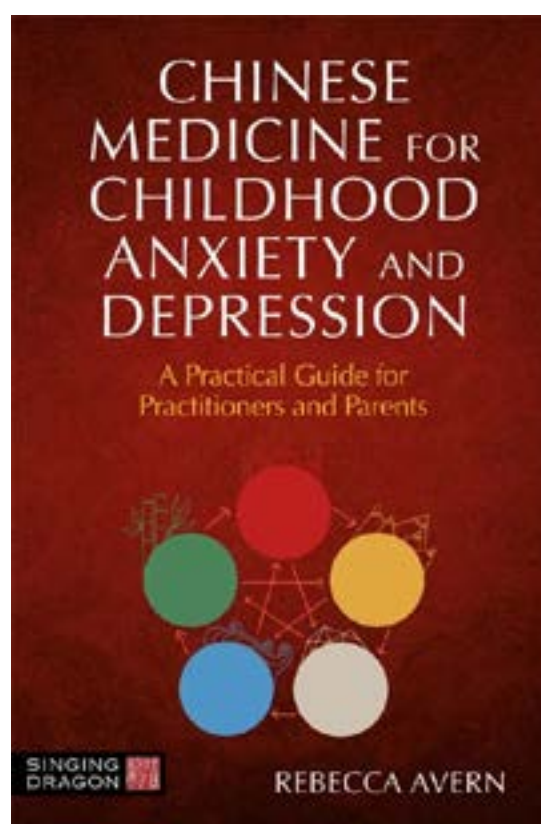




# **Rebecca Avern**

## **Chinese Medicine for Childhood Anxiety and Depression**

### **A Practical Guide for Practitioners and Parents**



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# CHINESE MEDICINE FOR CHILDHOOD ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

A Practical Guide for  
Practitioners and Parents



SINGING  
DRAGON 

REBECCA AVERN

Foreword by Elisa Rossi

# Contents

<i>Foreword by Elisa Rossi</i> . . . . .	9
<i>Acknowledgements</i> . . . . .	11
Introduction . . . . .	14

## Part 1: Understanding

1. Setting the Scene . . . . .	23
2. What Children Are Made of: <i>Qi, Shen, Essence</i> and <i>Blood</i> . . . . .	33
3. The Nature of Children and Childhood . . . . .	44
4. Nature: Five Element Constitution . . . . .	51
5. Nurture: What the Five Element Types Need to Flourish . . . . .	65
6. The Five Types of Anxiety and Depression . . . . .	76
7. The <i>Yin/Yang</i> of Anxiety and Depression . . . . .	90

## Part 2: Helping

8. Emotions . . . . .	109
9. Connection. . . . .	124
10. Family. . . . .	136
11. Times of Change . . . . .	148

12. The <i>Yin</i> and <i>Yang</i> of Daily Life. . . . .	162
13. Exercise. . . . .	175
14. Breathing. . . . .	186
15. The Art of Eating . . . . .	191
16. What to Eat . . . . .	199
17. Sleep . . . . .	210
18. What Else Can We Do to Help? . . . . .	221
<i>Appendix 1: Paediatric Tui Na . . . . .</i>	<i>229</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Head, Neck and Face Massages . . . . .</i>	<i>234</i>
<i>Appendix 3: Auriculotherapy. . . . .</i>	<i>238</i>
<i>Appendix 4: Dissipating Stuck Emotions . . . . .</i>	<i>240</i>
<i>Appendix 5: Finding a Paediatric Acupuncturist. . . . .</i>	<i>243</i>
<i>Bibliography . . . . .</i>	<i>244</i>
<i>Index . . . . .</i>	<i>246</i>

# Introduction

As a paediatric acupuncturist, I spend my days with babies, children and teenagers who are all struggling. Sometimes this is because of a physical symptom. However, usually it is because the child is struggling with her mental/emotional health. I am writing this book because, time and time again, I see how applying the wisdom of Chinese medicine to a child's situation can bring about extraordinary change. It relieves the child's anxiety or lifts their mood. Chinese medicine contains so much insight that is timeless in its appeal and efficacy.

