



中醫 TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Low Mood – A Chinese Medicine Perspective*

WHEN IT'S MORE THAN JUST "FEELING DOWN"

Sadness and low mood are common clinical presentations today. There are many patients who have chosen to manage their mood disorder using traditional Chinese medicine instead of, or in addition to, conventional pharmaceutical medicines. For these patients there are many formulas that can help them regain emotional balance and restore joy to their lives.

An enduring tendency in Chinese thinking is to see motion and change (dòng 动) as an essential part of our existence. In this world of ceaseless change and transformation, we maintain health through the orderly flow and exchange of jīng 精, qì 氣, and xuè 血. When the orderliness of functional processes is upset (for example when what should go up goes down, or vice versa), the various circulations become obstructed and health problems may arise.

As we can see below, there are frequent textual references describing the process of unskillful emotional reactions leading to the loss of flow and depression of circulation.

- **Nei Jing Su Wen:** "When thinking excessively, thoughts are stored in the heart, concentrated in one place, whereby the qì stops moving and becomes depressed. That is why qì congeals jié 結."
- **Nei Jing Ling Shu:** "When sad and worried, the passage of qì slows and its movement is depressed."
- **Zhu Bin Yuan Hou Lun:** "Qi accumulation illness, jie qi bing 结气病, is produced by sadness and worry. When thoughts are heavy in the heart, the shen slows, qì gets depressed and congealed inside."

Re-establishing emotional stability and balance is vital for overall health. In this article we will review strategies you can use to help patients with mood disorders.

TCM MANAGEMENT OF MOOD DISORDERS

Sadness and low mood in traditional Chinese medicine is categorised as one of the following:

1. Depressive condition – *yu zheng*
2. Withdrawal – *dian*
3. Vacuity taxation – *xu lao*
4. Insomnia – *bu mian*
5. Vexation and agitation – *fan zao*
6. Visceral agitation – *zang zao*

CHINESE PATTERN DIFFERENTIATION: REPLETION PATTERNS

Sadness and low mood can be differentiated into five repletion patterns, including liver qì depression, liver depression transforming into fire, blood movement depression (blood stagnation), phlegm and qì depression and stagnation, and phlegm fire obstruction.

1. Liver qì depression

Clinical Manifestation:

- irritability
- passive aggressive behaviour
- resistance
- stubbornness
- tendency to sigh
- chest and hypochondriac oppression
- lower abdominal distension and pain
- diminished appetite
- discomfort in the epigastrium
- possible delayed menses
- darkish, stagnant menstrual blood
- menses unable to come easily
- premenstrual breast distension
- T: normal, or slightly darkish body, thin, white coat
- P: tight

Typical Formula: *Chai Hu Shu Gan Tang* [Bupleurum & Cyperus Formula]

Formula Discussion: This is a variation of *Ni San* [Bupleurum & Zhi Shi Combination], mentioned in the Zheng Zhi Zhun Sheng (Guidelines for Pattern Identification and Treatment). This formula courses the liver, rectifies qì, quickens blood, relieves pain. This formula is less blood nourishing than *Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Dang Gui Formula] but is more effective in rectifying central burner qì.

Common Modifications:

- In cases of liver qì invading the stomach with signs such as belching, add Fo Shou [Finger Citrus].
- In cases of strong menstrual pain, add Yu Jin [Curcuma aromatica] and Pu Huang [Pollen typhae].
- For stomach pain, add Hai Piao Xiao [Cuttlebone].

2. Liver depression transforming into fire

Clinical Manifestation:

- the above signs and symptoms, plus
- not just irritable, but angry
- shouting, cursing
- speaking inappropriately
- bitter taste in the mouth, often on waking
- possible sour regurgitation
- headache
- red eyes
- tinnitus
- dry stool
- dark, yellow concentrated urine
- T: red, body, yellow coat
- P: wiry

Typical Formula: *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Peony Formula].

