

The Cycle of Healing

By Richard Whelan MNZAMH

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard Whelan has been in full time practice as a herbalist in Christchurch since 1989 where he works with all kinds of people from all walks of life. Richard studied in Australia in the 1980s with Dennis Stewart, Robyn Kirby and Andrew Pengelly and has since gone on to study the humoral system of the ancient Greeks to help develop a whole-person, constitution-based approach for a modern natural health practice.



One of the things I have most loved about being a Western herbalist is how much freedom it gives one to be truly 'eclectic', that is, to derive ideas from a broad range of sources. However, I believe that we must have some kind of philosophy, some roots, underpinning our practice or we end up inexorably descending into a product-centric approach that focuses on the problem ahead of the patient. For me personally some of the deepest and most beneficial roots have come from the old, simple and observable reality that people naturally gravitate towards one side or another of two key spectrums that see them being relatively hotter or cooler, and at the same time relatively dryer or damper than each other.. It has been from getting back in touch with that most basic of starting points that I have experienced a steady stream of discoveries to aid the one thing that actually matters in any and all of this work, which is how to become well again.

The following includes some of those discoveries but should, I hope, seem familiar and matter-of-fact because of these common roots. However, it is original material, unreferenced or published elsewhere; my wish to share it here is only because I see that it helps and that it works.



Cycle of Healing

Everything in the universe moves in cycles, including our own, innate, ability to self-repair and heal. What can be seen, in anyone who has become chronically sick and not getting better by themselves, is that there is always one key area in particular within their self-regulating cycle of healing that is especially stuck or imbalanced.

There are four key phases in this cycle that counter-balance each other; they are *activity and rest*, *nourishment and cleansing*. All of us, in normal life, move through these phases more than once a day, but a person in chronic ill-health invariably has at least one aspect of this cycle that has become badly stuck or imbalanced. A key strategy to bring forth a rapid shift in the condition is to identify which particular phase of the cycle is most out of balance with the needs of the organism as a whole and then put our core therapeutic attention into that place. Finding where the self-healing cycle is most stuck, and getting it moving again, can see a profound shift in days instead of weeks, or weeks instead of months.



Cleansing

I want to start by talking about the cleansing phase because this aspect of the healing cycle is the most widely misunderstood yet has the potential to do so much good when approached with care and sensitivity. All our old herbal and naturopathic traditions set great store to the value of cleansing and many of our patients will say that they instinctively feel this is what they need. So, aside from what you might do to get it happening, firstly and most importantly, how do you know for sure that this is where the primary therapeutic attention should go? The short answer is you may well not know for sure! Even if a person has such classic signs as a heavily coated tongue, sluggish bowels, pasty

skin, swollen glands or aching joints, the fact is that if their primary need is actually for rest, or they are suffering from some frank deficiency that requires nourishment, then putting them into a cleansing process may just tax their self-healing energy further and achieve nothing good in the long term.

So, unless you are no-possible-doubt, gut-certain sure then I urge you, my fellow student or practitioner, to take the following precautionary measure and have a listen to the heart of the sick organism itself, because you can be sure that its innate intelligence most certainly knows what it needs. This simple step, which takes a mere moment, only requires that you trust the evidence

underneath your own fingertips. Place them gently against the pulse at the wrist of your patient, do not rush, wait until you can feel it easily flowing under your hand and that you have its 'measure' then place one or two drops of Juniper, or Celandine, or Dandelion, or any of the great cleansing herbs that you are on the best of terms with, and feel, 'listen'. The effect, when the person is not ready for this kind of intervention, will be as startlingly obvious to the sternly objective scientist as it will be to the most empathic of healers because the pulse will most certainly weaken and waver if cleansing is not appropriate to push ahead with. However, if help with cleansing is what is most needed now, then you will just as surely feel that pulse become more robust, more defined, and more vital, it just feels better. This is an ancient technique, it requires no special training, no concentrated thought, just a willingness to trust that there is an intelligent healing force within all living things, which quite frankly, when it comes to healing, is all any of us have going for us to truly get us better in the first place!

There is a marvellous and ever-increasing amount of science coming into our world, including into the old ways, but so much of what we must do in practice is still an art. What I am talking about here is: the art of finding the right therapeutic

intervention, the art of the right dose, and then the art of the right timing for how long one continues on one phase before moving to another. It is not necessary, but it is normal, and ok, for a person who is embarking on a strong, herbal-centred cleansing process to have a healing crisis for a few days where they feel excessively tired, sore, and rinsed out, then a few days later the clouds part and they start to glimpse some of their former vitality and optimism return.

Of all the constitutions, it is the hot, damp 'Tigers' who most often need a robust cleansing process, but it is the cool dry 'Elephant/Butterflys' (EB) people who will most acutely feel the need to cleanse and will even talk about this with a sense of craving it! That said, any of the constitutions may need a cleansing process at some stage, what is unknown is how long and how strong. Until you have guided a hundred people down such a path, and travelled it yourself, I suggest frequent follow ups so you know when this phase of the treatment is quite sufficient or vice versa, when we're not there yet and need to keep going, or even to keep going stronger! It's ok to not always get it right the first time, no-one can learn this kind of art from a book - it really is all about practice.



