

DO NOT SILENCE THE MESSENGER

By Jingduan Yang, MD

Nancy (a pseudonym for a real person) is a 30-year-old woman who has had pain in her lower abdomen for three months, which gets worse every time after she eats something oily, or drinks anything cold. She then would have diarrhea for a couple of days. Her pain was localized in her left side and she felt better if she put pressure or heat on the area. She feels fatigued easily and is sensitive to cold. She has bad cramps and heavy menstrual flows, which are irritating at times. She has trouble falling and staying asleep.

Nancy had such an episode not long ago and was frustrated that no medical investigation could reveal any visible or detectable causes for her symptoms. She began to worry if something more serious is going on, but had no way to find out.

Her doctor recommended some medications that may relieve the symptoms, but she wondered if something could be done differently this time because her symptoms always returned when she discontinued her medications.

The human body is a perfectly designed self-modulated sustainable system. Feedback is a mechanism that can be found in almost every system of the human body. For example, when someone is taking in too much sugar from food, the body will produce insulin to transport sugar from the blood to cells in order to keep blood sugar at a normal level. Therefore the body is able to self-balance, self-repair, and self-heal when it functions normally. When its functions are challenged, unwanted physical and mental symptoms may occur. So any symptom we experience is a message from our body that something is wrong and that we should pay attention to it.

At this point, the worst thing that anyone can do is to give medications to relieve the symptoms without addressing the underlying issues. It is the equivalent of silencing the whistleblower and masking a bad situation.

Most well trained doctors would not do that, but unfortunately many still do. Even the doctor who try to investigate the cause of Nancy's symptoms still end up prescribing medications that just relieve the symptoms. He did so because he did not find any signs of inflammation, infection, cancer, or other detectable or visible cause of Nancy's symptoms. If he had found an inflammation, he would have prescribed antibiotics; if he had found a cancer, he would have suggested surgery or chemotherapy. The problem here is he did not address the causes of the possible infection or cancer, and focused only on how to deal with the symptoms. He did not get the message!

What are Nancy's symptoms trying to tell us? As my discussion with her continued, the answer surfaced.

First, she has ignored how much stress she has been under in the last five years. She left China to go to graduate school in the Midwest, and consequently has moved three times to different cities. She entered a law school on the east coast and took the bar exam after graduating, after three months of intensive study. This has prevented her from having adequate sleep, regular meals, and exercise. She was constantly worried about the outcome of the exam. Two weeks ago, she started her first job at a law firm, which is a blessing and a stressor at the same time. On top of all that, she is grieving the loss of a long-time friend.

Secondly, Nancy's diet has affected her negatively. She enjoys a couple of cold drinks with her meals or at parties, and frequently eats hot spicy Sichuan or Korean gourmet. She loves red meat and is allergic to seafood. Her meal hours are still very irregular.

Modern medical science has recognized that stress can cause imbalance in neurotransmitters, pro-inflammation cytokines, and hormonal abnormality. The diet that Nancy is eating is also known to increase inflammation.

From the Chinese medicine perspective, cold food and drinks congeal energy channels and blood vessels, thus causing pain and dysfunction. Grief and sadness weakens the normal energy of the lungs and large intestines. Anger and resentment causes energy and blood blockage in the channels of the liver and gallbladder, which causes insomnia, indigestion, mood swings, dysmenorrhea, and pain.

We got the message. Nancy agrees to receive a course of acupuncture treatments to unblock the energy channels in her large intestines/lungs and liver/gallbladder; and to have moxibustion which involves burning an herbal stick on selected acupuncture points to warm up the cold energy that produces blockages.

I recommended a couple of Chinese herbal remedies to increase energy in the affected meridians and reduce the cold and damp energies in her stomach and intestines. I advised Nancy to talk to a therapist who specializes in relationships to improve her coping skills. She agreed to participate in meditation and Qigong practices to improve her body's self-healing capacities and relax her mentally and physically. I suggested, for the time being, that she eat only steamed vegetables and rice porridge with a couple of herbal ingredients. She also agreed to refrain from any cold drinks, alcohol, and red meat. She is trying to rearrange her schedule so she can have meals in a more regular fashion.

Treat symptoms as your friends, not your enemies. Do not silence them or kill them. They are trying to give you important messages. We should respect them and listen to them. We then can make changes in our lifestyles, treat the problems' root causes, and live longer, healthier, and happier.