

# *A Brief Discussion on the Relationship between Zhu Danxi's Qi Stagnation Syndrome and Depression*

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**Abstract:** Depression, also known as depressive disorder, is a disease characterized by a persistent low mood. The incidence rate has been increasing year by year and has become an important part of social and psychological issues. Zhu Danxi's theory on Qi stagnation syndrome, based on inheriting from predecessors, has its own unique theory on Qi stagnation and has many discussions on the prescription and medication of Qi stagnation syndrome, which has a great influence on the research and development of Qi stagnation syndrome in later generations. There is a certain connection between the two, but there are also many differences. By comparing and contrasting depression and Zhu Danxi's Qi stagnation syndrome, understanding the root causes of the disease's occurrence and development can better guide clinical treatment.

## 1. Introduction

Depression (Depression) is also known as a depressive disorder, a type of psychological disorder characterized by persistent fatigue, slow response, low mood, reduced appetite, reduced speech, and weight loss, etc., and in severe cases, it can even lead to delusions, hallucinations, or suicidal and other harmful behaviors. With the gradual development of the economy and society, people's pace of life has accelerated, and the demands on people by society have become higher and higher, and personal pressure has also increased, which has led to an increase in the incidence of depression year by year. According to statistics from the World Health Organization, depression, as a chronic relapsing disease, has affected 1/5 of the global population. Regarding Qi stagnation syndrome, Zhu Danxi, based on inheriting from predecessors, has put forward his own unique academic views and has made many elaborations on the etiology and medication of the syndrome, which has a greater impact on later generations. Qi stagnation syndrome and depression have differences and similarities. In-depth understanding of the relationship between the two, not blindly equating the two, distinguishing the two, recognizing their differences and similarities, can better guide the clinical use of medicine, treat diseases, and play the role of traditional Chinese medicine in treating Qi stagnation syndrome or depression.

## **2. Zhu Danxi's Qi stagnation syndrome and Depression**

### **2.1. Brief Introduction to Zhu Danxi's Qi Stagnation Syndrome**

#### **2.1.1. Etiology and Pathogenesis of Qi Stagnation Syndrome**

Before Zhu Danxi, people mostly believed that external pathogens were the cause of diseases. Zhu Danxi gradually shifted the cause of diseases to internal injuries. Zhu Danxi pointed out that "When the qi and blood are harmonious, no diseases occur. Once there is depression, all diseases arise. Therefore, many diseases in the human body are caused by depression." He divided Qi stagnation syndrome into qi depression, blood depression, phlegm depression, food depression, damp depression, and heat depression, creating the "six depressions" theory.

The causes of Qi stagnation syndrome include: external pathogens, internal injuries such as seven emotions, and dietary fatigue, involving various internal and external factors; Danxi believed that the pathogenesis of Qi stagnation syndrome is the stagnation of qi and blood circulation, with qi depression as the first, believing that the disease is located in the middle burner, the spleen and stomach qi is not smooth, the whole body's Qi and blood, body fluids cannot be transported, cannot reach, leading to the occurrence of Qi stagnation syndrome.[1]

Qi stagnation syndrome is a broader concept in traditional Chinese medicine, covering a category of diseases caused by various reasons leading to qi stagnation and blockage. In addition to emotional factors, it may also be caused by external pathogens, diet, fatigue, and other factors.[2]

