Correspondent Lorne Oliver was highly skeptical of acupuncture, but faced cognitive dissonance because he believed acupuncture saved his life. He describes the experience on his blog at http://www.filletofseoul.com/2008/10/acupuncture.html

Briefly, he developed itching after eating a dried persimmon, broke out in hives, developed a rapid pulse, then shallow, rapid breathing and dizziness. He concluded that his airway was closing off and he was going into anaphylactic shock. Thinking he wouldn't live to get to a hospital, he stopped at a nearby acupuncture clinic. The acupuncturist stuck needles in various places and had him lie under a heat lamp. He was back to normal in half an hour. The acupuncturist told him that he only had 20 minutes to live when he entered the clinic.

Did acupuncture save his life? I doubt it. I suspect he had a simple case of hives. LOTS of people get hives and don't develop anaphylaxis. When he saw the hives he panicked, thinking he was going into anaphylaxis and might die. Fear made his heart beat fast and made him hyperventilate. Hyperventilation raises O2 levels and lowers CO2 levels, raising the pH of the blood and causing various physiologic changes. You're breathing too much but paradoxically you feel like you can't breathe or can't take deep enough breaths, you get dizzy, you may have numbness and tingling in your hands, a headache, chest pain; you can even pass out. This is very frightening: patients often believe they are dying or having a heart attack. I've helped many patients out of this fix by simply reassuring them that they were in no danger and talking them down or getting them to re-breathe in a paper bag.

The acupuncturist helped Lorne calm down, and the symptoms resolved just as they would have anyway. The needles had nothing to do with it.

Refreshingly, Lorne accepted my explanation. "Well, that explains that then, doesn't it? ...fits the situation better and makes more sense; Occam's razor and all that."

One case of cognitive dissonance cured; one acupuncture miracle debunked.

Harriet Hall, MD

The SkepDoc

http://www.skepdoc.info/

http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/