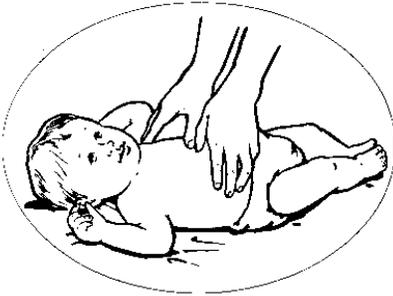
Another level of our conditioning goes even deeper. Just the phrase 'care for the common cold' immediately conjures up a product: medication, injection, tea, and tablet. All are products; something we buy, take, ingest. If we were to explore the depth of this conditioning, we might find layers of always looking for a fix, solution or cure from something out of a bottle. Even if we substitute ingredients (herbs for pharmaceuticals) there is a strong conditioning to take something, buy a product, consume.

What if, just for a moment, we entertain the notion that the 'cure' for the common cold wasn't a product or treatment, but an approach? What if we allowed an option of approaching common cold symptoms from a different perspective, a different angle? What would that look like? As I explore these questions, I come up with a whole list of useful things in combination with an herbal tablet, like...rest.

I believe one of the most natural responses to having a cold is to rest. But, the requests I get from most people, sometimes unspoken, is: Give me some herbs for a cold so I can keep on going, working, mothering, etc. When I suggest rest in addition to herbs, a frequent reply is: I don't have time for that! It's an interesting way to relate to our body and ourselves. I don't have time to rest.

When we take into account our schedule, work, family, finances, bills, mortgages - it seems like we can't make time to rest. But...try this approach. What would your response be to a young

child with a cold who insisted on going to school, playing outside in the cold and wet and maintaining their usual hectic schedule of classes and activities?



Interestingly, we don't even have to think about it. The response is very clear: rest and stay inside, skip school. It's a very natural response. But, for some reason, what we easily and naturally apply to a child in the same situation, we have great difficulty justifying for ourselves. This is a technique I've learned in caring for others and myself. It is pretty simple. If a young child came to me with this _____ (fill in the blank), how would I respond? And then I

know how to proceed. This requires paying attention, awareness, mindfulness. Is there a natural way to move through the damp and cold Pacific Northwest winter and relate to colds in a balanced way?

Colds happen. Any approach that has as a goal 'never getting a cold' is flawed from the outset. Common colds are how our immune systems strengthen and adapt. Without the regular challenges of cold viruses, we could easily die from the simplest viral exposure. Given that colds happen, is there a way to support the body and immune system without being in bed for a week or two or three and another month to recover?

Learning how to recognize our conditioned behavior and resulting approach to the common cold can be applied elsewhere in our lives. Using the skill of mindfulness and exploring our approach may lead us to relate to our body, mind and spirit in more supportive and natural ways. Even with the common cold.

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