#### **2.1.2. Symptoms and Treatment of Qi Stagnation Syndrome**

In "Danxi Xinfu," it is said, "When qi and blood are harmonious, no diseases occur. Once there is depression, all diseases arise. Therefore, many diseases in the human body are caused by depression." It can be seen that Qi stagnation syndrome is more common, and Zhu Danxi's discussion on the symptoms of Qi stagnation syndrome has different emphases on qi, blood, phlegm, fire, dampness, and food. For example, Qi depression is mostly seen in depression, mood swings, chest and rib pain, fullness, and distension; damp depression is accompanied by a heavy body, abdominal distension or water sounds, belching, a white and greasy tongue coating, and loose stools; phlegm depression is seen in coughing, expectoration, or chest and rib fullness and discomfort; fire depression is prone to anger, irritability, restlessness, rib pain, and noisy swallowing acid; food depression is seen in low spirits, frequent sighing, lack of appetite, abdominal distension, and a sense of fullness in the abdomen; blood depression is seen in chest and rib pain, or stabbing pain, limb weakness, bloody stools, a dark purple tongue, and petechiae, etc. [3]Zhu Danxi's symptoms of Qi stagnation syndrome cover different situations that may occur when the body's operation is not smooth, but the basic starting point is qi depression. Zhu Danxi's treatment principle for Qi stagnation syndrome is: ① Regulate qi mechanism, treat depression accordingly ② Syndrome differentiation and medication, good at using Yueju Wan, treatment focuses on resolving qi depression, and prescriptions mostly use Yueju Wan.

### **2.2. Brief Introduction to Depression**

#### **2.2.1. Etiology and Symptoms of Depression**

So far, the cause of depression is not very clear, and many factors such as biology, psychology, and social environment are involved in the pathogenesis of depression. The main biological factors involve genetics, neurochemistry, neuroendocrinology, neurogenesis, etc.; psychological factors are character constitution, such as: depressive constitution. Social environmental factors are stressful

life events encountered during adulthood, which are important triggers for depression. The occurrence of depression is the result of the combined action of various factors. The main manifestations of depression are ① persistent low mood, pessimism, lack of pleasure, easy self-blame, and severe cases may have hallucinations; ② slow thinking, slow reaction, closed thinking, inability to think, inability to concentrate, and severe cases have difficulty communicating with others; ③ reduced will activity, lazy behavior, inability to live, and severe cases have suicidal tendencies; ④ cognitive dysfunction, memory decline, long reaction time, high alertness, learning difficulties, poor language fluency, poor coordination; ⑤ somatic symptoms, insomnia, fatigue, decreased appetite, weight loss, constipation, body pain, body discomfort such as nausea, palpitations, chest tightness, sweating, etc. A few patients may have increased appetite, weight gain, etc., dry mouth and bitter taste, constipation, short and red urine. The tongue is red, the coating is yellow, and the pulse is string-like and rapid; blood depression, chest and rib pain, or stabbing pain, dark purple tongue, petechiae, dark stools; food depression, low appetite, abdominal distension, or a sense of fullness, belching and swallowing acid. The pulse is mostly deep and slippery. The basic symptoms are: chest and rib pain, distension, etc.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, qi stagnation is the basic pathogenesis of depression, and qi depression affects the function of organs and the operation of qi and blood, leading to blood depression, fire depression, damp depression, phlegm depression, and food depression, which are secondary or concurrent. Due to emotions as the main cause, the accumulation of phlegm, blood stasis, and water dampness and other pathological products related to the six depressions is the basis for many clinical symptoms. The diagnosis of depression needs to meet certain standards, such as the severity and duration of symptoms.[4]

### **2.2.2. Treatment of Depression**

There are many modern treatment methods for depression, and multiple means are used in combination for treatment. ① Medication treatment is the main treatment measure, and the first-line antidepressants currently used in clinical practice mainly include selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (representative drugs venlafaxine and duloxetine), norepinephrine and specific serotonin antidepressants. ② Psychological treatment, the cause of this type of depression is mostly social factors, and common psychological treatment methods include supportive psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, marriage and family therapy, psychoanalytic therapy, etc. ③ Physical treatment, repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation treatment, mainly be the same with mild to moderate depression.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine: Depression can be treated from the "six depressions," with qi regulation as the priority, and resolving various depressions. For the complex situation where phlegm, blood stasis, blood, fire, dampness, and food are all present, it is necessary to use blood-activating and stasis-eliminating, fire-purging and heat-clearing, dampness-drying and phlegm-removing, and food-digesting methods according to the specific pathogenesis.

