

Someone with a sore throat and cough walks into a crowded room. Why is it that only a few of the people in the room end up catching a cold? How can some immune systems handle an “attack” while others succumb? And once the acute phase of a disease has passed, why do some of us experience lingering symptoms?

As a Doctor of Oriental Medicine, I learned that a person’s emotions affect health as much as physical factors. An emotional imbalance can weaken our immune system and make us vulnerable to disease... including Lyme. Back in 2015, when I first discovered that my strange symptoms (see [APRIL 26 Newsletter](#)) likely had some correlation to the high level of Lyme antibodies in my blood, I wondered, “How did I get Lyme disease in the first place?”

Let’s consider *acute* Lyme disease. When it comes to my health, I’m into prevention, but not vaccinations (more on that in a future blog), and avoiding tick bites was difficult on our five-acre farm in the wilderness. I won’t hit you with the percentages of ticks that carry the Lyme bacteria, or the various resulting symptoms,



Mowing with a scythe in 2015.

because that information could fill a book. What I remember back in 2015 was wondering, “Why me?” I read up on the bacteria *Borrelia burgdorferi* (Bb) and discovered that many forest workers have antibodies for the Lyme bacteria without having experienced the clinical symptoms of the disease. Their immune system had successfully attacked and eliminated the Bb bacteria before it could cause symptoms. I was leading a healthy life on a permaculture farm, so why hadn’t my immune system matched the task?

I was a vegetarian at the time, getting plenty of protein from local organic cheeses and our own eggs, as well as the proper grain and legume combinations. I practiced Tai Chi and Yoga daily. I went to bed early, got up early, drank herbal teas. What went wrong? Fortunately, my knowledge of Traditional Chinese Medicine provided the answer: I was emotionally and physically compromised at the time of the tick bite. My immune system was in a weakened state when the bacterial infection occurred.

Starting a permaculture farm from scratch in 2014 was a complete change of venue for me. I was no longer behind a desk dealing with patients, but facing outdoor weather fluctuations and physical labor.

Eager for success but feeling like a beginner at age fifty-one, I was pushing myself emotionally and physically, wanting too much, too fast. I ran on fear—fear of the unknown and the lack of control. Everything on the farm felt unpredictable.

I never thought being a farmer would be so emotionally challenging. After all, we weren’t killing our livestock for meat. But I had named our seven chickens, and it was a blow to the chest whenever I found a pile of feathers while searching for the last hen to put back in the protected coup. Our chickens were truly free-range. We released them from their outdoor enclosure whenever we worked in the gardens, and they picked bugs from the hayfields and snacked on wild herbs under the forest edge. This provided plenty of excellent eggs. But now and then, a hungry mother fox would steal the weakest of the bunch to feed her five pups. Or the local chickenhawk would dive down right before my eyes and be off with my best layer before I could whack the predator with my broom. Sure, the circle of life. I watched *The Lion King*. But it gets you just the same. How would you feel if a fox or hawk killed your cat or small dog?



Insects are a beautiful part of nature, and they soon took over my house. Mosquitos kept me up at night, flies pestered me while I cooked, and weevils got into my grains no matter how well I sealed the containers. I couldn't keep up with the spiderwebs, so I learned not to bother. I was constantly hitting the books to identify the latest insect I was putting back outside. The wilderness felt truly wild.



The variety of birds were amazing! Birds scratched up and scavenged our freshly-seeded gardens, tipped over planters on the balcony, and pooped on our awnings. God bless them! But the mice were a bit too much. They ate anything the birds missed, and our farm cat, Pete, could never let his guard down. Pete brought me two or three fresh kills every morning and placed them nicely under my bed to show his level of prowess. The only thing worse than being awoken by a half-dead mouse scurrying up your leg under the bedcovers is having tiny mouse feet scamper across your face in the middle of the night. And then there was the bloody mess under the bed every morning.



A beautiful owl hung itself in the net we spanned to protect the chicken coup. Apparently, it had dove for mice and hit the net, like a sparrow not seeing the windowpane. I admired the variety of reptiles in our natural sanctuary, but an Aspis viper (a poisonous snake) bit Pete on two occasions. Our cat proudly survived, but I had a few more gray hairs each time. And I made mistakes that cost us dearly. Once, I forgot to roll out the awning over the seedlings on the balcony and six weeks of work was burned in the sun.

