

## Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) – A Chinese Medicine Perspective

### Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) is a condition that is characterised by long-term exhaustion, muscle weakness, depression and sleep disturbances. Patients suffering from CFS feel so tired that they are unable to do even half of their normal daily activities. This fatigue persists, even with more rest. The fatigue may last as little as a month, or it may persist for many years. CFS affects twice as many women as men. The cause of CFS is unknown, but it is believed that viral infections and/or immune system reaction may be responsible. Risk factors include extreme stress, or anxiety, flu-like illness that doesn't completely go away, and poor eating habits.

### Conventional Pharmaceutical Treatments

To help manage their symptoms your CFS patient may be taking medications such as:

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) – given to help reduce pain and inflammation.
- Antidepressants – for management of depressive symptoms. These drugs can also reduce fatigue, reduce muscle tension and improve sleep.
- Benzodiazepines – to help reduce anxiety and improve sleep.

### Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in Chinese Medicine

In TCM, categories similar to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) are:

1. Xu Lao (vacuity taxation, any pattern of severe vacuity),
2. Yu Zheng (depression pattern), and
3. Bai He Bing (a disease characterised by the patient having the desire for something but the inability to fulfil the desire, e.g. a desire to rest, but inability to sleep).

*Note: There may be other categories depending on the presentation of the disorder.*

It is important to note that patients diagnosed with what is termed a "syndrome" in modern medicine tend to present with a group of patterns rather than a clear-cut, text-book pattern presentation. Hence, it is important in clinic to establish which patterns your

patient exhibits, in what priority and to tailor treatment accordingly. During this process, it helps to differentiate between the manifestation of the disease and the underlying constitution – i.e. answer the question: "How did the patient get to where he is now?".

Huang Xiao Bo, et al. of the Xuan Wu Hospital (Beijing)<sup>1</sup> suggest that the often young CFS patients develop CFS due to being under considerable career or other pressure in daily life, while not being able to rest properly. This can result in a frustrated or depressed frame of mind and exhaustion. Often insufficient recovery from illness is part of the picture as well. In our modern Western society, we can add improper diet to the scenario. This combination of exhaustion, illness and improper diet lead to vacuity (mostly spleen qi, blood and yin vacuity), while pressures in daily life and a negative mental outlook give rise to Liver depression/depressive heat.

### Multiple Patterns and the Concept of Yin Fire

The above patterns tie in well with Bob Flaws' observations that:

"Most patients with Chronic Fatigue Immune Deficiency Syndrome (CFIDS) exhibit "yin fire" patterns."<sup>2</sup>

The concept of "yin fire" stems from the Chinese master physician Li Dong-yuan who mentions it in his famous treatise *Pi Wei Lun* (Discussion of Stomach and Spleen, 1246, available in translation by Blue Poppy Press). According to Flaws:

"In this treaty, Li was not primarily talking about digestive diseases like diarrhoea and constipation. Rather, he was talking about complex, difficult to treat allergic, autoimmune, and immune deficiency diseases."<sup>3</sup>

Flaws further explains:

"Yin fire is not the same as vacuity heat (xu re) but does include vacuity heat. Basically, yin fire has five causes or mechanisms. These are Spleen qi vacuity, Liver depression/depressive heat, damp heat, yin and blood vacuity with vacuity heat, and stirring of ministerial fire. Typically, three, four, or even five of these disease

mechanisms occur simultaneously. However, according to Li, it is spleen vacuity and the resulting qi depression and chaos of up-bearing and down-bearing which is the crux of the matter, at least in terms of treatment."<sup>4</sup>

Based on these observations, in treatment of CFS, the following five principles should be applied together when constructing a formula:

1. Fortify the Spleen and supplement the qi.
2. Regulate upbearing and down-bearing with acrid, qi-rectifying medicinals.
3. Clear heat.
4. Treat whatever other disease mechanisms and symptoms are present.
5. Evaluate the relative priorities and importance between these five principles and weight the treatment plan accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

### Residual Pathogenic Factor

Maciocia considers a residual pathogenic factor one of the main conditions for CFS. If the patient suffers from weak defence qi or does not rest adequately during an acute invasion of a pathogenic factor, the pathogenic factor may remain in the interior while the patient seems to recover. According to Maciocia:

"A residual pathogenic factor on the one hand continues to produce symptoms and signs, or on the other, it predisposes the person to further invasions of exterior pathogenic factors..." "Moreover, it will also tend to weaken qi and/or yin, establishing a vicious circle of pathogenic factor and deficiency..." "In the case of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, the residual pathogenic factor is nearly always dampness (with or without heat). In Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, dampness is typically in three locations: 1) in the head (causing poor memory and concentration), 2) in the stomach and spleen (causing digestive problems) 3) in the muscles (causing muscles ache, fatigue and heaviness)."<sup>6</sup>

Hence, no matter what other pattern(s) the patient presents with, consider dampness transforming medicinals in the modification.