## **3. The Relationship between Qi Stagnation Syndrome and Depression**

### **3.1. Similarities between Qi Stagnation Syndrome and Depression**

#### **3.1.1. Etiology of the Disease**

There are many reasons for the occurrence of the disease: ① The occurrence of the disease is related to emotional factors, due to sudden stimulation for various reasons, including social factors,

natural factors, etc. ② Both believe that the occurrence of the disease is related to multiple factors and is the result of the combined action of multiple factors. ③ It is closely related to the patient's own constitution, and both believe that the occurrence of the disease is related to personality and physique. Emotional factors are dominant: Traditional Chinese medicine believes that the seven emotions (joy, anger, worry, thought, sadness, fear, surprise) are excessive or out of balance and are the key factors in the pathogenesis of Qi stagnation syndrome and depression. Long-term worry and anger can lead to liver qi stagnation, and qi stagnation over time can turn into fire, showing symptoms such as irritability, anger, and dry mouth and throat.[5] At the same time, excessive sadness can damage lung qi, causing the lung to lose its surrender function, showing symptoms such as chest tightness and cough. In the pathogenesis of depression, long-term mental pressure and adverse life events and other emotional stimuli can lead to an imbalance of brain neurotransmitters, thereby causing symptoms of low mood, which has a certain similarity with the theory of emotional pathogenesis in traditional Chinese medicine. [6]The functions of organs and viscera affect each other: The liver, heart, and spleen play an important role in the pathogenesis of Qi stagnation syndrome and depression. The liver is in charge of dredging and dislikes depression. If the liver qi is not smooth, it can cross and offend the spleen, leading to the spleen losing its healthy operation, showing symptoms such as loss of appetite, abdominal distension, and loose stools. The spleen losing its healthy operation will further affect the generation of qi and blood, leading to qi and blood deficiency, the heart losing its nourishment, showing symptoms such as palpitations, insomnia, and forgetfulness. At the same time, the heart is the master of the spirit, and the unrest of the heart spirit will also worsen the mood depression and depression.

### 3.1.2. Symptoms of the Disease

It most common symptom is the persistent low mood, depression, or manic restlessness, and anxiety. The body has various discomforts, and various functions are reduced, with many accompanying symptoms. According to modern research, depression is often comorbid with functional gastrointestinal diseases, and psychological factors are important factors causing gastrointestinal discomfort. Symptoms include abdominal pain, bloating, belching, acid reflux, loss of appetite, early satiety, diarrhea, constipation, and other gastrointestinal discomfort symptoms, which are similar to Danxi's belief that the disease is mainly in the middle burner and the discomfort of the stomach and abdomen, and the discomfort of the stomach and abdomen is similar to food depression. [7] The clinical symptoms of both are more complex and involve all parts of the body. The commonality of specific emotional expressions: Patients with Qi stagnation syndrome and depression show low mood, depression, and lack of interest in things. In the view of traditional Chinese medicine, this emotional state is due to qi stagnation and inability to be unblocked, leading to the heart spirit being depressed and unable to be refreshed. Patients often feel heavy-hearted and unable to extricate themselves, and even appear self-blaming, self-blaming, and other negative emotions. And somatic symptoms are also related: Chest tightness, rib pain, abdominal bloating, poor appetite, insomnia, and other somatic symptoms are common in Qi stagnation syndrome and depression. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that these symptoms are caused by qi stagnation, qi and blood circulation disorder, and organ dysfunction. For example, chest tightness and rib pain are manifestations of liver qi stagnation and qi mechanism disorder; abdominal bloating and poor appetite are the result of spleen dysfunction and stomach qi not descending; insomnia is caused by the heart spirit losing nourishment, or liver stagnation turning into fire, disturbing the heart spirit.

