

Applications of Polyvagal Theory for Trauma in Clinical Practice: Auricular Acupuncture and Herbology

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Abstract : Within current orthodox medical protocols, trauma and mental health issues are deemed to reside within the realm of cognitive or psychological therapists and are marginalised in these areas, in part due to limited drugs option available, mostly manipulating neurotransmitters or sedating patients to reduce symptoms. By contrast, this research presents examples from the clinical practice of how trauma can be assessed and treated physiologically. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are a tally of different types of abuse and neglect. It has been used as a measurable and reliable predictor of the likelihood of the development of autoimmune disease. It is a direct way to demonstrate reliably the health impact of traumatic life experiences. A second assessment tool is Allostatic Load, which refers to the cumulative effects that chronic stress has on mental and physical health. It records the decline of an individual's physiological capacity to cope with their experience. It uses a specific grouping of serum testing and physical measures. It includes an assessment of neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, immune and metabolic systems. Allostatic load demonstrates the health impact that trauma has throughout the body. It forms part of an initial intake assessment in clinical practice and could also be used in research to evaluate treatment. Examining medicinal plants for their physiological, neurological and somatic effects through the lens of Polyvagal theory offers new opportunities for trauma treatments. In situations where Polyvagal theory recommends activities and exercises to enable parasympathetic activation, many herbs that affect Effector Memory T (TEM) cells also enact these responses. Traditional or Indigenous European herbs show the potential to support the polyvagal tone, through multiple mechanisms. As the ventral vagal nerve reaches almost every major organ, plants that have actions on these tissues can be understood via their polyvagal actions, such as monoterpenes as agents to improve respiratory vagal tone, cyanogenic glycosides to reset polyvagal tone, volatile oils rich in phenyl methyl esters improve both sympathetic and parasympathetic tone, bitters activate gut function and can strongly promote parasympathetic regulation. Auricular Acupuncture uses a system of somatotopic mapping of the auricular surface overlaid with an image of an inverted foetus with each body organ and system featured. Given that the concha of the auricle is the only place on the body where the Vagus Nerve neurons reach the surface of the skin, several investigators have evaluated non-invasive, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) at auricular points. Drawn from an interdisciplinary evidence base and developed through clinical practice, these assessment and treatment tools are examples of practitioners in the field innovating out of necessity for the best outcomes for patients. This paper draws on case studies to direct future research.

Keywords : polyvagal, auricular acupuncture, trauma, herbs

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