Formula Discussion: There are a number of commonly used variations of *Xiao Yao San*. This is one of the most commonly used. This particular formula is from the Nei Ke Zhai Yao, or Summary of Internal

*Material adapted from the 2005 Greg Bantick Seminar on depression - Greg Bantick is also the presenter of the February 2009 Seminar on Stress, Anxiety and Mood Disorders.

Medicine. It is *Xiao Yao San* with the addition of Mu Dan Pi and Zhi Zi and is used where there is constrained liver qi generating heat, and the constraint is invading the spleen. This formula courses the liver, rectifies the qi, clears heat, resolves depression, nourishes the spleen, drains damp, nourishes and harmonises the blood.

Modern Research:

• **Effects on GABA:** *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Peony Formula] activates GABA receptors: *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* has an anxiolytic action through binding to, and activating, GABA receptors. A secondary effect is that the formula promotes synthesis of chemicals which decrease anxiety. This formula has a GABAergic effect. GABA binds to the body's benzodiazepine receptors, which prevents nerve impulses associated with stress and anxiety from reaching the motor centres of the brain and sedates the central nervous system.¹

• ***Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Peony Formula] may reduce low mood:** In a 12 week study, 124 patients with mood disorders were given *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* concomitantly with an anticonvulsant and showed beneficial effects.²

• ***Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Peony Formula] increases dopamine levels:** *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* contains an active ingredient that increases dopamine levels. This action will contribute to the formula's well known mood lifting effect as dopamine activity decreases apathy, improves mood and feelings of wellbeing; inducing euphoria and increases assertiveness.³



• ***Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* and *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang* relieve panic disorder:** Four patients with panic disorder and agoraphobia were given *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San*, followed by *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang*. Both formulas relieved the panic attacks, anticipatory anxiety and agoraphobia. It was noted that *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* was more effective in the more severe cases.⁴

3. Blood movement depression (blood stagnation)

Clinical Manifestation:

- emotional depression
- restlessness and agitation
- feeling vulnerable
- easily upset
- dark facial colour
- rib side and flank distension and pain
- suicidal thoughts
- possible amenorrhoea
- possible painful menses
- T: dark, purplish, or with purplish spots
- P: deep, wiry and or choppy

Typical Formula: *Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang* [Persica & Achyrantes Combination]. Alternatively *Si Wu Tang* [Dang Gui Four Combination] and *Si Ni San* [Bupleurum & Zhi Shi Formula] and Tao Ren [Persica] and Hong Hua [Carthamus].

Formula Discussion: *Xue Fu Zhu Yu Tang* first appeared in the 19th century treatise, *Yi Lin Gai Cuo*, or Corrections of Errors Among Physicians. This formula is a combination of the blood invigorating formula, *Tao Hong Si Wu Tang* [Persica, Carthamus and Dang Gui Combination], with the qi regulating formula, *Si Ni San* [Bupleurum & Zhi Shi Formula]. It is used for a variety of complaints in the upper body that share fixed, sharp, stabbing pain together with tongue and pulse signs of blood stasis. This formula invigorates the blood and dispels blood stasis, unblocks the channels and spreads the qi of the liver, and stops pain. This formula not only invigorates blood and transforms stasis in the blood level, it also relieves depression and constraint in the qi level. This is using qi to promote the movement of blood by ensuring that lung qi properly diffused and that liver qi is smoothly spread. It has the effect of invigorating the blood without consuming it, and overcoming blood stasis while promoting the production of new blood.

Common Modifications:

All quantities in raw herbs.

- For neurosis: add He Huan Pi (Albizia) 10-20g, Ye Jiao Teng (Polygonum Stem) 10-20g, and Zhen Zhu Mu (Concha Margaritiferæ) 25-40g.
- For schizophrenia: add Meng Shi (Lapis) 30-50g, Mu Li (Oyster Shell) 30-50g, Long Gu (Dragon Bone) 30-50g, and Hu Po (Succinum) 6-15g.
- For obvious headache: add Man Jing Zi (Vitex), and Bai Ji Li (Tribulus).

