

Exploring the Pathogenesis and Treatment of Depression Based on the Theory of Emotion-induced Pathogenesis in Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract:

The incidence of depression is increasing year by year. Modern medicine has not yet determined its etiology and pathogenesis, but has proposed many hypotheses, such as the monoamine transmitter theory, brain-derived neurotrophic factor hypothesis, and excessive activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. [1] Clinical treatment mainly uses various antidepressants, but the clinical efficacy is limited, with significant side effects and low patient acceptance. This study, based on the “theory of emotion-induced pathogenesis”, points out that the pathogenesis of this disease lies in the excessive or insufficient seven emotions (joy, anger, worry, thought, sadness, fear, and fright), which lead to disorders in the transportation and transformation functions of the five zang-organs (liver, heart, spleen, lung, kidney) and the reception and transformation functions of the six fu-organs (gallbladder, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, bladder, triple energizer), thereby affecting the normal function of brain spirit. Guided by relevant theories of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), methods such as herbal prescriptions, fitness, and music therapy are used to regulate emotions and harmonize the internal organs, providing new ideas for clinical depression treatment. Combining TCM therapies (e.g., herbal medicine, acupuncture) with exercise and music can alleviate patients’ suffering. Integrating theory with clinical practice can more effectively reduce the pain of depression patients and their families.

Keywords:

Depression, Etiology and Pathogenesis, Emotion-induced Pathogenesis, TCM Syndrome Differentiation and Treatment

1. Introduction

Depression (major depressive disorder, MDD) is a disease characterized by low mood, accompanied by symptoms such as loss of interest, attention difficulties,

feelings of guilt, decreased appetite, and even suicidal ideation, along with other cognitive, behavioral, and social functional abnormalities. [2] It is characterized by high prevalence, recurrence rate, and disability rate. [3,4] According to statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 350 million people worldwide are suffering from depression, and the incidence is increasing year by year. It is predicted that by 2020, depression will become the second leading global disease, imposing a severe socioeconomic burden. [5,6]

The pathogenesis of depression is complex, involving multiple causes. The widely recognized monoamine transmitter theory suggests that it is caused by the abnormal reduction of monoamine transmitters (such as 5-hydroxytryptamine and norepinephrine) in the central nervous system. Antidepressants that inhibit the reuptake or degradation of monoamine transmitters to increase their content are the main treatment methods. [7] Common drug types include SSRIs, SNRIs, NaSSA, 5-HT receptor balanced antagonists, and tricyclic antidepressants, with representative drugs such as paroxetine, fluoxetine, duloxetine, milnacipran, mirtazapine, protriptyline, and trazodone. Clinical observations have found that about one-third of depression patients experience adverse reactions during antidepressant treatment. [8] In contrast, TCM treatment is significantly safer than western medicine and can simultaneously regulate peripheral symptoms of depression, such as fatigue, loss of appetite, constipation, dry mouth, and sexual dysfunction. [9]

Depression belongs to the categories of “depression syndrome”, “visceral”, “lily disease”, and “plum pit qi” in TCM. This syndrome is mainly characterized by emotional depression, mood swings, chest tightness, and hypochondriac pain, with possible accompanying symptoms such as irritability, frequent crying, or a sensation of a foreign body in the throat. [9] This article discusses the pathogenesis and treatment of depression from the perspective of TCM's “emotion-induced pathogenesis”. Music therapy can relax the mind, regulate emotions, maintain mental health, reduce sympathetic nerve activity, and alleviate related physical symptoms. [10] The close integration of theory and clinical practice will more effectively benefit humanity. [11]

2. Concept of the Theory of Emotion-induced Pathogenesis

The term “seven emotions” was first recorded in The Book of Rites·Liyun, which states: “What are human emotions? Joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, aversion, and desire. These seven require no learning.” [12] The Book of Rites regards the “seven emotions” as manifestations of human feelings, considering them direct expressions of human nature. In this book, human emotions are placed within the framework of rituals and righteousness, rather than merely understood as emotional fluctuations. In other words, the “seven emotions” emphasized in The Book of Rites primarily focus on the basic characteristics of human nature, serving as the origin of the widely used concept of “seven emotions” in later generations.

