

WINTER

by Kate Quinn Stewart, Licensed Acupuncturist

Welcome, Winter! Wait - what's that you say? It's still Fall 'til December 21? That's one way of looking at it. In Chinese tradition, however, the seasons are made up of the six weeks preceding the solstice or equinox and the 6 weeks following it. Four transitional weeks between the seasons round out the year. So from this perspective, November 2nd through November 8th was our transitional week between Fall and Winter, and the season officially began on November 9th. For those of you who have a hard time with Winter, the bright side is that our transition into spring begins on February 1st.

Many people do report dreading Winter's approach, and I find that my patients have an easier time with it when we explore the gifts and the purpose of Winter. The ancient Chinese, living in an agrarian society where day to day activities depended on the conditions in the natural world around them, developed a deep understanding of the unique energy of each season. They came to understand that the energy of each season manifests in the functioning of our bodies, minds, and spirits since we, too, belong to the natural world. Additionally, each season is associated with a particular element, a color, a climatic force, an emotion, and a set of energy pathways, organs, and physiological functions in the body.

For the ancient Chinese, Winter meant uncertain times. For nine months, they had planted, cultivated, harvested, stored up, and let go of what wasn't needed. Then it was necessary to survive through the Winter months by wisely managing the resources they had carefully conserved. To that end, and in harmony with the shorter daylight hours and cold weather, Winter was a time to rest up by going to bed a bit earlier, sleeping a bit later, tending to the interior of the household, and avoiding over-exertion, except in cases of true emergency. They observed the fauna and flora following the same impulse, as animals burrowed into their dens to hibernate and seeds germinated underground, quietly gathering power to fuel Springtime's burst of activity.

Winter, the most yin of seasons, corresponds to Water, the most yin of elements. The color associated with Winter is black and its climate is, naturally, cold. Winter's emotion is fear, which, when balanced and appropriate, is a gift that helps us survive by alerting us to danger and empowering us to fight or flee to save ourselves. Within our bodies, the Kidneys and Bladder are the organs associated with the Winter. These organs manage the storage and release of fluids and energy. The adrenals, which sit atop the Kidneys, are key players in our fight-or-flight response. The sense associated with Winter is hearing, which requires a certain amount of stillness on our part in order to listen closely and receive what arrives at our ears.

As Winter begins, this is a good time to examine whether the Water element is in balance within us and whether we are acting in harmony with the energy of the season. When our Water is in balance, we have the wisdom to know what is urgent and therefore worthy of a significant expenditure of energy, and what is not so urgent. We use all of our resources wisely - energy, power, possessions, money - knowing when to save up and when to spend. We assess risks appropriately, recognizing and

responding to true threats without living in constant anxiety or paranoia. We are able to balance stillness and movement, generating the energy we need to be active with ample sleep, down time, and meditation. Our energy level is steady, we are able to cool ourselves appropriately, we manage our fluids well, our Kidneys, adrenals, and Bladder function appropriately, our bones are strong, and our lower backs and knees are strong and pain-free.

If our Wintertime energy is out of balance, we may find that everything feels urgent and that we are constantly pushing ourselves to accomplish the whole to-do list and more, without prioritizing what tasks truly warrant the energy we are spending. We may find that we have either frozen our own assets for fear of being without or frittered away what we had on things that do not serve us. We may be constantly anxious and afraid, unable to let go of the fight-or-flight response and relax into rejuvenating stillness. In terms of health issues, we may experience kidney stones, infections of the kidneys or bladder, hot flashes, night sweats, dryness, adrenal fatigue, exhaustion, mental and emotional burn-out, anxiety, paranoia, post-traumatic stress disorder, hearing problems, swollen feet or ankles, osteoporosis, bone spurs, or pain, tension, and weakness in our lower backs and knees.

If any of these issues sound familiar, have no fear - a combination of acupuncture, herbs, and self-care can go a long way in restoring the health of your Wintertime energy. Make an appointment today for an acupuncture tune-up to address those Wintertime imbalances. Then try these self-care tips to support your health by bringing yourself into harmony with the energy of the season.

1) Recognize the importance of sleep and quiet time. In a culture that is always on the go and seems only to value ambition, productivity, and constant accomplishment, we can forget how critical it is to rest and recharge. If we do not restore our energy through plenty of rest, we will inevitably end up exhausted. Think of your reserves of energy like a bank account; if you make too many withdrawals and not enough deposits, you will end up overdrawn. Likewise if you are always active and seldom restful, you will end up exhausted and ill. Ideally, you should be "depositing" a little more in your energy bank account than you withdraw so that you go to bed each day with a little energy left over. That way you will have a reserve fund for when you really do have to make an all-out push to handle an emergency. Make friends with the stillness of Winter and remember that it is what allows you the energy for new growth in the Spring and fun in the Summer.

2) Drink plenty of water. Water is our internal coolant and lubricant. When we drink enough, we can regulate our temperature so that we don't overheat, all our tissues are properly moistened, and our joints and muscles move fluidly. How much water do you need? Take your body weight in pounds and divide that number in half. That's the number of ounces your body needs per day. If you're not getting anywhere near that much, increase your intake gradually to give your body time to adjust. Remember: juices, sodas, and caffeinated beverages don't count because sugar and caffeine actually dehydrate you.

4) Avoid caffeine as an energy booster. Caffeine may make you feel more alert, but it doesn't actually give you any more energy or nourish you in any way. Caffeine simply stimulates your body to scrape the bottom of the barrel to access the very last of your energy reserves. Over time, it will leave you depleted and fatigued. Instead, try something that actually adds to your body's resources - some full,

deep breaths, some water or non-caffeinated herbal tea, a healthy snack, a nap, or a short break from your work.

5) Take time to prioritize. When you find yourself harried and anxious, pause for a moment to evaluate what is really urgent and what can wait. Spend your energy on the critical things and take a more relaxed approach to the little things. Often we thoughtlessly drive ourselves into the ground trying to accomplish things that could be done at an easier pace.

6) Practice some form of meditation or quiet mindfulness. You don't have to retreat to a monastery to take advantage of the benefits of meditation. Simply tuning in and quietly paying attention to the sensation of your breath moving in and out of your body for a few moments can help calm anxiety and balance your nervous system. While you're breathing, release any tension you may feel in your body. If you'd like to learn more, there are many wonderful books, recordings, videos, and classes on meditation techniques. If meditating while sitting still sounds too difficult, look into chi gong, t'ai chi, or yoga, which are all forms of moving meditation.

7) Take a luxurious bath with candlelight and relaxing music. Winter belongs to the Water element, and surrounding yourself with water helps you reconnect with that yin energy. The low, gentle lighting and calming music help you settle into the stillness.

8) Balance your social engagements and your down time. This can be a tall order during the holidays, but it is critically important. The warmth of our relationships and the coziness of gatherings by the fire can help us keep our internal joy and warmth alive through the cold winter. Too much partying and too much energy spent on holiday preparations, however, prevent us from getting the full effect of Winter's restfulness. This, in turn, leaves us with less vim and vigor for the activity of Spring and Summer.

9) Bundle up and go for a nature walk. You'll see how all the plants and animals are resting and gathering energy for the surge of growth in the Springtime. If you can spend time near a natural body of water, all the better.

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