- For general deficiency: add Dang Shen (Codonopsis) and Huang Qi (Astragalus).



4. Phlegm and qi depression and stagnation

Clinical Manifestation:

- plum pit qi
- feeling overwhelmed
- pressured to make decisions
- possible oppressed feeling in the chest
- possible rib side pain
- T: greasy, white coat
- P: wiry, slippery

Typical Formula: *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang* [Pinellia & Magnolia Combination].

Formula Discussion: This formula disperses stagnant qi and accumulation by promoting the movement of qi, dissipates clumps, dissolves phlegm, directs rebellious qi downward, and restores the downward movement of stomach qi. *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang* first appeared in the *Jingui Yaolue*, or Essentials from the Golden Cabinet. It was listed in one of the chapters on gynaecological disorders, and specifically recommended for "women who feel like there is a lump of baked meat stuck in their throat." This condition is by no means limited to women. It has come to be referred to as "plum pit syndrome" (mei he qi), a term that specifically refers to a lump-in-throat sensation that typically worsens when unhappy or depressed, and is due to circumstances which the patient figuratively feels they cannot swallow. This leads to qi constraint, affecting the lung and stomachs ability to move qi downwards. This, in turn, leads to problems with the transformation and transportation of fluids, leading to the accumulation of phlegm. This interference of the qi mechanism by phlegm also leads to the stuffy feeling in the chest and epigastrium.

Common Modifications:

- For severe qi stagnation: add Chai Hu (Bupleurum), Yu Jin (Curcuma aromatica), Xiang Fu (Cyperus) and Qing Pi (Blue Citrus).
- For severe stifling sensation in the chest: add Yu Jin (Curcuma aromatica), and Zhi Ke (ripe Citrus).
- For mood disorders, if accompanied by throat discomfort: add Da Zao (Jujube), this will produce *Si Qi Tang* (Four-Ingredient Decoction for the Seven Emotions).

Modern Research:

- **Ban Xia Hou Po Tang [Pinellia and Magnolia Combination] modulates neurotransmitters:** Brain monoamines like serotonin and dopamine play important roles in various psychiatric and neurological diseases, such as sadness and anxiety. *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang* increases serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline and reduces their breakdown. This explains why this formula works so well for these types of disorders.⁵
- **Honokiol from magnolia reduces anxiety:** Honokiol is strongly anxiolytic. Magnolia-free preparations of *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang* [Pinellia and Magnolia Combination] do not have the anxiolytic effect associated with preparations that contain the magnolia.⁶
- **Ban Xia Hou Po Tang [Pinellia and Magnolia Combination] reduces stress markers:** Stress upregulates expression of certain proteins in the brain. *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang* significantly reduces the expression of these proteins in stressed rats; however, there is no reduction in unstressed animals.⁷
- **Ban Xia Hou Po Tang [Pinellia and Magnolia Combination] reduces stress-related diseases:** Neuropeptide Y is involved in regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and stress responsivity. Neuropeptide Y increases under stress and is used as a marker of stress. Administration of *Ban Xia Hou Po Tang* prevents the rise in neuropeptide Y, indicating the formula is beneficial in stress-related diseases.⁸



5. Phlegm fire obstruction

Clinical Manifestation:

- both apathetic and tired, and restless and anxious, possibly alternating between the two
- heavy feeling in the head
- profuse phlegm
- poor sleep
- chest oppression
- reduced appetite
- burping
- sour regurgitation
- T: greasy yellow
- P: slippery, rapid

Typical Formula: *Huang Lian Wen Dan Tang* [Coptis Decoction To Warm The Gall Bladder]. Or alternatively *Wen Dan Tang* [Bamboo & Hoelen Combination] and *Huang Lian* [Coptis].