In medical literature, the term “seven emotions” first appeared in San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang Lun by Chen Wuzé in the Song Dynasty. When proposing the “three causes theory” he stated: “The seven emotions are the normal nature of humans. When they are activated, they first emerge from the depression of the zang-fu organs and then manifest in the limbs, serving as internal causes.” [13] In TCM health preservation theory, “nature” is often regarded as a positive quality, while “emotion” is seen as a negative factor. Therefore, there are concepts of “nourishing nature” and

“eliminating emotions”, emphasizing the importance of regulating emotions and mindset for health preservation. Chen Wuzé’s clear proposal of the “seven emotions” as a pathogenic factor in his work is naturally based on profound reasoning and evidence. Before Chen Wuzé, although the concept of “seven emotions” was not explicitly proposed, medical practitioners of all dynasties had long recognized the impact of emotions on disease occurrence and development. Through observation and practice, they found that excessive or prolonged negative emotional states can negatively affect human physiological functions, leading to various diseases. Therefore, TCM health preservation theory emphasizes the importance of emotional management, believing that regulating and controlling emotions can prevent diseases and promote physical health.

Among the 162 articles in Huangdi Neijing, 32 directly involve psychological topics, containing a total of 236 core terms. Additionally, emotions such as joy, anger, worry, thought, sadness, fear, and fright are mentioned multiple times. In Suwen·Jutong Lun, which discusses “nine qi causing diseases”, six of them correspond to the seven emotions described by Chen Wuzé. It is worth noting that the theory of “seven emotions” originates from Chen Wuzé’s etiology theory, so the “seven emotions” are regarded as a pathogenic factor rather than normal emotional expressions. Therefore, Qi Xianghua et al. [14] proposed that the “seven emotions” can also be considered as “latent pathogens”. Emotions affect the human body, but they do not necessarily lead to disease. As stated in Suwen·Maiyao Jingwei Lun: “The resentment of autumn becomes the anger of winter.” [15] From autumn to winter, the onset time is quite long.

3. Emotion-induced Pathogenesis and Depression Syndrome

3.1. Emotions are normal human feelings, but lack of regulation can lead to diseases

The diagnosis and treatment of the seven emotions is a time-honored and unique therapy in TCM. Huangdi Neijing classifies emotions into seven types: joy, anger, worry, thought, sadness, fear, and fright, referred to as the “seven emotions”. Lingstates: “Heaven has wind and rain, and humans have joy and anger.” Joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness are natural expressions of human emotions, just as wind, rain, cold, and heat are inevitable in nature. These emotional fluctuations are an indispensable part of the human emotional world. However, if these emotional activities lose balance and become excessive or insufficient, just like the seasons losing their normal and becoming chaotic, they may negatively affect our physical and mental health and even trigger various diseases. Therefore, maintaining emotional balance and stability is as important for our health and well-being as maintaining harmony in nature. Lingstates: “The origin of all diseases arises from wind, rain, cold, heat, dampness, joy, and anger.” Chen Wuzé discussed the key role of emotional factors as internal causes of diseases in San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang Lun. He believed that fluctuations and imbalances in emotional and psychological states are important causes of internal diseases in the human body. Zhang Jingyue further expounded on this view in Jingyue Quanshu·Yu Zheng, pointing out: “All stagnations of the five qi can lead to various diseases, which are diseases caused by stagnation; as for emotional stagnation, it always originates from the heart, which is disease caused by stagnation.” Zhang Jingyue believed that the stagnation of qi in the five zang-organs leads to the occurrence of various diseases, while emotional and

psychological stagnation is mainly caused by the disorder of the heart-spirit, thus triggering diseases. Li Yongcui also put forward a similar view in Zheng Zhi Hui Bu : “There are those who develop stagnation due to prolonged illness, and those who fall ill due to prolonged stagnation.” [16] He emphasized that prolonged illness may lead to emotional and psychological stagnation, and conversely, prolonged emotional and psychological stagnation may trigger new diseases. These views all originate from the emotional etiology theory of Neijing, that is, the imbalance of emotional and psychological states is an important cause of diseases.

