

Healing Heartbreak with Chinese Medicine

By Dr. Jill Harrison, LAc., D.A.O.M., MA

We all remember our first heartbreak. That sense of being so crushed, we couldn't breathe. Of having our hopes so dashed, we felt we would never love again. One would think that heartbreak gets easier as we get older and wiser, but that initial gut-wrenching phase remains one of life's stormiest passages.

Like many of you, I've felt this as actual physical pain in my heart space. I'm not talking about other types of losses or grief. I'm speaking specifically about a broken heart from the loss of romantic love. Heartbreak feels very specific because it is specific—in fact, chemically it is very different from other types of loss. Whether sudden or gradual, a surprise ending or self-initiated, the unwanted loss of romance from a partner, a crush or even a date can feel devastating, a personal abandonment.

As a trained psychotherapist and doctor of Chinese medicine, I have had the great privilege of helping people through these trying times.

Getting Through a Painful Time

So, how do we heal from this loss? The good news is that we have in our human blueprint the knowledge of how to heal. I have seen it happen with others, and in my own life. Yet if the adage "time heals all wounds" has a lot of truth to it, it's not usually helpful at the moment we hear it. The time before healing occurs can feel like torture. In the case of heartbreak, this torturous feeling arises from a false belief that we cannot survive without the person we've lost. Helen Fisher, Ph.D., a biological anthropologist, has done numerous studies on the science of love and romance. As she describes in her TED talk ("[The Brain In Love](#)"), there is brain chemistry behind this that helps us understand what these big feelings are. She says that an obsession becomes even greater after you've been dumped, because the brain system becomes more active when you can't get what you want. Although it doesn't sound very romantic, these feelings are chemical. With acupuncture, we can spark the flow of serotonin and dopamine without the object of desire reappearing. Our happiness is within us. The needles remind us of that.

How Can Chinese Medicine Help?

While Western medicine tends to repress symptoms like pain, acupuncture and herbal medicine, a.k.a. Chinese medicine, focus on allowing symptoms in order to accelerate the healing process. Dr. Leon Hammer is an American psychiatrist who studied and then incorporated Chinese medicine into his practice. In his book *Dragon Rises, Red Bird Flies*, Dr. Hammer explains how acupuncture opens the unconscious and breaks through maladaptive feedback loops. When we are dealing with heartbreak our mind loops over and over again on the same obsessive thought—a maladaptive feedback loop. With acupuncture, the person has an opportunity to replace a destructive thought process with a reparative one. For example, let's say a patient comes to me shocked by a sudden breakup. At that moment all she wants is to hold onto what was. To have the truth be different than it is. At that moment she can't see or feel how life can or will be okay without that person. What she really wants from the treatment is to bring her lover back.

The first acupuncture session allows for a pause in that dilemma. The needles bring a bigger picture, a more expansive view. There is now the experience and the possibility of life feeling okay again. The needles help release feel-good hormones like dopamine and serotonin, the same ones released when we fall in love. In fact, when we are madly in love, when our system is flooded by those hormones, we then associate those strong emotions with the other person, teaching our bodies that we need that person to feel good. As the needles release the hormones, just having those positive feelings viscerally reminds us that it is possible to feel good again without the lost object of desire. A shift can happen in the very first session. The blinders of that association open up a bit, sometimes even a lot. Because when we feel the possibility of something different than that stuck feeling of heartbreak, when we feel it in our body, mind, and spirit the sluice that has been shut opens a little to let light in.

I'm very blessed to have a practice that allows for talk therapy and deliberate attention toward emotional and spiritual healing. Practically speaking, I choose acupuncture points that will help release stuck energy in the heart and allow people to move through their heartbreak more fully and expediently. There are also herbs that have a similar function, opening the heart and moving the qi and stuck energy in the direction of healing and harmony. When my heartbroken patient leaves her acupuncture

treatment, she has an herbal remedy to take with her to continue the healing at home. The intention is to nourish and strengthen the heart qi and move the qi that is stuck (most often referred to as liver qi stagnation). We are building inner strength and constitutional sustenance. Although the individual circumstances require individualized treatments, I generally prescribe bi-weekly acupuncture for two weeks and weekly acupuncture for another 4 weeks along with herbal remedies throughout this painful time. As they say, when you're walking through hell, don't pitch a tent.

Other things that are helpful after any loss include talk therapy, support groups, self care, eating well, limiting substances, and reading great books such as Pema Chödrön's *When Things Fall Apart*. There is a positive side to heartbreak, too. For me, the broken hearts in my history have opened me up to look at the many pieces and surfaces of my heart. I have been able to put my broken heart back together so that it feels bigger and fuller than ever before. Stronger and more integrated. Many of my previously unhealed wounds have been healed during heartbreak, because when there is a break it allows the light to penetrate through all the broken places. I have often said that although I would never wish such pain on any one else, I feel grateful for the experiences and the journeys that my heartbreaks have taken me on. I love myself more fully and completely as a result of these experiences. If you're dealing with heartbreak, here are some tips to keep in mind:

Helpful Tips

1. Yes, this hurts, but not forever. As Elizabeth Gilbert says, "Embrace the glorious mess you are." Give yourself a finite amount of time to wallow, such as "I can eat ice cream every day for one week and then I'm done!"
2. Everyone is different and heals in their own way and in their own time. Don't compare your insides to someone else's outsides.
3. Keep hope alive for a new love when the time is right, but don't glom on to someone right away just to distract yourself.
4. Know that you may have many relationships that will teach you a lot before you meet your life partner. All relationships serve a purpose for your growth and healing. Honor the lessons that you will learn from your relationships and even your pain.
5. Use your energy to develop new habits. Make positive changes in your life and let go of the habits that don't serve you. If you focus on this you will be distracted from the

obsession of the loss and learn that you can make yourself feel better.

6. Get their crap out of your house. Continuing to exist among the energy of their stuff will prolong your suffering. And stop following them on social media immediately!
7. Take a vacation or take a mini holiday to get a change of scenery if you can.
8. Listen to yourself. Even through the pain, this is an opportunity to know yourself better.
9. Through this evolution of self, you will recognize that you deserve the best and you will vibrate and attract that. Like Maya Angelou said, "Never make someone a priority when all you are to them is an option."
10. Become your own best friend. You were born with yourself and will die with yourself so make your relationship with you sacred. The more you love *you* the more you will be able to receive the love coming your way.