

STARHURST PILOT STUDY

THE EFFECTIVE APPLICATION OF AURICULAR ACUPUNCTURE FOR TREATING SUBSTANCE MISUSE IN A SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOOL

Introduction

Surrey Young Peoples Service (SYPS) is a new treatment service for young people under the age of 19 years, who are experiencing problems with substance misuse. It is a multi-disciplinary care team that has a holistic approach to the treatment it provides. The ethos is an integrated health care approach using various complementary therapies alongside traditional counselling, education, harm reduction strategies and prescribing if required.

Starhurst is a boarding and day school for around 60 boys between the ages of 11-16yrs in Dorking, Surrey. The school provides education, care and therapy for pupils with severe emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. The majority of the pupils attending have failed in previous educational settings and have experienced periods of time in exclusion from full time education. The pupils present with a wide range of complex needs and include medically diagnosed conditions such as ADHD.

Surrey Young Peoples Service was asked to attend Starhurst School as the teachers had identified a growing problem with pupils and substance misuse: this ranged from smoking skunk which is a high concentrated form of herbal cannabis through to stimulant drugs like ecstasy and amphetamines. All boys smoked tobacco.

Rationale

After the initial assessments of drug use and social history had been carried out on the referred pupils it was clear that the level of emotional and behavioural disturbance that they displayed would require an enhanced treatment package. Based upon these assessment findings, I proposed an intervention designed to reduce substance use (if motivated), reduce cravings and to significantly reduce levels of anxiety and motor stimulation with an overall aim of promoting increased rest and relaxation.

A treatment intervention that has been successfully used with adult substance misuse, especially stimulant users, is auricular acupuncture. This is used as a detox assist and there is a well-documented evidence base for this treatment provided by NADA UK (National Acupuncture

Detoxification Association) and it is well established in most frontline adult drug services in Britain. Also, recent studies in America by Dr Michael Smith of the Lincoln Hospital, New York, suggest that it could be an effective treatment for children with special needs. On this basis I felt that this could work successfully with disturbed adolescents.

Methodology

The proposal was put forward to the schools Board of Governors who had obtained medical opinion and it was accepted. Letters of explanation and information was sent to parents about the proposal and interest was sought from the pupils. Once pupils had been selected, further explanation was given to the pupils and parents prior to written consent being obtained.

Following discussions with the Head of Starhurst, parental consent and boys volunteering to take part in the study we decided on a group of 6 boys to receive auricular acupuncture twice a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) for 6 weeks. Although more six boys expressed interest, six was deemed to be a large enough group due to the nature of their difficulties.

Given that this intervention was an initial program, the following evaluation plan was developed. Obviously, as a practising auricular acupuncturist; I would be predicting a positive therapeutic outcome. Therefore, in order to avoid any bias in the evaluation, we decided the following:

1. That Celia Clack, the substance misuse link teacher would take part in the group treatment sessions and conduct informal interviews with the participants.
2. The Head of the School, Henry Kiernan would carry out formal structured interviews individually with the pupils following the six-week course.

The auricular acupuncture would be based on the 5 point Treatment as taught by N.A.D.A UK, the 5 points comprise a basic formula, which involves placing five small sterilised disposable acupuncture needles into specific sites on each ear, with the pupils sitting quietly in a group setting for 45 minutes. The 5 points chosen, seen from a western medical position with the lung, liver and kidneys being the organs of elimination are described by Bensky {1985}:

Sympathetic - Used for treating diseases, which have a disruptive effect on the sympathetic, and parasympathetic nervous systems. Also used for analgesic and relaxant effect upon the internal organs, particularly the digestive system.

Shen Men - Regulates excitation and inhibition of the cerebral cortex. Has a sedative effect, thus used for many neuropsychiatry disorders.

Lung - Used for analgesia and anaesthesia. Helps control sweating. Aids the respiratory system

Kidney - strengthens the kidney and the cerebrum. Used for treating neurasthenia, headaches, lassitude and urogenital problems.

Liver - Used for liver inflammation, anaemia, alleviates toxicity in blood.

Delivery

Before the treatments began the pupils were given a clear induction of the treatment process and what was expected from them, especially around health and safety. This would mean the pupils would not be able to walk about with the needles in place for the duration of the treatment and would have to have the needles removed if they needed to leave the room or go to the bathroom. They were encouraged to remain silent during the treatment and not to distract each other.

The treatment setting was provided, this was a room in a quieter wing of the school which was made as calm as possible. The boys were encouraged to get into a comfortable position, either sitting on comfortable chairs with good back support or some chose to lie on the floor. To enhance the therapeutic environment we used aromatherapy oils in burners, which usually was sandalwood for a meditative and calming effect and also provided relaxation music to be gently played in the background.

