

Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture Treatment for Postpartum Depression: A Case Report

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Abstract: *Postpartum depression (PPD) is a severe mental disorder threatening maternal and infant health. Conventional treatments have side effects, while traditional Chinese medicine offers safe non-pharmacological options. This paper presents a 24-year-old postpartum patient with severe PPD and suicidal behavior, diagnosed as liver stagnation with spleen deficiency and brain spirit malnourishment. She received Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture combined with Western medicine interventions. Acupuncture focused on Governor Vessel, Conception Vessel, Liver Meridian acupoints to unblock Du meridian, regulate spirit, soothe liver and tonify qi and blood. After 7 sessions, her depression, anxiety, insomnia and suicidal ideation were markedly relieved, with stable emotion and normal sleep and diet at follow-up. Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture is safe, effective and breastfeeding-friendly for PPD, worthy of clinical application.*

Keywords: Postpartum depression; Tongdu Diaoshen acupuncture; Governor Vessel; Regulating spirit; Acupuncture therapy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a mental disorder characterized by persistent low mood, diminished interest, pessimism, self-blame, and sleep disturbances in postpartum women. Severe cases may involve self-harm or suicidal behaviors, posing risks to maternal and infant safety [1–4]. Clinical manifestations primarily include persistent low mood, melancholy, anxiety, suspicion, insomnia, early awakening, decreased appetite, and reduced energy levels, which worsen following negative events but may temporarily alleviate with rest and psychological counseling [5–6]. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), PPD falls under the categories of "Yuzheng" (depression syndrome) and "Zangzao" (visceral restlessness) [7]. The etiology is primarily attributed to qi and blood deficiency or visceral weakness, often associated with dysfunction of the liver, kidneys, and brain [8]. PPD significantly impairs the quality of life for postpartum women and maternal-infant bonding; severe episodes may lead to suicide or infant harm, endangering maternal health, compromising marital and family well-being, and adversely affecting the infant's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional development [9–11]. Early intervention yields favorable outcomes, making timely, safe, and effective treatment crucial. Psychotherapy and antidepressant medications are key therapeutic approaches for PPD [12–13], demonstrating significant clinical efficacy, though they carry adverse effects such as withdrawal symptoms, sexual dysfunction, and liver injury. Non-pharmacological interventions show greater clinical promise for managing postpartum depression, with an increasing number of patients opting for traditional TCM interventions [14].

The Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture Therapy is based on the pathogenesis of postpartum conditions characterized by "excessive deficiency and blood stasis, liver qi stagnation, and cerebral nutrient deficiency." It primarily targets acupoints along the Governor Vessel (Du Meridian), Conception Vessel (Ren Meridian), Pericardium Meridian, and Liver Meridian. Through acupuncture, it aims to unblock yang qi in the Governor Vessel, nourish the brain marrow, regulate emotions, and calm the mind. The core principles include "unblocking the Governor Vessel, regulating the spirit, soothing the liver, and harmonizing qi and blood." The author successfully treated a case of severe postpartum depression accompanied by suicidal behavior using the Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture Technique. The case report is as follows:

Patient Ms. Liao, female, 24 years old, married, 5 months postpartum. In late December 2025 (2 months postpartum, weaned), she developed anxiety, worry, and low self-esteem due to the death of a relative, accompanied by poor sleep. By February 2026, symptoms worsened, manifesting as low mood, decreased interest, hypersensitivity and suspicion, feeling others were gossiping behind her back, memory decline, insomnia with frequent awakenings, and restlessness. By late February 2026, she exhibited pessimism, world-weariness, self-blame, and guilt, believing she was a burden to her family. On March 13, 2026, she attempted suicide by overdosing on ibuprofen. After gastric lavage at another hospital, she was transferred to our institution and admitted as "postpartum depressive state" in the outpatient department. Current symptoms include: depressed

mood, pessimism, self-blame, anxiety, reduced interest, slowed thinking, perceived mental sluggishness, memory decline, fatigue, insomnia with frequent awakenings (sleeping only 2–3 hours nightly), poor appetite, pale tongue with white coating, and deep-thin pulse. No prior medical history. Physical examination revealed clear consciousness, stable vital signs, no abnormalities in heart, lungs, or abdomen, and negative neurological findings. Mental status examination showed clear consciousness, intact orientation, slowed thinking, delusions of reference, depressive and anxious mood, reduced volitional activity, high suicide risk, and preserved insight. Auxiliary examinations: no abnormalities on brain CT or MRI; ECG showed sinus arrhythmia. Western diagnosis: 1. Severe depressive episode with psychotic symptoms; 2. Pelvic effusion. Traditional Chinese Medicine diagnosis: Stagnation syndrome; pattern: Liver stagnation with spleen deficiency and brain spirit malnourishment. Treatment principle: Soothe the liver, strengthen the spleen, and regulate the mind through the Governor Vessel.