## Getting behind the labels

'Anxiety' and 'depression' are terms or labels that are commonly used but which describe an extraordinarily vast array of different feeling states. A child may complain about feeling fearful, tense or worried. She may say she has negative thoughts, difficulty in concentrating or feels irritable much of the time. She may complain of a loss of appetite or having difficulty getting off to sleep. She may have low moods, or a lack of energy. She may say she feels tearful and no longer enjoys being around her friends and family. Parents may report that their child is withdrawn, grumpy, difficult or defiant, getting into trouble at school, or always squabbling with her siblings.

We may observe that she does not make eye contact or fidgets all the time. All of this may be casually labelled 'anxiety' and/or 'depression'. In order to help, the first thing to do is to put these labels to one side. As parents and practitioners, we need to listen to the child, observe her, explore (to the degree that she is able) what is going on in her internal world and gain an understanding of the context of her life. Although throughout the book you will see the terms 'anxiety' and 'depression', the focus is always on unpacking these convenient but limited labels.

## **The current state of childhood mental health**

Not long ago, mental health problems in children were taboo or barely ever discussed. Nowadays, it can feel as if they have become almost fashionable. There are almost daily headlines about increased rates of child and teen anxiety, depression, self-harm and eating disorders.

By endlessly commenting on the rise of child and teen anxiety and depression, by calling it an epidemic, are we somehow magnifying the problem? Or, on the contrary, is it only now that we are finally as a society waking up to a problem that has been pushed under the carpet for too long?

Perhaps there is some truth in both these stances. Whichever way the truth lies, it is undeniable that there are vast numbers of children who struggle with their mental/emotional health.

## **What is normal?**

In my clinic, I hear children of primary-school age talk about ‘my anxiety’, as if they regard it as being as much a part of who they are as the fact that they have brown hair or blue eyes. I hear teens announce that they need anti-depressants because their mood is low for a week or two around exam time. I also hear children saying that they feel anxious about feeling anxious, concerned that this means there is something wrong with them. I have seen adolescent mood swings and teenage heartbreak become medicalised. It is hard to escape the fact that it benefits pharmaceutical companies to pathologise more and more aspects of life.

Being fully human means feeling a wide range of emotions. Feeling anxious before starting a new school or low after you have lost a grandparent does not mean that you suffer from anxiety or depression. Nor does feeling fed up and angry at times when you are a teenager. However, it is a different matter when a child’s feeling state begins to affect her everyday life, schooling and relationships. When a child’s emotional world diminishes them and the lives of those around them, it is a sure sign of a pathology.

There is a fine line between turning every ‘negative’ emotion into a medical problem and ignoring the fact that a child needs help. However, it is a line that we as parents or practitioners must walk as carefully as we can. Both intervening prematurely and failing to act can exacerbate the problem.

## Nature and nurture

It is an indictment of our society that so many of our young people are suffering. Yet we do not seem to have grappled sufficiently with the question of ‘why?’ There are, of course, too many children who grow up in crushing poverty or violent households, or with other problems in their life that understandably affect their moods and their emotional well-being. However, on the surface, the majority of children in the developed world today have it easy, compared with past generations. They have comfortable and warm houses, an abundance of food choices, and more clothes than they know what to do with, mostly attend more than good enough schools, have an astounding array of leisure activities available and have access to good-quality medical care.

Yet it is often these children whose mental/emotional health is suffering. They may not have to worry about their next meal, but their family may be under strain, their parents divorced, or they may feel enormous pressure to succeed in exams, look a certain way or have the right pair of trainers. The problems that 21st-century life causes for most children today are very different from those of a few generations ago, yet are pernicious enough to be causing huge amounts of unhappiness.

Chinese medicine understands that there are two aspects that need to be addressed. The first is the inherent nature of the child. Some children are born with more of a tendency to become anxious or feel low than others. It could be said that their mental/emotional constitution is somewhat weak. The second aspect with which we must be concerned is the child’s lifestyle. It is the interaction between these two things that produces either a child who thrives or one who struggles.

There is little we can do to change a child’s inherent nature. Yet what we can do is to try to recognise it and then to create a life for that child which, as far as possible, suits him. Chinese medicine, in particular the Five Element approach, is a wonderful tool to help both parents and practitioners understand the differences between children’s emotional natures.

A child’s lifestyle, on the other hand, is something that we do have some control over. There seems to be so much about the lifestyle of many children that makes it difficult for them to be happy, even for middle-class kids who seemingly have it all.

