

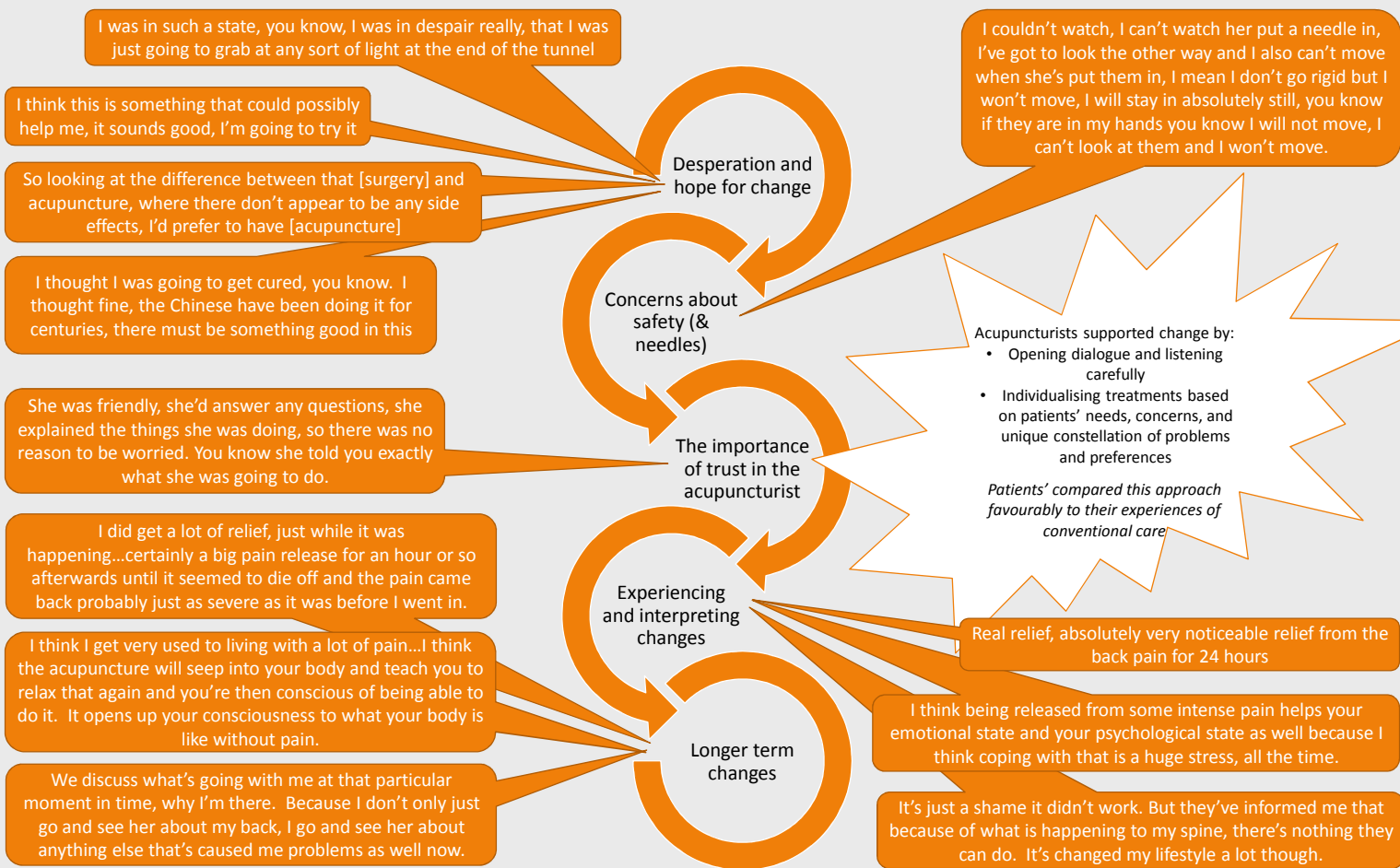
Exploring Change Processes in Acupuncture for Back Pain: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

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Background
Personally, economically and socially, back pain is costly (1) and is commonly used for LBP (2). In randomised clinical trials acupuncture has shown large effects on chronic pain compared to usual care or waiting list controls but often only small effects compared to sham acupuncture (3;4). This suggests acupuncture has large non-specific effects, i.e., factors other than needling characteristics contribute to patients' outcomes (5). Indeed, acupuncture can be conceptualised as a complex intervention in which changes in patients' health are produced not only by needling but also by more psychosocial factors such as empathic therapeutic relationships and holistic consultations in which discussions of lifestyle and self-care can trigger changes in how patients think and feel about their symptoms and their ability to manage them (6-9). However, little is known about the psychosocial factors and processes that might be involved in acupuncture for LBP.

Aims
• To explore patients' experiences of acupuncture for back pain
• To identify psychosocial processes that might support clinical changes

Methods
We conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. 23 interviewees were purposively sampled from a nationwide longitudinal questionnaire study (n=485) (10,11). We deliberately interviewed men (n=8) and women (n=15), of varying ages (29 – 82 years), receiving acupuncture in diverse settings (7 acupuncture clinics; 5 physiotherapy; 9 pain clinic; 1 general practice), with different adherence levels (17 attended all appointments). We also sampled for diversity in outcomes (positive/negative/no change in disability/pain/wellbeing).



Summary
Participants described how, on starting treatment, they were desperately hoping that acupuncture would improve their ability to function and enjoy their lives despite back pain, and so they typically cared little about how it might work. They expressed concerns about acupuncture needles and side-effects, and trusted acupuncturists who made them feel safe, explained the treatment clearly, and made them feel special and listened to. Participants felt more in control when acupuncturists created space for dialogue and this was important because they perceived little control over pain and conventional treatment options. Some but not all participants experienced benefits including: pain relief, better functioning, and feeling happier or less depressed. As a result of their experiences, they described believing that acupuncture can 'work' to produce real, if short-term, benefits.

Conclusions
Clinical changes in back pain as a result of acupuncture may be supported by therapeutic relationships that empower patients and attend to their concerns.

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