Formula Discussion: The base formula, *Wen Dan Tang* [Bamboo & Hoelen Combination], is an important remedy for resolving heat phlegm. In the treatment of mood disorders, a key component of this formula is disharmony between the stomach and gall bladder with phlegm heat. The phlegm heat interferes with the rising of clear yang, and disturbs the chest and heart, clouding the heart orifices.

Common Modifications:

- For stubborn insomnia due to heart and gall bladder deficiency: add Shi Gao (Gypsum), Ren Shen (Ginseng), Long Yan Rou (Arillus Euphoriae Longanae), Suan Zao Ren (Zizyphus), and Mai Men Dong (Ophiopogon).
- For hysteria, fearfulness and great agitation: add Chai Hu (Bupleurum) and Huang Qin (Scute).

Case Example: Male late 40's. Chief complaint of sinus congestion and feeling blocked and "fuzzy" in the head. On questioning reveals he has a stuffy feeling in the chest and often feels he cannot get a deep breath. Is depressed, short tempered, impatient, eats poor quality and excessively, drinks moderately, has a strained relationship with his wife and



kids, hates his job, can feel dizzy and disoriented, sometimes when he is walking he feels like he is leaning sideways. P: rapid slippery T: yellow greasy.

CHINESE PATTERN DIFFERENTIATION: VACUITY PATTERNS

Depression can be differentiated into four vacuity patterns: Depression of heart qi, heart and spleen vacuity, spleen and kidney vacuity, and yin vacuity with fire effulgence.

1. Depression of heart qi

Clinical Manifestation:

- easily distracted, absent minded
- fearful
- anxious
- restless
- sorrowful
- tendency to cry easily
- frequent yawning
- T: pale, thin white coat
- P: wiry, fine

Typical Formula: *Gan Mai Da Zao Tang* [Licorice & Jujube Combination].

Formula Discussion: This formula nourishes the heart and quietens the spirit, relaxes tension and harmonises middle burner. *Gan Mai Da Zao Tang* first appeared in the classic formula compendium the *Jing Gui Yao Lue*, or *Essentials from the Golden Cabinet*, Chapter 22, clause 6. It was originally mentioned in the chapter on women's disorders and was recommended for use in zang zao, restless organ syndrome. This is an emotional syndrome attributed to excessive anxiety and worry. This damages the heart yin, constrains the flow of liver qi, and damages spleen qi. There is some confusion about what is meant by the term organ. Some authors feel it means the uterus. However, men also experience the syndrome. Other authors feel it refers to the heart and addresses where the heart loses its tranquility, the spirit becomes restless. This seems to fit with the focus of the formula. In clinic, all the yin organs could be involved. Another idea in the formula is liver constraint. This sweet formula was apparently inspired by the treatment principle found in chapter 22 of the *Su Wen*, that "When the liver is in a bitter and restless state, quickly eat sweet flavours to emolliate it." Despite its simple food based design, the formula

has been found to be highly effective in the treatment of various mental disorders. It is frequently combined with other mood disorder formulas.

Common Modifications:

- For heart yin deficiency: add Bai He (Lily) and Bo Zi Ren (Biota).
- For qi deficiency: add Dang Shen (Codonopsis) and Huang Qi (Astragalus).
- For schizophrenia: add Gui Zhi (Cinnamon Twigs), Long Gu (Dragon Bone) and Mu Li (Oyster Shell).
- For instability and restlessness of heart qi: add Suan Zao Ren (Zizyphus), Yuan Zhi (Polygala), Fu Shen (Poria cocos) and Wu Wei Zi (Schizandra).
- For insomnia: add Bai He (Lily), Dang Shen (Codonopsis), Suan Zao Ren (Zizyphus), Long Chi (Dens Draconis), Wu Wei Zi (Schizandra) and Mai Men Dong (Ophiopogon).
- Above symptoms and liver constraint, depression, irritability and anger, chest and hypochondriac distention and pain: combine with *Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Dang Gui Formula].
- Above symptoms and anxiety, schizophrenia, manic depression, psychosis, obsessional neurosis, neurasthenia, dementia, menopausal syndrome, epilepsy, migraine, auditory and visual hallucinations, stubborn inability to listen: combine with *Wen Dan Tang* [Bamboo & Hoelen Combination].

