

Taking a Stab at Acupuncture

By Jenny Rough

We start with my fertility history. One miscarriage. One laparoscopic surgery to remove an ovarian cyst. One period every month that's twelve days long and comes with cramps so debilitating I curl into a fetal position on the shower floor, allowing hot water to spray my lower back. And finally, countless pregnancy tests that keep turning up negative.



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"Crying," I say.

"Sickness?"

"Puking."

"Does anything accompany your menstrual cramps?"

"Diarrhea."

He looks at my tongue four times.

"Acupuncture will strengthen your abdominal region so that you can support a pregnancy," he says. "Your body has a hard time retaining things."

I find his comment so insightful I'm practically ready to re-evaluate my entire career (a writer, I spill words out on the page faster than I can keep up). But before I say anything, he asks if I'd be willing to drink bitter herbs. They're supposed to harmonize my hormones.

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"Sure," I say.

So this is Eastern medicine, I think, glancing around his small office. I'm sitting in a chair next to a desk where the practitioner is scribbling notes. In the middle of the room there is a bed that looks like a massage table without the headpiece; a plant hangs from the ceiling, and a shelf on the wall holds containers which must store the one thing I've been trying to avoid thinking about: needles.

In a million years I never imagined I'd find myself here. My husband and I are both for alternative therapy. We practice yoga for flexibility and inner stillness, I drink ginger tea to aid with digestion, and we incorporate a prayer discipline into our daily lives. We also avoid pharmaceutical drugs as much as possible for two people born and raised under Western medical philosophies. But there is something about voluntarily asking someone to pierce my body with sharp metal objects that makes me draw a line.

Until now. My friend Kari conceived her daughter after starting acupuncture. And my husband came home from work one day to tell me an acupuncturist had spoken to his company as part of their wellness program. Maybe it'll work for us, we thought.

See how much I love ya, kid? I call out in silence as I gaze heavenward. Mommy's willing to torture herself with needles! One time during a routine procedure at a doctor's office, I worked myself into such a panic that I fainted, fell off the exam table, and bonked my head on the floor so hard I gave myself a concussion. When I came to, I threw-up (go figure).

The practitioner wants to show me the needles to alleviate my phobia. He unwraps one and holds it up. It's long and ultra-thin. It's also flexible.

"Watch," he says, "see how it bends?"

He offers to stick it in his arm.

"Be careful," I warn as he pokes himself.

"I didn't even feel that," he says.

When I begin treatments, I understand what he means. I'm not gushing over acupuncture the way

some do — my mom claims it's so relaxing she falls asleep — but I survive. Usually I can't feel the needle prick my skin, but I do feel a throbbing deep inside.

"That's your Qi grabbing the needle," the practitioner says when I explain what aches. The Qi (pronounce chee) is my body's vital life energy circulating within. The needles are placed in spots that are supposed to open up my energy flow and push more blood to my ovaries and uterus.

I visit once a week. He changes the location of the needles depending on my cycle, and this time it's two in my abdomen, four in my legs, and one in each wrist. In the car afterwards, I call my husband with a full report. Today is the day I start drinking bitter herbs. At home, I mix the brown goop with water and swallow the concoction. It tastes like twigs.

The first month, I'm five days late. I'm so convinced I'm pregnant that the false alarm is almost as devastating as the miscarriage. The second month I'm more cautious. Still, I'm glad I'm trying Eastern medicine. Maybe I'll even combine Western medicine into my attempts as well, such as allowing sperm to be inserted directly into my uterus via the "Turkey Baster method." But I know there is only so much I can do. Eastern medicine and Western medicine may have their differences, but under both practices, giving birth is revered as one of life's greatest miracles.

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