### 3.1.3. Treatment of the Disease

Both use drug therapy as the main treatment. The use of antidepressants has a good effect on the

treatment of depression; studies have shown that Yue Ju Wan has a clear antidepressant effect on acquired, drug-induced, and chronic stress depression models, can improve the blood rheology indicators of liver depression syndrome animals, increase the content of brain neurotransmitters in model animals, and improve the quality of life of model animals.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, the course of depression is generally relatively long. In addition to the most important pathogenic factors that need to be treated, various factors such as qi stagnation, blood stasis, water retention, food stagnation, blood stasis, and phlegm coagulation, which are caused by various reasons, affect the operation of qi and blood nutrients, leading to the spirit being suppressed and seeing abnormal emotional symptoms. Qi stagnation is the primary pathogenesis of depression, but phlegm, heat (fire), dampness, food, and blood stasis are secondary or concurrent, forming the basis for many clinical symptoms. Therefore, in the treatment process of traditional Chinese medicine, the first priority is to regulate qi and resolve depression, and to dredge the liver and resolve depression as the basic treatment method for this disease, and to combine different symptoms and constitutions of patients for syndrome differentiation and treatment, or to resolve phlegm and remove dampness, or to purge fire and nourish yin, or to activate blood and remove stasis, explore the deep connection of the "six depressions," explore the key to their mutual transformation and interruption, and thus treat targetedly. In terms of specific medication, taking qi-regulating drugs as an example, commonly used drugs are tangerine peel, Buddha's hand, *Perilla frutescens*, clove, agarwood, *Bupleurum*, and *Aurantium*, etc., which have acrid and fragrant flavors and are pungent, with the effect of dredging the liver and resolving depression, having the effect of regulating emotions and widening the chest and qi mechanism, which can better improve the patient's emotions and symptoms. And when exploring the medication pairs of Qi stagnation syndrome, it is found through reference to cluster analysis and association rule analysis that the commonly used prescription medication pairs are: dragon bone and oyster, *Scutellaria baicalensis* and *Cinnamomum cassia*, jujube and ginger, *Codonopsis pilosula* and *Astragalus membranaceus*, *Bupleurum* and *Paeonia lactiflora*, *Bupleurum* and *Cyperus Rhizoma*, *Bupleurum* and *Curcuma zedoaria*, *Pinellia ternata* and *Citrus reticulata*, *Poria* and *Atractylodes macrocephala*, etc.

### 3.2. Differences between Qi Stagnation Syndrome and Depression

#### 3.2.1. Etiology of the Disease

The etiology of Qi stagnation syndrome by Zhu Danxi has a broader scope of application, including external diseases, as well as other internal injuries and miscellaneous diseases, while depression belongs to mental diseases, mainly considered from the mental aspect. Qi stagnation syndrome itself covers a broader range than depression, so the etiology of the disease is also different. For example: emotional disorders lead to the seven emotions being extreme or the five emotions turning into fire, some people have a weak constitution and low organ function due to innate endowment, congenital kidney qi deficiency or introverted, sensitive, and overly cautious personality, external pathogens and internally generated phlegm, blood stasis, etc., also affect the etiology of Qi stagnation syndrome. Qi stagnation syndrome belongs to the traditional Chinese medicine system, and depression is a mental disease in Western medicine. [8]The causes include genetic factors, family hereditary tendencies: Depression has a certain genetic tendency. Studies have shown that if there are patients with depression in the family, then the risk of relatives suffering from depression will increase significantly. Genetic factors may increase the susceptibility of individuals to depression by affecting the metabolism and receptor function of brain neurotransmitters. Neurobiological factors such as neurotransmitter imbalance: Neurotransmitters such as serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine in the brain play an important role in mood