Rather than our focus being purely on the child and assuming that it is he who has or is ‘the problem’, we also need to look at the child’s lifestyle and

work out which aspects of it are preventing the child from thriving. There are aspects of life that are widely accepted as being normal and fine, but which compromise the mental/emotional well-being of many children.

There are, of course, some aspects of our children's lives that we cannot change. Most children will have times when life is difficult and does not go according to plan, or when they feel some pressure. Most will come across alcohol, drugs, social media and sexting at some point in their teenage years. Our role as parents or practitioners is to help a child develop the resilience to cope during these times, and to be able to manage better the parts of life that we are not able to change.

I make no apology for reminding people what we all surely already know: that having good connections with others, getting enough sleep, incorporating movement into daily life, etc., etc., are all essential for a child's mental/emotional well-being.

That this needs to be written is indicative of the fact that many children's early years no longer meet their basic needs. Many aspects of children's lives nowadays that are considered as the norm are often at the root of their problems. We scratch our heads and wonder why so many children are struggling, instead of noticing what is right in front of our eyes. Most of the time, creating solid mental/emotional health in our children is not rocket science. Part 2 of the book explores the key aspects of children's lives and how they can contribute to anxiety and depression.

## **What does Chinese medicine have to offer?**

Chinese medicine is a lot more than acupuncture and herbalism. It is an entire philosophy and way of living. In order to help children, they do not necessarily need to be taken to a practitioner. The information contained in this book is all about adapting a child's lifestyle to suit her, so that her mental/emotional health can thrive.

Chinese medicine understands that the mind, the emotions and the body are one entity. It looks at the whole to understand what may be manifesting in one part. Sometimes, to help a child feel less anxious, the most effective approach is to make a change to her lifestyle that will, on the surface, primarily affect her physical body. For example, excessive exercise at too young an age could be detrimental not only to the child's body but also to her mental/emotional health. There is much to be gained from taking this holistic approach,



rather than reducing our understanding of what is going on to levels of chemicals in the child's brain, or to a hormonal imbalance, for example.

The Chinese medicine system of the Five Elements provides a framework through which the differing natures and temperaments of children can be understood. It helps us to understand why each child's needs are unique. It also helps us to grasp the nuances of a child's mental/emotional state, once things have become imbalanced.

I know of no other system that so effectively helps us appreciate the fact that one child's medicine is another's poison, that one child's anxiety has a different flavour to it than another's, and that every child who has a low mood will experience that in her own unique way.

Part 1 of the book elucidates the Five Element model so that parents and practitioners can better understand children and the differing ways they manifest mental/emotional imbalance.

## **Filling a gap**

Most children today who are significantly anxious and/or depressed are offered some kind of talking therapy as a first line of treatment, perhaps from a child psychologist or a cognitive behavioural therapist. While helpful for some, for many children talking therapy can be too direct and threatening. We know that the part of the brain that enables self-insight (the prefrontal cortex) does not fully develop until we reach our early twenties. This is why many children lack the maturity and insight that is needed to talk at length about their internal emotional world.

Those whose symptoms are more severe may be offered a range of medications, most commonly selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs). SSRIs have side-effects and are often not licensed for use in children. Many parents have concerns about their child starting medication at such an early stage in their lives. Moreover, in many parts of the world, child and adolescent mental health services are hugely under-resourced at the same time as being inundated with the ever-increasing number of children who need help. There is often a waiting list of months, if not years, before a child can be seen.

The information contained in this book will empower parents to start making positive changes now. It can assist practitioners to guide both parents and children in order to make changes that will benefit children's mental/emotional health. These changes do not rely on pharmaceuticals or on the

willingness of their child to talk to a therapist. Moreover, they are accessible to everybody because they do not cost money. Whether used alone or in conjunction with other interventions, Chinese medicine's unique perspective is a welcome additional approach to support children's mental/emotional well-being, which can be added to the rather limited existing ones.

## **Keeping the focus on the child**

I have purposely chosen not to cite the wealth of medical research that has been done and continues to be done in the area of child and teen anxiety and depression. That research can be found in any number of articles and books on the subject. Much of what Chinese medicine has long since held to be important has lately been proven to be true by modern science.