Case Example: Female, late 40's. Professional appearance, articulate, well spoken. Chief complaint of frequent urination, especially at night, leaving her tired and lethargic the next day. On inquiry she is suffering depression and probably post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the violent stabbing death of her eldest son. She is very anxious, easily frightened, irritable, cries easily, sleeps only a couple of hours each night and is very tense physically. P: deep fine weak.



2. Heart and spleen vacuity

Clinical Manifestations:

- palpitations
- busy thinking
- worrying
- confusion
- inability to concentrate
- feeling overwhelmed
- loss of strength and heaviness in the limbs
- timidity, overly compliant behaviour
- poor sleep
- poor memory
- light headedness
- fatigue
- no enthusiasm
- taking little delight in food or drink
- T: pale
- P: fine, weak

Typical Formula: *Gui Pi Tang* [Ginseng & Longan Combination].

Formula Discussion: Source: Fu Ren Liang Fang. The formula supplements qi and blood, strengthens the spleen, nourishes the heart and quiets the spirit.

Common Modifications:

- Pronounced insomnia: add *Ye Jiao Teng* (Polygonum Stem).
- Pronounced blood vacuity, night sweats: add *Shu Di Huang* (Rehmannia, raw), this produces the formula *Hei Gui Pi Wan*.
- Concurrent liver qi depression with heat: add *Chai Hu* (Bupleurum) and *Shan Zhi Zi* (Gardenia).

3. Spleen and kidney vacuity

Clinical Manifestation:

- lack of enthusiasm
- apathy
- procrastination
- depression
- wants to lie down
- a still body, little gesticulation
- a monotonous, flat voice
- feeling easily frightened, and apprehensive
- sexual dysfunction
- poor libido
- weakness of low back and knees
- T: large, pale, possible teeth marks, white coat
- P: deep, fine

Typical Formula: *Ji Sheng Shen Qi Wan* [Kidney Qi Pill from Formulas To Aid The Living]. Alternatively (number of grams of granules for one dose) *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* [Rehmannia Six Formula] 3g and *Huai Niu Xi* [Achyranthes] 1g and *Che Qian Zi* [Plantago] 1g and *Rou Gui* [Cinnamon] 0.3g.

4. Yin vacuity with fire effulgence

Clinical Manifestations:

- depression
- high anxiety
- possible panic attacks
- palpitations
- insomnia
- dream disturbed sleep
- dizziness
- heart agitation
- heat in the five hearts
- irritability
- easily angered
- wanting to be alone
- possible suicidal ideation
- T: red, no coat
- P: fine, rapid

Typical Formula: *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* [Rehmannia Six Formula].

Formula Discussion: This formula is derived from *Shen Qi Wan* from the *Jing Gui Yao Lue* (Essentials from the Golden Cabinet). The formula's creator, Qian Yi, removed the yang tonifying herbs from the original formula, leaving an elegant and well balanced formula to supplement kidney yin in children with symptoms such as failure to thrive, a shiny, pale complexion, dispiritedness and so on. This formula has since become the most commonly used formula for supplementing and enriching kidney yin deficiency. Because the liver and kidney are of the same source, it also nurtures liver yin.

Common Modifications:

- Insomnia: add *Suan Zao Ren* [Zizyphus] and *Ye Jiao Teng* [Polygonum Stem].
- Lower back pain and weakness: add *Du Zhong* [Eucommia] and *Huai Niu Xi* [Achyranthes].

References available on request.