2. TREATMENT PLAN

2.1 Treatment with Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture

Acupoint selection: Baihui (GV20), Yintang (GB20), Shenting (GV20), Dazhui (GV20), Taodao (CV4), Shentang (CV4), Anmian (CV4), Qihai (CV8), Zhongwan (CV12), Baihui (GV20), Mingmen (CV4), Shenmen (CV4), Taichong (CV12), Zhaohai (CV12), and Zusanli (ST36).

Procedure: The operation was divided into two groups—prone position and supine position—alternating between them. One group was performed daily with alternating implementation. Routine disinfection of acupoint skin was conducted as follows:

Group 1 (Prone Position Procedure): The patient assumes a prone position. To address symptoms such as mental sluggishness and memory decline caused by fatigue, reduced mobility, and cerebral ischemia, acupuncture is performed at four acupoints: Dazhui (GV14), Taodao (GV11), Shentang (GV13), and Mingmen (GV4). Dazhui, Taodao, and Shentang are needled obliquely at a depth of 0.8–1.2 cun, avoiding deep insertion that may injure the spinal cord and exacerbate patient discomfort. Mingmen is needled vertically at a depth of 0.5–0.8 cun, with caution exercised regarding strong stimulation to account for the postpartum constitution characterized by qi and blood deficiency as well as liver and kidney deficiency, thereby preventing damage to yang qi. Moderate stimulation intensity is applied, employing a balanced tonifying and draining approach, with needle retention for 20 minutes.

Group 2 (Supine Position Procedure): The patient assumes a supine position. For symptoms such as depressive mood, insomnia with frequent awakening, and poor appetite, acupuncture is performed at the following acupoints: Baihui (GV20), Yintang (GB20), Shenting (GV25), Anmian (GV14), Qihai (CV6), Zhongwan (CV12), Shenmen (GV13), Taichong (CV14), Zhaohai (CV15), and Zusanli (ST36). Level needling at Baihui, Yintang, and Shenting (0.5–0.8 cun) can alleviate mental sluggishness and memory decline. Needling toward the contralateral eye direction at Anmian (0.8–1.2 cun) specifically targets insomnia and frequent awakening. Direct needling at Qihai and Zhongwan (1–1.5 cun) avoids the bladder and abdominal organs, addressing poor appetite, fatigue, and lethargy while tonifying the spleen and replenishing qi. Direct needling at Shenmen, Taichong, Zhaohai, and Zusanli (1–1.5 cun) includes: Taichong for soothing the liver and relieving depression; Shenmen for calming the mind; Zhaohai for nourishing yin and enriching blood; and Zusanli for regulating qi and blood. Moderate stimulation intensity is applied with balanced tonifying and draining effects, and needles are retained for 20 minutes. The two groups alternate, administered once daily, with 7 sessions constituting one treatment course.

Modified treatment based on syndrome differentiation: For patients with pale tongue and white coating, deep and thready pulse, and obvious deficiency of qi and blood, the stimulation intensity may be appropriately reduced, and tonifying methods may be added. If symptoms of anxiety and restlessness worsen, the stimulation intensity at the Taichong acupoint may be appropriately increased to enhance the effect of soothing the liver and relieving depression.

Key Treatment Principles: Based on the syndrome differentiation of liver stagnation with spleen deficiency and cerebral nutrient deficiency, along with specific symptoms such as emotional depression, insomnia with frequent awakening, and slowed thinking, the two treatment groups alternated therapeutic approaches to collectively achieve the effects of soothing the liver, strengthening the spleen, unblocking the Governor Vessel, and regulating mental function, thereby targetedly alleviating various patient symptoms. The alternating acupoint applications in both groups not only facilitated Governor Vessel regulation and yang-qi replenishment but also emphasized

liver-soothing, spleen-strengthening, and heart-calming with blood-nourishing actions, effectively improving symptom profiles, reducing suicide risk, and promoting emotional and constitutional recovery in patients.