This book encourages the reader not simply to do what a particular study suggests might be a good idea. It advocates observing the child, examining her life and navigating a way forward that will provide relief and benefit the child. While studies have their value, they can also divert us away from observing, understanding and responding to what is in front of us.

## **Long-term strategies in place of instant panaceas**

This book does not offer a panacea that promises to cure every child's problems. Nor is it a manual full of yet another set of 'rules', which may suit one child but be detrimental to another. Although you will find many practical suggestions, it is not full of punchy sound bites, top tips or quick hacks. Creating an environment in which an individual child can thrive is a subtle and nuanced process, which can be challenging at times, and takes commitment. This book is an invitation to think differently.

It may challenge parents to let go of previously held notions about who their child is and what is right for them. Implementing the necessary changes may be difficult and may take time, but ultimately the potential benefits are manifold.

Finally, we cannot get away from the fact that what we are doing now societally is not working optimally for the young. Rates of child and teen anxiety and depression are rising, and the treatments on offer are of limited benefit. We have to do something differently if we are to stem the tide. This book is a call to arms.

The way forward is to understand and then accommodate the fact that

each child has different needs. It is also to initiate changes to their lifestyle that can help them to thrive. Chinese medicine believes there is nothing more important than developing the art of ‘nurturing the young’. In doing this, we not only create thriving children, but ones who will go on to have a much greater chance of becoming well-balanced adults.

# Setting the Scene

## **The big picture**

Before we dive in to talking about children's mental/emotional health, it is necessary to discuss a few key Chinese medicine concepts. These concepts will be referred to throughout the book, so you might want to check back to this chapter, as and when necessary, to refresh your understanding of them.

At first glance, concepts such as *yin/yang* can appear fairly easy to grasp. Many people find that the more they sit with these ideas, the deeper their understanding of them becomes. As you read and take on board these concepts, I hope that you will begin to *feel* and to *live* them rather than just have an intellectual understanding of them. Of course, in a book, words are the only vehicle to impart the nature of these ideas. My hope is that as you observe the children in your care and the world they live in, you will begin to see how these concepts are embodied.

I have been familiar with the language of Chinese medicine since 1995. The philosophy that underpins it endlessly reveals itself to me still, in ever different ways. For some readers, this will be their first encounter with the language of Chinese medicine. For others, these concepts will already be familiar. I hope that whichever is the case for you, the descriptions that follow will resonate and prove helpful.

## **Key Chinese medicine concepts**

Chinese medicine is based upon a profound and extensive philosophy, a discussion of which could fill volumes on its own. Here I will limit my discussion to a brief, but I hope adequate, description of the key concepts that relate to childhood mental/emotional health. For anybody wishing to explore Chinese

## THE ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD WHO WORRIES ABOUT SCHOOL

Maisie has to take an exam to get a place at her next school. She knows it is really important and is worried because she still does not really understand how to do the mathematics that she knows will come up in the exam.

She spends the whole of Sunday worrying about it and, as bedtime approaches, she finds she just cannot stop the worries from whirling around and around. As she tries to get to sleep, she develops a stomach ache. It is a dull, throbbing feeling that then makes dropping off to sleep even harder. Figure 1.2 illustrates this process.

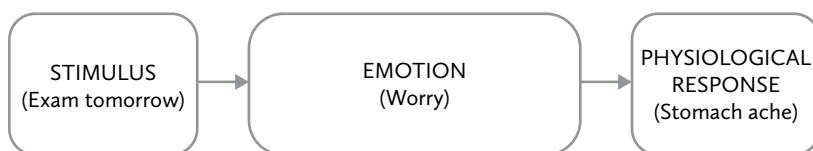


Figure 1.2 An emotion produces bodily changes

## Yin/yang

The concept of *yin/yang* is probably the most important and distinctive theory underpinning Chinese medicine. *Yin/yang* represent opposite, but complementary, qualities. They are seemingly opposing forces, which are actually interconnected and interdependent. They give rise to each other and are interrelated. Together, *yin/yang* comprise the whole of creation. Figure 1.3 shows the famous *tai ji* symbol which illustrates *yin/yang* in perfect harmony; one flowing into another, *yin* containing *yang* and *yang* containing *yin*.