## Pattern Differentiation

As CFS is a modern disease category and patients typically present with multiple patterns, pattern differentiation varies in Chinese sources. Treatment should consider the existence of multiple patterns, the concept of yin fire, and the possibility of a residual pathogenic factor. Aetiology typically includes:

1. overwork,
2. external contraction seasonal evil,
3. emotional difficulties/negative mental attitude,
4. weak constitution or,
5. long illness.

Based on these, the following patterns are often mentioned in modern Chinese Medicine literature,<sup>7,8</sup>

### 1. Qi vacuity

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, pale face, tiredness worse in the mornings, shortness of breath and disinclination to talk, short hasty breathing and a weak voice, tendency to take a breath in order to continue speaking, slight muscle ache, muscle fatigue after slight exertion, spontaneous sweating, dizziness, palpitations, poor appetite, slight abdominal distension, loose stool. Pale tongue with white coating, vacuous weak pulse.
- Formula: *Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang* [Ginseng and Astragalus Combination].
- Modifications:
  - Dampness (e.g. feeling of stuffiness in the stomach duct, greasy coating, reduced appetite): add Cang Zhu [Atractylodes], Sha Ren [Cardamon], Ban Xia [Pinellia].
  - Palpitations: add Bai Zi Ren [Biota], Long Chi [Dens Draconis].
  - Strong spontaneous sweating: add Mu Li [Oyster Shell], Fu Xiao Mai [Wheat].

### 2. Spleen vacuity with damp encumbrance

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, feeling of heaviness in the limbs, head feels heavy, bland taste in the mouth, mouth feels sticky, loss of taste, stuffy feeling in the stomach duct, abdominal distension, loose stool or diarrhoea, disturbed sleep, pale swollen tongue with teeth marks, white moist coating, soggy slippery pulse.
- Formula: *Xiang Sha Liu Jun Zi*

Tang [Saussurea and Cardamon Combination] with *Ping Wei San* [Magnolia and Ginger Combination].

- Modifications:
  - If head feels very heavy or distended: Gou Teng [Gambir], Tian Ma [Gastrodia], Dong Gua Pi [percarpium benincasae hispidae].



### 3. Qi vacuity with blood stagnation

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, shortness of breath and disinclination to talk, stabbing fixed pain in the chest and rib side, pain tends to refuse pressure, tongue may have stasis speckles, deep rough pulse.
- Formula: Bu Yang Huan Wu Tang (tonifies qi, invigorates blood, unblocks channels). Ingredients (all quantities in raw herbs): Huang Qi [Astragalus] 120 g, Dang Gui [Angelica Sinensis] 6 g, Chuan Xiong [Cnidium] 3 g, Chi Shao [Red Peony] 4.5 g, Tao Ren [Persica] 3 g, Hong Hua [Carthamus] 3 g, Di Long [Lumbricus] 3 g. Add Ji Xue Teng [Milettia] and for better results.

### 4. Dual qi and blood vacuity

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, shortness of breath and disinclination to talk, short hasty breathing and a weak voice, tendency to take a breath in order to continue speaking, spontaneous sweating, dizziness and flowery vision, palpitations, insomnia, white lustreless or yellowish complexion, numbness in hands and feet, pale nails, pale scanty menstrual flow, pale tender-soft tongue, fine weak forceless pulse.
- Formula: *Ren Shen Yang Rong Tang* [Ginseng Nutritive Combination]
- Modifications:
  - Dizziness, pronounced:

Tian Ma [Gastrodia].

Ju Hua [Chrysanthemum].

- Insomnia, pronounced: Suan Zao Ren [Zizyphus], Ye Jiao Teng [Polygonum Stem].
- Numb limbs: Ji Xue Teng [Milettia], Dan Shen [Salvia], Si Gua Luo [Luffa].

### 5. Dual qi and yin vacuity

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, spontaneous perspiration, shortness of breath, dry cough, insomnia, dry mouth, sore throat, dizziness, dizzy vision, tidal heat effusion, sensation of heat in the palms and soles, sore lumbus, tinnitus, scant urine, hard stool, red tongue with little coating, thin rapid weak pulse.
- Formulas: *Si Jun Zi Tang* [Four Major Herb Combination] with Zuo Gui Wan (Ingredients of Zuo Gui Wan: Shu di huang [Rehmannia (cooked)], shan yao [Dioscorea], shan zhu yu [Cornus], tu si zi [Cuscuta], gou qi zi [Lycium fruit], gui ban jiao [Tortoise shell gelatin], lu jiao jiao [Antler gelatin], niu xi [Achyranthes]).
- Modifications:
  - Dry cough with little sputum: Sha Shen [Glehnia], Mai Dong [Ophiopogon].
  - Dry mouth and sore throat: Shi Hu [Herba Dendrobii], Yuan Shen [Radix Scrophulariae Ningpoensis].
  - Tidal heat effusion, hot palms and soles: Jin Yin Hua [Lonicera], Chai Hu [Bupleurum], Qin Jiao [Gentiana macroph], Mu Dan Pi [Moutan].
  - Dry stool: He Shou Wu [Ho Shou Wu], Rou Cong Rong [Cistanche].