regulation. Patients with depression often have an imbalance of these neurotransmitters, such as reduced serotonin levels, which can lead to symptoms of low mood, anxiety, and insomnia. Neuroendocrine disorders: The dysfunction of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis) also plays an important role in the pathogenesis of depression. Long-term stress can lead to overactivation of the HPA axis, secreting excessive glucocorticoids, thereby affecting the neural plasticity and survival of neurons in the brain, increasing the risk of depression. Psychological and social factors such as life events: Major life events such as the death of a loved one, unemployment, divorce, etc., can serve as stressors, triggering psychological responses in individuals. If individuals cannot effectively cope with these stressors, it may lead to the occurrence of depression. Personality traits: Certain personality traits such as neuroticism, perfectionism, and low self-esteem are closely related to the occurrence of depression. People with these personality traits are more likely to have negative cognitive evaluations of life events, thereby increasing the risk of depression. Lack of social support: A lack of a good social support system, such as disharmonious family relationships, few friends, social isolation, etc., will also increase the possibility of individuals suffering from depression. Social support can provide emotional comfort, practical help, and informational support, which helps individuals cope with the pressures and difficulties in life.

### 3.2.2. Symptoms of the Disease

The symptoms of Qi stagnation syndrome by Zhu Danxi, in addition to emotional aspects, are most prominently manifested as distension and pain in the chest and ribs, and according to different accompanying causes, the clinical focus is different, and the classification is clear; depression belongs to mental diseases, and the main symptoms are manifested in emotions and life aspects, which are more severe than Qi stagnation syndrome in clinical practice.

### 3.2.3. Treatment of the Disease

In terms of the differences in disease treatment, the treatment of Qi stagnation syndrome and depression are two different medical systems, and the direction of treatment has similarities, but there are still differences in the final analysis. The treatment of Qi stagnation syndrome is based on the traditional Chinese medicine system, and the treatment of emotional diseases is part of the treatment, while the treatment of depression mainly treats the mental and emotional aspects, using drugs, psychological, biofeedback treatments, and physical therapies to treat the disease from multiple aspects.

The treatment of Qi stagnation syndrome in traditional Chinese medicine mainly adopts the method of syndrome differentiation and treatment, using different treatment methods such as dredging the liver and regulating qi, nourishing the heart and calming the spirit, and strengthening the spleen and stomach according to different syndrome types, and commonly used prescriptions include Xiao Yao San, Chai Hu Shu Gan San, Gui Pi Tang, etc. At the same time, acupuncture, tuina, and other therapies can also be combined. The treatment of depression mainly uses antidepressant drugs in addition to psychological treatment. Psychological treatments include cognitive-behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, supportive psychotherapy, etc., aiming to help patients change negative cognitive patterns and behavioral methods, and improve the ability to cope with stress. Physical therapies such as electroconvulsive therapy and repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation may have certain effects on severe depression patients. Modern medical treatment pays more attention to the regulation of physiological mechanisms such as neurotransmitters. The treatment of Qi stagnation syndrome in traditional Chinese medicine emphasizes syndrome differentiation and treatment, comprehensively analyzing the patient's specific symptoms, tongue appearance, pulse, etc., to determine the syndrome type, and then adopt

corresponding treatment methods. In addition, traditional Chinese medicine can also use acupuncture, tuina, qigong, and other therapies to regulate the body's qi and blood, organ function, and achieve the purpose of treating Qi stagnation syndrome.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper first briefly introduces the basic situation of traditional Chinese medicine Zhu Danxi's Qi stagnation syndrome and depression, and then narrates the similarities and differences in the aspects of disease etiology, symptoms, and treatment from three aspects. Zhu Danxi's Qi stagnation syndrome and depression are only slightly similar in pathogenesis and treatment, and they are diseases with some similarities under different systems. Clinical attention should not confuse the two and should distinguish the nature of the diseases before treatment. Traditional Chinese medicine Qi stagnation syndrome and modern medicine depression have certain similarities in etiology, pathogenesis, and clinical manifestations, but there are obvious differences in concept scope and treatment methods. In clinical practice, the relationship between the two should be fully understood, and the advantages of traditional Chinese medicine and modern medicine should be combined to provide more comprehensive and effective treatment for patients.

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