LIFESTYLE

# Science Just Made a Case for Adding Acupuncture to Your Depression Treatment Plan

It's one more tool to consider, according to doctors.

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While nearly 40 million Americans have depression, there is no one treatment that's a perfect fit for everyone. With that, you can do everything "right" by regularly going to talk therapy and taking antidepressants and still feel that you could use extra support to be in peak mental health. There are plenty of options for complementary therapy you can add on to your existing treatment, but new research just made a case for one more to consider: acupuncture.

The study's findings aren't enough to suggest that everyone with depression should book an appointment with an acupuncturist ASAP. But they do add to a growing body of research that suggests this form of Traditional Chinese Medicine may be a helpful add-on to what you're already doing for your mental health.

For the needle-averse, doctors say you don't need to tax your mental health more by forcing yourself to do acupuncture. "But if you're interested in acupuncture and can access it safely, it can be helpful as a complementary therapy," says Amit Afkhami, MD, PhD, a psychiatrist and professor at The George Washington University's Milken Institute School of Public Health. Naturally, the details matter.

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## The study's initial findings

The study, which was published in the journal Medicine, analyzed brain imaging data from 317 people with major depressive disorder who went through acupuncture or "sham" acupuncture (meaning, they were given needles that didn't penetrate or did minimal acupuncture at non-acupuncture points).

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When they analyzed the brain scans, researchers found that people who were given acupuncture showed increased activity in an area of the brain called the right cingulum region, which is linked to emotional control, along with the right caudate nucleus, which is part of the brain's reward system.

The more acupuncture sessions people did, the greater the change in an area of the brain called the left amygdala region, which is important for emotional processing. People on antidepressants saw activity boosts in their left hippocampus, which is involved in memory and stress regulation, along with the right middle occipital gyrus, which is a visual processing area.

Overall, the researchers concluded that acupuncture creates noticeable brain changes that may help with treatment for depression.

## There are likely a few reasons for the findings, according to mental health providers

The findings suggest that there could be a "neurobiological" component to why some people feel better after acupuncture or simply feel more relaxed, says Thea Gallagher, PsyD, clinical associate professor at NYU Langone Health and cohost of the *Mind in Vivo* podcast.

"There are probably multiple things happening at once," she says. "Acupuncture can be a calming, embodied experience, and if it helps someone feel less physiologically activated, sleep better, experience less pain or feel more connected to their body, all of those things can have downstream effects on mood."

Depression impacts networks in the brain that are involved in mood, motivation, and reward, points out Randy D'Amico, MD, neurosurgeon at Northwell's Lenox Hill Hospital. "Acupuncture may influence some of those same circuits, causing changes in regions involved in emotional regulation and reward processing," he says.

But while acupuncture may lead to brain changes, Dr. D'Amico stresses that these are temporary. "The study shows changes in brain activity, not proof of permanent rewiring," he says.

This isn't the first study to link acupuncture with lowered symptoms of depression. A 2024 scientific review published in the journal Frontiers in Neuroscience found that acupuncture was "significantly more effective" at lowering depression scores compared to those who just took medication.

A small 2025 study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports* found that participants with depression who received daily scalp acupuncture had "significantly better" depression scores compared to those who followed their usual treatment plan.

But acupuncture isn't a guarantee for easing symptoms of depression. A small study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Network Open* in 2023 found no difference in symptoms between people with depression who received auricular acupuncture (acupuncture around the ears) and those who did not.

## It's not recommended to use acupuncture alone to treat depression

Doctors reiterate that acupuncture still isn't considered a first-line treatment for depression. "Patients should not discontinue an effective antidepressant treatment or cognitive behavioral therapy—for which there is evidence—in favor of acupuncture alone," Dr. Afkhami says.

But acupuncture could help if you feel like there's still room for improvement with your symptoms, according to Hillary Ammon, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Center for Anxiety and Women's Emotional Wellness. "This may be good for anyone who feels they are not responding to the first-line treatments, or those that have hit a wall in progress," she says. (Ammon just suggests talking to your health-care provider before making any changes.)

Gallagher agrees: "Depression often responds best when we're approaching it from multiple angles," she says. Medication can help with the biological symptoms of depression, therapy can help people change patterns of thinking and behavior, and acupuncture may provide another avenue for helping regulate some of the brain and body systems involved in depression, she explains.

If acupuncture just isn't appealing to you, but you want to make sure you're doing all you can to support your mental health, Dr. Afkhami recommends trying to exercise regularly, follow a healthy diet, stick with a regular sleep-wake schedule, limit alcohol, get outside regularly, and interact with people often. "Limiting social media and other forms of media that can increase anxiety can be helpful, too," he says. "All of this can be a meaningful part of an evidence-based treatment plan."

Ultimately, it may take some trial and error to find what's best for your mental health, as Dr. D'Amico points out. "The challenge is figuring out which combination is right for each patient."

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