3.2. The seven emotions and five aspirations can damage the five zang-organs

Suwen·Xuanming Wugi states that the liver stores the soul, the heart stores the spirit, the spleen stores the will, the lung stores the corporeal soul, and the kidney stores the ambition. [11] Regarding the five zang-organs as vital physical organs forms the theoretical basis for regulating emotions by adjusting the functions of the zang-fu organs, and vice versa. This view fundamentally differs from modern medicine, which regards tissues and organs purely as soulless physical structures. [16]

Suwen·Yin Yang Ying Xiang Da Lun proposes that “anger injures the liver, joy injures the heart, thought injures the spleen, sorrow injures the lung, fear injures the kidney”. This so-called injury of the five zang-organs by the five aspirations is actually an example using the theory of the five elements. In reality, it does not mean a rigid one-to-one correspondence between emotions and organs. Among the five zang-organs, the heart has the closest relationship with emotional activities. As stated in Ling “The spirit resides in the heart”, and in Ling: “Sorrow, worry, fear, and fright injure the heart”, as well as in Ling: “Worry and thought injure the heart”. Suwen·Linglan Midian Lun states: “The heart is the monarch organ, from which the spirit emerges... All these twelve organs must not lose coordination. Therefore, if the monarch is wise, the subjects will be at peace; using this to preserve health leads to longevity and a life free from danger; applying this to governing the country leads to great prosperity. If the monarch is not wise, the twelve organs will be in danger, the channels will be blocked and, and the body will be greatly injured; using this to preserve health leads to disaster, and applying this to governing the country will cause the foundation to be in great danger. Take warning, take warning!” [17] If the organs within the body coordinate harmoniously (like a wise monarch and obedient subjects), the body can maintain harmony and balance, thus achieving health, longevity, and freedom from disaster. This discussion emphasizes the importance of coordination among the internal organs to ensure the smooth operation of physiological functions and promote overall health and longevity.

3.3. Prolonged stagnation leading to disease

Suwen·Maiyao Jingwei Lun states: “The resentment of autumn becomes the anger of winter.” [17] The term “resentment” originally refers to extreme internal confusion and low mood, which is the initial stage of anger. Just as exogenous febrile diseases have an incubation period, diseases caused by emotional factors also have a similar latent process. In this process, “autumn” and “winter” symbolize the passage of time, which can be appropriately called “emotional latent pathogens”. This term vividly describes the phenomenon that emotional factors accumulate potentially over a period of time and may trigger diseases at some future moment. In life, and each person’s attitude and coping style when facing these difficulties often determine their mindset and quality of life. Some people can self-regulate and let go, regarding these as part of life, and gradually as time passes and

the environment changes, thus maintaining inner peace and health. However, others may be unable to release the burden in their hearts due to internal depression and obsession. When these negative emotions accumulate to a certain extent, exceeding the body's own regulatory capacity, they will eventually lead to illness due to stagnant qi. "Autumn resentment" and "winter anger" can be seen as the transition from depression to depression. Explaining this from the perspective of climate change unnecessarily complicates and distorts its true meaning. [15]