2.2 Basic Treatment of Western Medicine

I administered antidepressants, anxiolytics, and sleep-improving medications, supplemented with MECT and repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation. Strict suicide prevention monitoring was implemented, with family members providing 24-hour supervision.

3. EFFICACY OBSERVATION

After the initial treatment, the patient's anxiety and tension showed slight reduction, along with decreased sleep disturbances. Following three treatment sessions, emotional stability improved, self-blame diminished, and nighttime sleep duration extended to 3–4 hours. After one treatment course (7 sessions), pessimism and negativity were significantly alleviated, delusions of reference subsided, appetite improved, slowed thinking progressed, and suicidal ideation weakened. By discharge, the patient's mood remained largely stable, sleep quality markedly improved, self-blame and suspicion virtually disappeared, fatigue decreased, and active communication became possible, with suicide risk reduced to low levels. Post-discharge follow-up revealed stable emotions, normal sleep and dietary patterns, no recurrence of negative or self-harm thoughts, and good maternal-infant status.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Postpartum depression corresponds to the "Yuzheng" (depression syndrome) in Traditional Chinese Medicine, with its pathogenesis primarily attributed to "blood failing to nourish the heart, leading to impaired mental function" [15-16]. In this case, the young mother exhibited chronic deficiency and blood stasis postpartum, with qi and blood deficiency as the root cause and liver qi stagnation as the secondary manifestation, manifesting predominantly as impaired cerebral nourishment. Postpartum blood loss depletes qi, resulting in impaired blood circulation and blood stasis; insufficient liver blood disrupts its regulatory function, causing liver qi stagnation; inadequate qi and blood circulation failing to nourish the brain leads to impaired primordial spirit nourishment, presenting as low mood, slowed thinking, insomnia, memory impairment, pessimism, and self-blame. Concurrently, phlegm-turbidity obstructing the interior contributes to excessive suspicion and sensitivity, occasionally progressing to suicidal ideation.

Acupuncture can improve neurotransmitter imbalances by regulating the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and elevating levels of 5-HT and NE, thereby alleviating depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders [17–21].

The Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture Therapy follows the principle of regulating the Governor Vessel to harmonize the spirit, with liver-soothing and qi-regulating as its core focus, and qi-tonifying, blood-nourishing, and blood-activating as its foundation. The key acupoints for Tongdu Diaoshen are the Governor Vessel points (Baihui, Shenting, Dazhui, Taodao, and Mingmen), which connect to the brain meridians and govern the body's yang energy. Acupuncture here elevates yang energy, replenishes qi, nourishes brain marrow, and awakens consciousness. Points such as Yintang, Anmian, Shentang, and Shenmen calm the mind, relieve depression, and promote sleep, effectively addressing postpartum insomnia, anxiety, and emotional instability. Zhongwan, Qihai, and Zusanli strengthen the spleen and stomach, replenish qi and blood, and reinforce vital energy to address postpartum "excess deficiency," supporting brain function through qi-blood regeneration. Taichong, the origin point of the Liver Meridian, soothes liver qi and alleviates depression. Zhaohai, a kidney meridian point and convergence point of eight pulses, nourishes water and wood, balances yin, and calms the spirit, addressing postpartum yin deficiency and insomnia.

The entire formula takes regulating the Governor Vessel and harmonizing the spirit as its principle, soothing the liver and regulating qi as its essence, replenishing qi and nourishing blood as its foundation, and calming the mind and soothing the spirit as its goal. It collectively achieves the effects of regulating the Governor Vessel and harmonizing the spirit, relieving liver qi stagnation, activating blood circulation and nourishing blood, as well as calming the mind and soothing the spirit, thereby eliminating blood stasis, relieving liver qi stagnation, replenishing qi and blood, stabilizing brain function, and harmonizing emotions.

In conclusion, Tongdu Diaoshen Acupuncture for the treatment of postpartum depression aligns with the pathological characteristics of postpartum disorders. It is safe, non-invasive, and does not interfere with

breastfeeding, rapidly improving emotional state, sleep quality, cognitive function, and physical symptoms while significantly reducing suicide risk. When combined with standardized monitoring and external therapy, its therapeutic efficacy is stable and reliable, making it worthy of widespread clinical application in the management of postpartum mood disorders.

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