Activation

Activation is a rather positive, and interesting, part of the healing cycle. In literal terms a person who is stuck in this phase of the healing cycle is simply not adequately moving, i.e. 'activating', their bodies and/or their minds. A person who has become quite badly blocked in this area may have lost all their interest and enthusiasm for learning and/or exercising. Many people who have been ill for a long time have had to give up regular activities, hobbies and exercise. They may even have had to give up their work or study if things were bad enough. By the time you see them they may have largely recovered from the initial trauma or sickness and the initial overwhelming intensity of their symptoms may have subsided but they have remained fatigued, unmotivated and unwell. The activation phase is where our great tonic herbs have an enormous amount to offer and, for me personally, they comprise a large proportion of my prescriptions as this phase is often one that a person needs to work on for many weeks or months, especially if they had been sick for a

long time. People feel good with tonics, and they feel good with getting their minds and bodies moving again. Consequently, there is some danger in trying to move into this phase too soon or too strongly. If a person actually needs to rest, or cleanse, for example, then they may temporarily lift their energy and mood with 'activation' only to crash back to earth again.

You have to be especially careful with Eagle (hot and dry) constitutions in this regard because they thrive in being active and will love the tonics but may need some particularly strong guidelines in place to keep their cycle moving through the rest phases as well. All kinds of people can need to give attention to this area, but another constitution for whom activation particularly comes up is the Bear (cool and damp) because they are prone to becoming very stuck indeed and some form of mind and body activation has often been seen to be the turning point in their getting out of their 'caves' and moving around in the 'forest' again.



Nourishment

Most nutritional supplements work in this phase of the healing cycle and many core herbal medicines could well be described as nourishing tonics. It is probable that at least some attention to this aspect of the healing cycle is appropriate for anyone who has been unwell for any length of time, but again it is really important to know when it needs to be the key area to focus on in terms of what we choose to give and what we ask them to give their attention to. Classic indicators that a lack of nourishment, or depletion, is the key area to focus on are things like: injuries that aren't healing, being worse for doing exercise (meaning they shouldn't be trying to get into the activation phase yet) and tell-tale signs of deficiency in the skin, hair and nails. It also

must be understood that emotional nourishment is equally as important as good physical nutrition in this aspect of the healing cycle and people who feel unsupported and unappreciated can manifest every bit as many signs of depletion as a person with a very poor diet. The pivotal therapeutic intervention for a person who is primarily not healing because of a lack of nourishment can be to find out where they most lack self-care and support and then work out the best step or steps to immediately start to remedy that state of affairs.

The cool, dry EB is especially prone to trouble in this phase of the healing cycle and will often show anaemia and other frank signs of deficiency on testing. The innate sensitivity of the

EB will often see them gravitating too far towards cooling, airy foods and they can need a redirection towards more warming, nourishing foods with plenty of good fats and oils in the mix. The general population is finally waking up to something we have been saying for decades now, which is that there is just too much sugar in the modern diet. We can see that an increasing percentage of our population is moving into the metabolic syndrome and in this case the nourishment phase of the healing cycle has become badly imbalanced with an excess of sugar and a lack of activation to balance it out. All constitutions are prone to this though Eagles are the first to get diabetes and Tigers are the first to become overweight.



Relaxing

Along with cleansing, the relaxing phase is the area that I most often start with in the healing process. Many people are so blatantly over-tired and under-rested that there is just no way that they can recover their health without rest, no matter what supplements, foods or herbs they might take. Similar to what can happen early in the cleansing phase, it must be noted that once a person who has been in significant sleep or rest debt starts to sleep and relax more, they will usually feel significantly worse (i.e. more tired) to start with. This temporary increase in fatigue isn't always the case, but it is a predictable response and a fairly sure sign that you are on the right track, especially in people who are suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress where their health history includes the phrase "I've never been well since...". In order to avoid meeting resistance and non-compliance you have to clearly explain that because they have been running on their nerves and adrenaline for a long time, that they may have to go through a time of feeling flat when they give themselves permission to rest. Denial is the greatest enemy of the healing process and it is very helpful to get the unrested patient to acknowledge how things actually are and to tune in to the deep and tightly wound spring within them. As they relax and start the process of unwinding you see a lot of joy return and they typically report much positive feedback from their nearest and dearest.