3.4. Pathogenesis of depression syndrome: Disorder of qi movement

The occurrence of depression is influenced by external environmental factors and internal personality deviations. TCM believes that its location is in the brain marrow. Excessive or insufficient emotions (joy, anger, worry, thought, sadness, fear, fright) triggered by life events lead to disorders in the transportation and transformation of the five zang-organs and the reception and transformation functions of the six fu-organs, primarily involving the liver and kidney, and affecting all five zang-organs as the disease progresses. [18] Ling states: "Wind and cold injure the body, while worry, fear, resentment, and anger injure qi." This means that the seven emotions primarily affect the movement of qi. Suwen·Jutong Lun states: "All diseases arise from qi. Anger causes qi to rise, joy causes qi to relax, sadness causes qi to dissipate, fear causes qi to descend, cold causes qi to contract, heat causes qi to disperse, fright causes qi to be confused, labor causes qi to be consumed, and thought causes qi to stagnate." This describes various manifestations of abnormal qi movement caused by emotional disorders. There are not only simple cases of depression syndrome but also complex phenomena of coexisting disease and depression. Meanwhile, there is a mutual interaction where emotional stagnation triggers diseases and diseases lead to emotional stagnation. Suwen·Yujizhencang Lun points out: "Worry, fear, sadness, joy, and anger that do not follow their proper order can cause serious illness. Thus, excessive joy leads to great deficiency, allowing kidney qi to invade; anger allows liver qi to invade; sadness allows lung qi to invade; fear allows spleen qi to invade; worry allows heart qi to invade. This is the principle. Therefore, there are five types of diseases, with twenty-five variations and their transmissions. 'Transmission' is the name for invasion." Diseases caused by emotional factors are highly variable in symptoms, posing great challenges for disease identification and diagnosis. [11]

4. Therapeutic Approaches for Depression Based on Emotion-induced Pathogenesis

In addition to the commonly used western medicine antidepressants, the integrated treatment of TCM and western medicine for depression can achieve complementary advantages. This comprehensive approach not only utilizes the strengths of western antidepressants (such as strong specificity, rapid onset, relatively definite efficacy, and fewer adverse reactions) but also takes advantage of TCM's ability to regulate the body, improve overall functions, and simultaneously treat peripheral symptoms of depression. [19] Since depression patients mainly manifest emotional disorders and often anxiety, relieving their emotions is also crucial. Suwen·Jinkui Zhenyan Pian records: "Gong is the sound of the spleen, loud and harmonious, like a sigh; excessive thought injures the spleen. The Gong sound can be used to induce anger to treat excessive thought; Shang is the sound of the lung, light and vigorous; Jue is the sound of the liver, melodious and straightforward; Zhi is the sound of the heart, harmonious and beautiful; Yu is the sound of the kidney, deep and profound." The five tones

correspond to the five zang-organs, and the tone of each organ can be used to treat diseases of that organ. Additionally, diseases of other organs can be treated according to the law of mutual generation and inhibition of the five elements. [11] Therefore, listening to music can help relax emotions. Music psychological relaxation therapy is a method that uses music or its elements to influence an individual's physical, mental, and emotional states, aiming to relieve anxiety and stress while promoting physical function improvement and disease recovery. [10] Currently, the TCM Traditional Five-Element Music (Zheng Mode) repertoire, curated by Professor Hao Wanshan as a consultant and Shi Feng in charge of composition, has been widely applied. This repertoire has been proven to significantly improve the mood of depression patients and is popular among patients due to its painless and easily acceptable characteristics. [20] TCM characteristic emotional therapy, rooted in the profound theory of the seven emotions, comprehensively regulates an individual's emotional world and spiritual outlook through precise acupoint massage, deep meditation of the tranquility method, subtle suggestion and induction, natural regulation of Chinese herbal medicine for the spirit, wisdom balance of emotional mutual restraint, harmony of form and spirit, respect for personality in following desires, and cultivation of sentiment. Through these meticulous and complementary methods, TCM characteristic emotional therapy can effectively alleviate patients' emotional distress and gradually achieve overall organic regulation. [21]

5. Conclusions

Based on TCM's "theory of emotion-induced pathogenesis", this article discusses the etiology and pathogenesis of depression, arguing that the etiology and pathogenesis of depression lie in the excessive or insufficient seven emotions leading to disorders in the transportation and transformation of the five zang-organs and the reception and transformation functions of the six fu-organs, thereby affecting the normal function of brain spirit. The etiology of depression remains unclear, and its pathogenesis is complex.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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