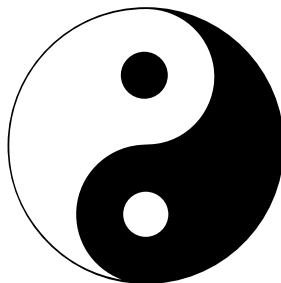


Figure 1.3 Tai ji symbol illustrating yin/yang

In Chinese medicine, an organ is defined by its *function*. What it *does* is more important than what it *is*. For example, the Lungs are defined by the fact that they are responsible for the whole breathing process, from the nose, down the trachea and to the organ of the lungs themselves.

Even if an organ is removed, for example, the gall-bladder, the functioning of the channel and the *qi* relating to that organ remains. Table 1.1 illustrates the Five Elements and their associated Organs and emotions.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1.1 Five Elements, organs and emotions**

ELEMENT	ORGANS	EMOTION
FIRE	HEART SMALL INTESTINE PERICARDIUM TRIPLE BURNER	JOY
EARTH	SPLEEN STOMACH	WORRY
METAL	LUNG LARGE INTESTINE	GRIEF
WATER	KIDNEY BLADDER	FEAR
WOOD	LIVER GALL-BLADDER	ANGER

### **The Five Elements and constitutional mental/emotional health**

The notion that a child has a particular mental/emotional constitution (as well as a physical one) has been a part of Chinese medical philosophy for over 2000 years. But what does this actually mean? It conveys the idea of each child having a particular temperament or disposition, and having certain lifelong characteristics that may manifest in his psychological make-up. For example, parents describe how, from day one, a child has been prone to worry, or easy to anger. Parents who have more than one child are often struck by the different emotional and psychological tendencies of each of their children.

Chinese medicine understands that every child has a constitutional imbalance in one of the Five Elements. This means that the child tends to struggle with the smooth expression of the emotion connected with that Element. For instance, the emotion connected with the Fire Element is joy. A child with a constitutional imbalance in the Fire Element might find it hard to raise his

# The Nature of Children and Childhood

## The big picture

In order to understand how and why a child becomes anxious or depressed, we first need to understand the nature of childhood. Chinese medicine has many insights into how a child is inherently different to an adult. Due to this perspective, paediatrics has been a specialty of Chinese medicine for over 2000 years.

These insights arose out of observations of children in everyday life. They did not come from research done in a laboratory. Neither were they expounded by academics or scientists who had little direct experience of babies and children. They are at the same time incredibly simple yet deeply profound. They are often insights that we instinctively know to be true, yet which we ignore. They remind us to look not at how many millilitres of milk a baby has drunk but at whether she appears sated and comfortable. They remind us to focus not solely on the temperature showing on the thermometer but also on the state of the child.

## Nurturing the young

Approximately 1400 years ago, one of Chinese medicine's most famous doctors, Sun Simiao, wrote that "There is no *dao* [meaning "skill" or "practice"] among the common people that is greater than the *dao* of nurturing the young. If [children] are not nurtured when they are young, they die before reaching adulthood."<sup>1</sup>

Sun Simiao was writing at a time when infant mortality rates were much higher than they are now, at least in the developed world, hence using what

**Metal:** Praise and appreciation; sincere and meaningful interaction

**Water:** Parents and carers tuning in to the child's rhythm

**Wood:** Having adventures together; being allowed freedom of expression

## What motivates the child at school and in life in general?

**Fire:** The desire to be loved

**Earth:** The desire to please others

**Metal:** The desire to achieve excellence

**Water:** The fear of failure

**Wood:** The desire to win

## What is the child's cry when they are not happy?

**Fire:** 'I'm bored. Will somebody play with me?'

**Earth:** 'I don't feel well' or 'I'm worried' or 'I can't cope – will you help me?'

**Metal:** 'I'm not good enough' or 'I need to be on my own.'

**Water:** 'I'm scared.'

**Wood:** 'I'm fed up' or 'It's pointless.'

## How does the child approach school work?

**Fire:** She will work better when work is made to be fun and there are others around.

**Earth:** She will do twice as much as needed and be overly conscientious.

**Metal:** She will pay great attention to detail and take a long time over the presentation.

**Water:** She will show great imagination but may have a tendency to daydream.





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