

Improving Executive Function Skills with Traditional Chinese Medicine

INTRODUCTION

Executive function skills are the mental processes that enable us to accomplish our goals; focusing our attention, planning and organizing tasks, remembering instructions or concepts (working memory) and being able to multitask. These skills are not only necessary for success in school or work, but for life in general. Studies show that in adulthood, executive function skills are critical for success in getting and keeping a job, career advancement, maintaining healthy relationships, weight management, experiencing happiness and overall enjoying a better quality of life.

8 EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

- **Planning and Organization**
 - ✓ The ability to plan how you will accomplish tasks, and how to break down tasks into smaller steps
 - ✓ Being able to organize information in a cohesive way and make connections between facts
 - ✓ Being able to organize materials and work spaces so that you can find things easily and maintain an efficient workflow

- **Working Memory**
 - ✓ The ability to hold, access, and manipulate information in order to complete a task

- **Task Initiation**
 - ✓ The ability to begin working on an activity or task
 - ✓ Independently generate ideas or problem-solving strategies.

- **Task Monitoring**
 - ✓ The ability to keep track of how one is progressing on a task
 - ✓ Monitor successes and failures
 - ✓ The ability to identify and correct mistakes

- **Self-Monitoring**
 - ✓ Being able to observe one's own behaviors and decide if they are appropriate
 - ✓ Respond to feedback and social cues
 - ✓ Social/interpersonal awareness



- **Inhibition**
 - ✓ The ability to control one's own behavior and resist impulses
 - ✓ Being able to consider the consequences of one's own actions
- **Emotional Control**
 - ✓ The ability to regulate one's own emotions and reflect on feelings and respond with an appropriate emotional reaction
- **Shifting**
 - ✓ The ability to be flexible and be able to "shift gears" and change tasks
 - ✓ Think about situations in new ways or adapt to new situations

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE'S THEORY OF THE ORGANS

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, we determine the health of the body by examining the functioning of the five organ systems:

- Heart-Small Intestine
- Liver-Gallbladder
- Spleen-Stomach
- Lungs-Large Intestine
- Kidneys-Urinary Bladder

Each organ system has specific functions, and when it is not at its optimal levels, disease and dysfunction can result. In traditional Chinese medicine, we try to find the underlying source of symptoms.

In Western Medicine, each organ has a specific function, and is treated as an independent unit. In Chinese medicine, the main organs are seen as complex systems that include the anatomic body, such as the heart, but also encompass important relationships with other organs and vital substances of the body (such as Blood, Essence, or Body Fluids), a corresponding tissue, sense organ, mental faculty, emotion, color and climate, or environmental factor that is associated with it.



TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE’S THEORY OF THE FIVE SPIRITS

The five spirits represent the various elements of a person’s psyche. These five entities together make up the larger, comprehensive “Spirit” that makes an individual who he or she is. The “Spirit” has been described as the “self-awareness that fosters the human experience of authenticity and personal meaning. Spirit allows self-reflection, art, morality, purpose, and values.” (Kapchuk)

Within the larger context of Spirit, there are five smaller spirits, or virtues which are associated with a specific organ system. In order to understand how mental and emotional functioning relates to the physical body in TCM, we must first understand these concepts.

These five spirits are the:

- Mind (Shen)
- Ethereal Soul (Hun)
- Corporeal Soul (Po)
- Thought (Yi)
- Will (Zhi).

Mind

The Mind, or Shen, is often known as spirit (with a small s). It is associated with the Heart system. When you hear the term Shen, or Mind, this term implies consciousness, thought, memory, sleep, cognition, intelligence, wisdom, insight, imagination, and ideas.

Ethereal Soul

The Ethereal Soul, which is associated with the Liver system, is considered to be the part of us that is not attached to our physical body and is said to continue to exist when we die. It is what allows us to have insight and intuition and is responsible for keeping our emotions in check. It is also influential in helping us to plan our lives and giving us a sense of direction, having clarity, and the ability to make good decisions for our lives.



The Corporeal Soul

The Corporeal Soul is the more physical aspect of the soul and is more closely attached to the physical body. It is housed in the Lungs, and is responsible for movement, and some say for regulating all physiological processes in the body. It is the physical expression of the soul. The Corporeal Soul protects us from outside influences.

Thought

Thought is housed in the Spleen. It can also be thought of as intellect. This concept encompasses thinking, intention, focusing, concentrating, and generating ideas. It influences memory in the context of memorizing information for work or school. If the Spleen energy is strong and vital, then a person will have clear thinking, be able to concentrate and memorize, and generate ideas.

Will

The Will is our drive, motivation, and determination to pursue our life's goals. It is housed in the Kidneys. If the Kidney energy is strong, our motivation and ability to remain committed to our pursuits will also be strong.

CONNECTING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS TO THE ORGAN SYSTEMS AND 5 SPIRITS

When we diagnose an illness or disease, we look at the functioning of all the organ systems and the 5 Spirits to determine which ones are out of balance. Usually there are two or three that may be in disharmony. We also look at the relationships between the organ systems. Sometimes a condition is the result of two systems that are not in sync with each other.

Psycho-emotional issues such as anxiety and depression can be attributed to a disharmony of one or more of the organ systems. However, we can correlate challenges with executive function and the functioning of the organ systems as well.



IMPROVING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS WITH TCM

Once we examine the specific executive functions that a person struggles with, and determine which organ systems are out of balance, we can use acupuncture or herbal formulas to bring the body and nervous system back into balance. In my private practice, my patients have found that acupuncture can help to improve their focus and clarity of thinking. Chinese herbal medicine can be used to treat the root of the organ system imbalances.

LEARNING PRACTICAL SKILLS TO IMPROVE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

It is important to learn strategies to help improve executive function.

- If someone has difficulty with planning and organization, strategies such as the use of calendars, to-do lists, stopwatches, and breaking tasks down into smaller steps need to be taught and incorporated into one's daily life.
- Trouble with working memory can be addressed with taking notes or keeping checklists.
- Learning metacognition skills can help to keep an individual on track and improve focus.

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