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Working Well

by Melissa Carr, BSc, DTCM, RAc, RTCMP

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You're sitting at your desk, slouching at the end of a tiring day, stressed about deadlines and staring at a computer screen, but focusing instead on your headache, stiff neck, sore hands, or aching back.

This situation is a common one for many. In fact, according to a 2000 Integra Survey—a random telephone survey of 1,305 working adults in the United States—62 percent of respondents routinely ended their day with work-related neck pain, 44 percent reported sore eyes, 38 percent complained of aching hands, and 34 percent reported difficulty in sleeping because they felt too stressed.

You could suffer until your next holiday or you could quit your job, but neither of these options is likely suitable. Happily, wellness practices, such as those employed in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) can be instrumental in helping to cope with the stresses at work.

Decompress the Stress

TCM identifies seven emotions as injurious to our health: extreme anger, joy, worry, pensiveness, sadness, fear, and shock. While it is important to feel each of these emotions at appropriate times, when the emotion is especially intense or is felt over a prolonged period of time—particularly if it is not expressed—it can cause illness.

Be aware of your stress level when you eat. When the body is under stress, it tends to act like an overheated engine, so it is best to avoid spicy, hot foods. Stay away from greasy, heavy, fatty, and sugary foods which are also difficult to digest, and eat regular meals—away from your desk.

Be Alert—Don't Overexert

You might not think that sitting at your desk all day is overexerting yourself, but it can, in fact, cause many physiological problems. Some muscles are underused, while others may be used too much.

A classic TCM book *The Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* (Dolphin Books, 1977) states that excessive use of the eyes injures the blood (which nourishes and supports mental activity), excessive sitting injures the muscles, and excessive standing injures the bones. Thus, if you stare at a computer all day, you should consciously blink more often and look away periodically. If you sit all day, be sure to get up and move. If you stand all day, sit whenever you can, if only for a couple of minutes at a time.

Relieve the Pressure

If you feel pain and discomfort during the day, acupressure can be used to help relieve the tension. Try massaging sore shoulders and neck. For your lower back, try making a loose fist and lightly knocking on the muscles beside the spine.

More Help

When these solutions are not enough, seek treatment from a professional. Acupuncture has been used for thousands of years to treat pain and other illnesses. Chinese herbs, nutrition, tui na massage, and other TCM treatments can be used as well for pain and stress management.

Talk to your employer about a workplace wellness program. Mention that Health Canada's website reports a return-on-investment of \$3.40 for each corporate dollar invested in wellness initiatives. You and your employers can create a workplace to be well in.

Your Heavy Head

If you don't believe that office work can be physically demanding, think about the amount of work that your neck muscles must do while you sit at your desk looking down at your papers or toward a poorly placed computer screen. The average head weighs about the same as a light bowling ball—about 12 pounds—and comprises approximately eight percent of your total body weight. Try holding that weight in an extended hand all day! Posture is the key: Your head is meant to be in alignment with your spine so your neck muscles do not need to be continually active.

Acupressure for Headaches

Try relieving a tension headache with one of the following methods:

- Rub the temples.
- Stroke over the eyebrows from the centre out.
- Massage the tender spots at the base of the skull.
- Knead the tenderest point in the fleshy part on the back of your hand between the thumb and index finger.

About the Author

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