Once everyone was settled a member of SYPS led with some creative visualisation. This was done by asking the boys to close their eyes and the worker would then begin using verbal imagery designed to induce a relaxation response.

Evaluation

When I first was introduced to the group they were agitated, they found it difficult to concentrate and were generally disruptive. This continued for the first two weeks (and was clearly documented by the teacher.) However as the treatment progressed I started to witness a general improvement in their behaviour and attitude towards the treatment based on their approach to the group and teacher feedback. By the end

they were much more engaged and co-operative to the extent that they were beginning to lead the creative visualisations and also create firm boundaries for the group. Teachers commented to me that this was unusually socially responsible and mature behaviour.

The evaluation conducted by Celia Clack and Henry Kiernan is detailed in the accompanying document. We can see that overall, this treatment had a positive impact on the pupils. The pupils, themselves, identified two main results: better sleep and feeling less stressed (see individual interviews). All felt it was helpful and valuable and a significant number felt there was a reduction in cravings immediately following treatment. Teachers identified major improvements in the participants' attitude and behaviour that was sustained outside the treatment sessions, in some instances course work improved and they felt the pupils were better able to deal with their anger.

As mentioned earlier, from my experience and knowledge of auricular acupuncture I would have expected some of the positive results listed above. Traditional Chinese Medicine Theory works on more than just the physical level. Each of the five points stimulated in the ear has also specific emotional and spiritual correlates.

It is stated in Traditional Chinese Theory of The Five Elements and how they relate to the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the person, the points can be seen in a more Transpersonal aspect {Liu Yanchi 1988;A&J Hicks1998}

Shen men – Means the “Spirit Gate”. The Spirit or ‘shen’ is said to reside in the heart. The heart has an association with love, trust, joy and communication. If this is not happening the person maybe ‘shen disturbed’. The spirit may not be able to settle, there maybe emotional instability, an inability to form any intimate relationships and difficulty in experiencing any peace or happiness. There is imbalance.

Lung – The lung has association with the grieving process and dealing with loss. It is linked with accepting new and letting go of old as well as self worth and value.

Liver – The liver is responsible for growth and creativity and is effected by frustration and resentment. Anger is most closely linked with liver.

Kidney – Stores our essence of or constitution, which is greatly depleted by constant use of drugs or alcohol. Our kidney energy is greatly affected by fear and paranoia.

If we now analyse the responses given by the pupils it becomes clear that there is a correlation between the points stimulated and the emotional response.

From Traditional Chinese Medicine, when we map the points in a more transpersonal perspective, we can see that by comparing the outcomes of the interviews to what the acupuncture is intended to stimulate and provide balance to; it would be hard not to notice a certain correlation.

When one of the boys stated that it worked better the first few times, then didn't have the same dramatic effect, this was because in Chinese Medicine terms his 'chi' (energy) was smoothly flowing. That particular boy was starting to find a balance in his life even though he had difficult personal circumstances and this was noted as well by his teachers, he was maintaining, for him, an emotional balance with the aid of the treatment.

My Experience

As the therapist I saw the boys grow as young people through their experience. To see these young people be able to experience and learn stillness, relaxation, self-awareness around stress and to become trustful and emotionally literate as a group was very rewarding. The fact that they were eventually able to leave their troubles before the sessions or begin to problem solve them during them was encouraging but also the fact they wanted other pupils and staff to experience what they had experienced. I would have personally liked more time following the actual acupuncture sessions to work with the pupils in addressing issues that came up for them during treatment as they became more open.

Conclusion

This piece of work is an evaluation of a therapeutic intervention, the success of which is documented by the teacher's feedback and pupil responses.

The Head teacher felt that this programme was a valuable and additional therapeutic intervention in working with disturbed adolescents. The consequence is that the school is now providing funding for some of the teachers and support staff to be trained in auricular acupuncture to continue and expand the treatment.

Pupil perception is very important – overall they saw it as being helpful, they valued the sessions and treated the whole programme seriously as it

progressed. They have expressed the benefits during and after the sessions and the want for the treatments to continue.

SYPS were invited into Starhurst School to help address the substance misuse issue. The pilot study for auricular acupuncture as an adjunct treatment intervention for substance misuse demonstrated a positive outcome: pupils reported a reduction in cravings; they also learned that it was possible to alter their state and relax without using drugs.

However it is clear that this treatment has the potential to assist the underlying emotional and behavioural needs of these young people. Therefore I strongly recommend further clinical studies and research.

Pupil quote:

“I wish it wasn’t over, you get used to knowing that you are going to have it. You sort of hang on knowing there will be another one”

Stuart Fraser
Senior Therapist
RN
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