If the relaxation phase is the key stuck part of the healing cycle, then it is going to be of very limited benefit to simply give some relaxing remedies at night and then focus on other kinds of medicines or therapeutic interventions during the day. The way to prompt a shift in this area is to use one or more of our potent relaxing medicines frequently and often, thus coaxing the system into making a shift from fight or flight into rest and relax. Like cleansing, *relaxation* is a powerful intervention to set in place and you really need to know that it is the right thing to do and I want to emphasise again how tremendously helpful it can be to not think you need to somehow 'just know' when this is the right intervention, but to ask the heart of your patient if it truly is what they need and want. Give a drop or two of, for example, Skullcap, or Passionflower, or Lobelia (which admittedly will be too strong for some), or Cramp bark or really any of these great remedies that you personally feel an affinity for, whilst gently feeling the pulse before during and after the dose. Their heart will give you very clear feedback, you just have to trust what you feel through your fingers, but I have to tell you that it is much

There is a place for nutritional supplements, especially in the early phases of treating deficiencies, but food is also medicine if we absorb it and digestive tonics - especially the bitters, but also the warming aromatics for the cool constitutions - see people who are willing to eat well obtain far more goodness from their food as they transition rapidly and measurably into good nourishment and exit quickly out of states of deficiency.

harder for a person with knowledge and medical training to do this than it is for even a child to do it. Nevertheless, if you are willing to try, and try again, then I am sure you will find that there will be people for whom any of the relaxing remedies will make their pulse noticeably, palpably weaker, more erratic, even more 'edgy' and agitated! Then there will be many more for whom you will feel the exact opposite effect. *The heart knows what the heart wants* and people who need the relaxing phase will tend to have a remarkably positive pulse response to the relaxing herbs; noticeably stronger, steadier and healthier.

Dosage is crucial, it is not the more the better in this area, the best dose of a relaxing medicine is the one that the person can actually feel doing something to them, it is ok if the effect is subtle, in fact that may be preferable, just so long as they know it is happening beyond their conscious control. Some people need things in black and white but many are willing to embrace the idea that their own body knows best and are happy to work with a range of doses from low to high to see what they respond to the best. The best length of treatment is just as variable, I don't think there are any rules about this, it's just what works that matters. People are the best gauge of when they are ready to let go of their remedies until the next time. We are there to make the introductions; it is for them to develop their own relationship with these herbal allies.

Eagles are the hardest to get to relax and so of course can end up being the ones who need it the most. If they haven't gotten sick enough, then they may not be ready to come down to earth and go through the kind of shift I talked about earlier but even a small rebalancing is worth aiming for and can be enough to get them into the rapid self-healing that their constitutions are more than capable of achieving. Tigers can respond beautifully to the right remedies but tend to need to also do enough things to physically relax at the same time. EBs are capable of carrying levels of tension that would crush lesser mortals and they have to be prepared to unwind those patterns very gradually and patiently but should still most certainly do the work when it is called for. Many Bears get physical ailments further down that are heavily influenced by the tension coming from up-top but they are usually quite 'cool' mentally and may not realise how much of a core issue this has become for them. A good book is a 'medicine for the mind' and I get many of my Bear patients reading novels again, which most of them used to love to do before they grew up and started getting their troubles.

Putting it together

As you can see from the charts on pages 14-15, there are arrows that go both ways around the healing cycle. Any of you who are taken with this simple but potent idea will be able to grasp it for yourselves (and no doubt make your own realisations about it as a result) by seeing how you move through these different phases, in one or other direction more than once in any day of your life. Likewise, if you come into some health trouble of your own, (and may it pass quickly if you do), I am sure you will be able to see and feel for yourself how one part of your own healing cycle clearly needs more attention than any other, and that when you give that attention, consciously or instinctively, in substance, in spirit, or in both, how everything quickly shifts from that point on.

You will also see in the chart how I have related different parts of the spine to the different phases in the healing cycle, likewise there are many cogent emotional connections and ramifications to each of these phases, all of which is a much bigger subject than I have room for here.

None of this is set in stone. One of the things I have most personally enjoyed and appreciated in adopting a constitutional

model is that, rather than imposing any limits, it has opened up a living appreciation for people's unique differences and their diverse, freedom-to-choose, humanity within their inherent nature. Nor is any of this meant to detract from or usurp any other method to engage with the healing process. What I am sure any practitioner will find happening, as soon as they start thinking in terms of hot, cool, dry and damp, and then along such lines of what is most impairing the self-healing process amongst cleansing, activating, nourishing and rest, is that you are simply better able to connect to the person first and foremost, with their problems in the background for sure, but their own healing journey front and centre. Rather than a problem, a protocol or a product, you can be better there for them, what they most need, how you can most help. In any case I do hope you found it interesting and, above all, as most of you reading this are, like me, somewhat tribeless, eclectic, try-anything herbalists, that you will put at least a little of it in your pipe, smoke it, and make of it what you will because, as I said at the beginning, all that matters in any of this is that we help each other be well, whichever is our way. ❀



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Match herbs to constitutions and/or problems



Healing happens via cleansing, restoration,
activation or nourishment. The body, tongue
& pulse show what's needed now, the
constitutional pattern shows the way ahead.

By Richard Whelan
Medical Herbalist

warmer
activating herbs
for damp, cool
stagnation

warmer
nourishing herbs
for dry, cool
depletion

CYCLE OF HEALING