### 6. Liver spleen disharmony

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, fullness and distension in the rib-side, sighs often, depression, reduced appetite, abdominal distension, soft stool or diarrhoea, or abdominal pain with diarrhoea that is relieved after passing stool, white or greasy tongue coating, stringlike pulse.
- Formulas: *Chai Hu Shu Gan San* with *Xiang Sha Liu Jun Zi Tang* [Bupleurum and Cyperus Combination with Saussurea and Cardamon Combination].
- Modifications:
  - Strong rib-side pain: add Yu Jin [Curcuma aromatica], Yan Hu

Suo [Corydalis].

- Irritability, bitter taste in the mouth and dry throat: add Shan Zhi Zi [Gardenia], Huang Qin [Scute].

### 7. Liver kidney yin vacuity

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, dizziness and dizzy vision, blurred vision or other visual disturbances, tinnitus, forgetfulness, insomnia and dream disturbed sleep, dry mouth and throat, tidal heat effusion, sensation of heat in the palms and soles, night sweats, tight or painful sinews, weak and sore lumbus and knees, red tongue with little coating, fine rapid pulse.
- Formula: *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* with Yi Guan Jian [Rehmannia Six Formula with Linking Decoction].  
Ingredients of Yi Guan Jian: Sheng Di Huang [Rehmannia, raw], Bei Sha Shen [Glehnia], Mai Men Dong [Ophiopogon], Dang Gui [Angelica Sinensis], Gou Qi Zi [Lycium Fruit] and Chuan Lian Zi [Melia].
- Modifications:
  - Painful muscles: Di Long [Lumbricus], Qin Jiao [Gentiana macroph], Niu Xi [Achyranthes], Yan Hu Suo [Corydalis].
  - Headache: Man Jing Zi [Vitex], Ju Hua [Chrysanthemum], Sang Ye [Folium Mori Albi].
  - Painful joints: Wei Ling Xian [Radix

Clematidis Chinensis], Fang Feng [Siler].

- Sore throat: Shan Dou Gen [Radix Sophorae Subprostratae], She Gan [rhizoma belamcandae], Xuan Shen [Scrophularia].
- Swollen/painful lymph nodes: Xia Ku Cao [Prunella], Lian Qiao [Forsythia].

### 8. Spleen kidney yang vacuity

- Symptoms and signs: Lassitude of spirit and lack of strength, white facial complexion, cold body and limbs, sore lumbus, cold knees, cold painful abdomen, diarrhoea or fifth watch diarrhoea, puffy face and swollen limbs, low libido or impotence, infertility, clear vaginal discharge, pale and swollen tongue, white moist coating, deep fine pulse.
- Formula: Jin Gui Shen Qi Wan (ingredients: Shu Di Huang [Rehmannia, cooked], Shan Zhu Yu [Cornus], Shan Yao [Dioscorea], Fu Ling [Hoelen], Ze Xie [Alisma], Mu Dan Pi [Moutan], Zhi Fu Zi [prepared Aconite, not available in Australia], Rou Gui [Cinnamon Bark]).
- Modifications:
  - Strong cold evil: Pao Jiang [blast fried rhizoma zingiberis], xi xin [Herba Asari cum Radice].
  - Long-term diarrhoea: Rou Dou Kou [Semen Myristicae Fragrantis], Bu Gu Zhi [Psoralea].
  - Sore lumbus and cold knees:

Bai Ji Tian [Morinda], Du Zhong [Eucommia], Chuan Niu Xi [Achyranthes].

### Spleen-Friendly Diet and Exercise

As an impaired spleen plays such a crucial role in CFS, the patient should be instructed in diet and exercise. The diet should be spleen-friendly, i.e. made up of fresh food that is cooked (neither cold nor raw, so the popular combination sandwich and salad is out!) and not extreme in flavour (not too spicy, salty etc.). All uncooked foods like salads, yoghurt and sandwiches are classified as cold foods, including cold drinks. Raw foods do not present a problem if eaten together with a warm meal, but the excessive consumption of cold foods leads to sluggish digestion (for further information please refer to the article "When the Herbs don't do anything - the Importance of Strengthening the Spleen", Sun Ten Newsletter, March/April 2005 edition).

A sedentary lifestyle weakens the spleen, mild exercise strengthens the spleen. Although tired, the patient should undertake mild exercise. It is important that this exercise has the function of benefiting the Spleen and moving Liver qi, but does not exhaust the Kidney. In short, it should be invigorating but not exhausting.

References available on request.