

ASTHMA AND EMOTIONAL HEALING

A brief Materia Medica of herbs that can help to address some of the emotional patterns underlying and contributing to asthma:

FEAR AND SHAME

Breath is a thread that connects us to the world. And when there is ambivalence about the safety of existing in the world, that thread can become tenuous.

Dr. Gabor Maté writes of a German study which found that:

“On objective measures, when asthmatic children felt frustrated or criticized, the flow of air from the lungs diminished, indicating airway narrowing. Decreased airflow has also been documented when children with asthma were asked to recall incidents of intense anger or fear.”¹

Intense feelings of fear and shame often underlie asthma. That fear can express itself in constriction, or become part of the feeling of emotional overwhelm that lead to excitation and hence inflammation.

In addressing these dimensions I like to work with:

DEVIL’S CLUB (*Oplopanax horridus*) – Devil’s Club is a strong, spiny plant with a tough outer bark and a soft inner bark that carves out space for itself, as it re-roots and grows outward in expanding stands. I work with Devil’s Club to provide a sense of protection² which allows someone to bring forward the fullness of who she is. Specifically indicated for those who are questioning their right to be in the world or their right to take up space.

REISHI (*Ganoderma* spp) -- Matthew Becker refers to Reishi as a “wisdom remedy,”³ bringing the deep stillness into the heart. Through connecting us with the forest’s long cycles of life, death, and rebirth, and the metabolization of that experience, Reishi brings grounding and calm.

I have found *Ganoderma applanatum* and *Ganoderma tsugae* to be reliable substitutes for *Ganoderma lucidum* in this regard.

SCHIZANDRA (*Schisandra chinensis*) -- The astringency of Schizandra gathers emotion and attention inward, calming panic by supporting the sense of core integrity and re-establishing boundaries with the outside world. From this place, power can return, “allowing the kidney to grasp the lung Qi” to draw in full breath.

LOBELIA (*Lobelia inflata*) – Relaxing the sympathetic nervous system, Lobelia allows for an opening to the reality of the present moment which contributes to the sense of safety that allows for the relaxation of constriction.

PULSATILLA (*Anemone pulsatilla*, *Anemone patens*, *Anemone occidentalis*, *Anemone tuberosa*, etc.) – Brings calm and grounding in the face of sudden frights (or sudden intense grief or dread.) Contra-indicated `` when the excitement depends upon irritation and determination of blood``⁴ and ``for the red-faced, flushed person with feverish countenance.``⁵

EMOTIONAL OVERWHELM

Maté writes that, for many asthmatics, ``Chronic emotional stresses sensitize the immune system, so that it becomes overly reactive to any number of triggers.``⁶ That increased reactivity makes an asthmatic more sensitive both to physical triggers – cold air, smoke, allergens, exercise – and to acute attacks resulting from more specific, immediate emotional triggers.

That increased sensitivity often includes an increased sensitivity to other people`s emotions, and increased anxiety when others are feeling negative emotions. Seemingly normal situations where other people are feeling stress can both contribute to the underlying situation of chronic stress and serve as triggers for acute anxiety that causes acute asthma attacks. Maté writes:

``The stresses that may induce asthma in a child are not necessarily recognized as such by either the patient or the family. Dr. Salvador Minuchin at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic has studied asthma and other childhood illnesses. In his view, highly sensitive children pick up subconscious cues from the environment, particularly about the emotional states of their parents.``⁷

I can say from personal experience that that pattern carries over into adulthood, with the sensitivity to parental emotional states developing into a sensitivity to the emotional states of friends, partners, and clients.

Chronic stress can also contribute to difficulty regulating emotional states, making a person more likely to feel intense, overwhelming emotions that seem disproportionate to the situation. This is especially true in people who are not neurotypical.