You get the picture. I was emotionally compromised. Probably, that played a greater role than the physical component, although I lost fifteen pounds the first year on the farm. We should know the limits of our body, not push those limits, and not take our body for granted. Same with our emotions. We need to recognize that emotions are a component of our health. They are a determining factor as to whether or not we contract an acute disease and how we recuperate from it. I should have slowed down and meditated more in order to "let go."

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), emotions are deeply connected to physical health. Prolonged or intense emotions can disrupt the flow of Qi (energy) to specific organs, leading to illness. In TCM, each major organ corresponds to a specific emotion: anger affects the liver, joy the heart, worry the spleen, grief the lungs, and fear the kidneys.

Back in 1999, when I studied traditional medicine in Chengdu, China, a patient with lung cancer was told he was only suffering from severe bronchitis because grieving over a cancer diagnosis would have lessened his chances for survival. Grief weakens the lungs. A man recuperating from a heart attack was not allowed to see his family. When well-meaning medical students snuck his wife in to see him, the man was so overjoyed that he had another heart attack and died. Too much joy (a racing pulse) weakens the heart. It is all a matter of balance.

Balance resulting in strong internal organs is essential for maintaining a healthy immune system. If the states are well-policed, their constituents well-nurtured, a criminal element is easily overcome. But if citizens are hungry, crime can take hold, and if the police department is inadequately funded...you see where I am going here. Disease has a chance to settle in.

Next, I wondered why I lacked the typical acute symptoms of Lyme disease in the weeks following my tick bite. No red rash, no flu-like symptoms. This can be explained by my weak "Upright Qi" (Zheng Qi). My body's defense system, like an exhausted military, didn't have the energy to fight the "intruders."

Often a healthy person will have a strong reaction to a disease—intense flu symptoms, for example—because their powerful Upright Qi is fighting hard against its aggressive opponent (for example, the Lyme bacteria). But a weakened person can't put up much of a fight. The foreign military overruns the borders and easily takes over control without much of a fuss from the unarmed inhabitants. So, no rash or fever from the tick bite because my body didn't have the energy to mount an inflammatory defense. And if I experienced, mild, flu-like symptoms such as fatigue and aching joints, I may have mistaken them for the result of hard physical labor.



The weaker the Qi, the weaker the immune response. And one's Qi—one's general energy—is strongly affected by one's emotions. Scientific studies have shown that repressed emotions are particularly damaging, potentially leading to long-term health problems. Living on the farm I was often alone with no one to talk to. When I met with neighbors, I was too embarrassed to share my failures. I was trying to "toughen up." Mostly, I didn't realize at the time how much my emotions were affecting my health.

If you have Lyme, were you emotionally compromised in any way when you contracted the disease? Life can be challenging on many levels, some only visible with hindsight.

Studies highlighted by Harvard Health Publishing as well as reviews of bereavement literature, indicate that mourning acts as a profound stressor that significantly weakens the immune system. Bereaved individuals are more vulnerable to illness, infections, and chronic conditions. You may not be grieving over the death of a loved one, but you may be watching too many depressing news stories.



Watching the news can trigger a mourning response, often referred to as vicarious grief or secondary traumatic stress. Repeated exposure to stories of death, natural disasters, war, or social injustice can cause people to feel deep sadness, hopelessness, and loss, even if they are not directly affected by the events. When you see a threat (in real life or through a screen), your fight or flight response turns on and your body releases cortisol and adrenaline, two hormones that provide you with the energy and mental acuity to take on the conflict. When the threat's gone, your body returns to baseline. But repeated

exposure keeps the system switched on. Over time, this constant activation wears the system down. Of course, you don't want to put on rose-colored glasses or play ostrich, but it may help to limit your contact with depressing stories and balance them with good news.

In summary, a healthy, balanced body also needs a resilient, rested mind to insure a strong immune system. Personally, I believe that illness is our greatest teacher. I am still learning.

Check out my JULY 26 newsletter that includes positive thinking as one of the [Ways to Optimize Energy](#).