Many of the remedies mentioned above will be relevant in helping a person manage this tendency – Reishi, Devil`s Club, and Schizandra especially. Pulsatilla will be contra-indicated here because of the association of this build up of emotion with heat (and hence blood) rising to the head. In acute situations of inflammatory asthma attacks triggered by intense emotions I tend to turn to:

HAWTHORN (*Crataegus* spp.) – Dr. Deborah Frances, as far as I can tell, was the first practitioner to use Hawthorn for asthma, in situations that involved an emotional sense of ``constriction and closing down.``⁸ Building on her use of the plant, and on Matthew Wood`s use of Hawthorn in situations where a person has red cheeks and situations where a person is ``restless, irritable, and nervous,``⁹ I have begun to use the combined tinctures of Hawthorn leaf,

flower, berry, and thorn in situations where emotional overwhelm and agitation lead to inflammatory asthma attacks preceded by redness in the cheeks and ears.

GRIEF

Emotional sensitivity and difficulties with emotional regulation can also lead to a holding on of emotions that tend to stagnate and be held in mucus that builds up in the lungs. Here I work with:

ELECAMPANE (*Inula helenium*) -- Elecampane takes both its common name and its Latin name (*Inula hellenium*) from the legend of Helen of Troy. Matthew Wood writes that

"The legend is that when Helen was kidnapped by Paris the plant sprang up from where her tears fell. Afterward the plant was known as 'Heart of the campagna' -- elecampane."¹⁰

and notes that the plant is indicated for a person who has been "'torn away from one's home'" causing grief and suffering.

I believe that the plant is also often indicated for those who have never felt at home in their surroundings to begin with: the bookish, asthmatic child whose imagination is captivated by stories of other worlds that sound more like home than this one. At once distant and emotionally sensitive. At times deeply empathetic and perceptive and at other times completely oblivious to social norms and cues. Asthma in these cases is often closely associated with social anxiety. Breath is a tenuous thread barely keeping the child present in this reality. Developing into an adult who feels other people's emotions intensely but has difficulty processing his own emotions and even more difficulty sharing them with others so tends to suppress and hold onto emotional pain.

There is resonance here with another indication suggested by folklore. Wood writes:

"An old name for *Inula* is 'elfwort.' Possibly this plant was used to treat 'elfshot' -- wasting and preoccupation caused by being shot by an elfin arrowhead."¹¹

Indicated when there is a tendency toward profuse mucus in the lungs combined with a phlegmatic emotional temperament.

EASTERN SKUNK CABBAGE (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) -- With deep roots that go into the murky depths of the swamp and a thermogenic spadix that melts its way through the ice to bring forth the first flower of the year as winter gives way to spring, Eastern Skunk Cabbage helps to bring old grief held in the lungs to the surface to be cleared.

¹ Gabor Maté, MD. *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2003. p. 191

² Deborah Frances, ND. "Specific Medicine: Oplopanax for Anxiety." *Medical Herbalism*. July, 1996. Accessed via http://medherb.com/Materia_Medica/Oplopanax_-_Specific_Medication_.htm

³ Matthew Becker, Paul Bergner, and Linda Whitedove. "Materia Medica Intensive." Boulder: North American Institute for Medical Herbalism

⁴ John Scudder, MD. *Specific Medication and Specific Medicines*. 1870. Accessed via <http://www.henriettesherbal.com/eclectic/spec-med/pulsatilla.html>

⁵ Michael Moore. *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*. Santa Fe: Red Crane Books, 1993. p. 259

⁶ Maté. p. 190

⁷ Maté. pp. 191-192

⁸ Deborah Frances. "Crataegus: Mental and Emotional Indications." *Medical Herbalism*. October, 1996. Accessed via http://medherb.com/Materia_Medica/Crataegus_-_Mental_and_Emotional_Indications.htm

⁹ Matthew Wood. *The Earthwise Herbal: A Complete Guide to Old World Medicinal Plants*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2008. p. 215

¹⁰ Wood. p. 304

¹¹ Wood. p. 304