

Breaking the stress cycle with Shiatsu

(Dr. Eduard Tripp)

Stress is a part of life. In Western understanding, it refers to the physical and psychological reaction to demands that require the body to adapt. What matters is not the stress itself – in other words, whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ stress – but whether we respond appropriately and are subsequently able to return to a balanced state. A manageable challenge can promote adaptation and development. However, if stress becomes too intense, persists for too long, or if there is a lack of sufficient resources and periods of recovery, it can turn into distress and have an exhausting effect in the long term.

When stress becomes a permanent state

The ‘modern stress trap’ describes a typical problem of today’s living and working conditions: constant stress combined with too little rest and recovery. Constant availability, an information overload, time pressure, high performance demands, multiple stressors, uncertainty, lack of physical activity or sleep deprivation do not necessarily constitute excessive strain on their own; however, when combined, they can lead to a state of arousal becoming increasingly the norm, and the body being unable to reliably return to a state of rest.

This state also becomes a ‘trap’ because overload is often only recognised at a late stage. At the same time, apparent coping strategies such as striving for even greater performance and efficiency, taking fewer breaks and sleeping less, or excessive screen time can further exacerbate the situation. At the same time, recovery, body awareness and the ability to consciously switch between activity and rest all diminish. The crucial question is therefore not only: ‘How can we reduce stress?’, but also: ‘How can we strengthen our ability to switch flexibly between arousal and relaxation?’

Stress from the perspective of Far Eastern medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine has no direct equivalent to the modern Western concept of stress. Nevertheless, a comparable underlying principle exists: pressures, challenges and emotional arousal are part of life – and as long as the body can adapt flexibly to changing demands and the qi flows freely, homeostasis is maintained. Stress only becomes problematic when it becomes too intense or prolonged and can no longer be adequately processed.

From this perspective, the modern stress trap can be understood as an increasing loss of regulatory capacity; for if a stressor persists and tensions cannot be sufficiently resolved, the free movement of qi may be impaired. In modern TCM, chronic emotional stress is therefore often associated with liver qi stagnation, whereby the liver functional circuit represents, amongst other things, the free and flexible flow of qi – and thus, symbolically, adaptability and regulation as well.

Typical signs may include inner tension and irritability, a feeling of being unable to wind down, sensations of pressure or constriction, frustration, as well as digestive or sleep problems. If the stagnation persists for a longer period, patterns of overexcitement and 'heat' may also develop; with continued stress, patterns of deficiency and exhaustion may increasingly come to the fore. Other functional systems may also be affected: the spleen, for example, is associated with brooding, overwork, irregular eating habits and exhaustion, whilst the heart and Shen are linked to inner calm and sleep problems.

This results in a typical progression: stress and activation are initially normal and manageable processes. However, if the tension persists, this can lead to stagnation, increasing overexcitement and, ultimately, exhaustion. From this perspective, resilience therefore does not mean enduring as much stress as possible, but rather remaining adaptable and being able to regenerate after stress.

How Shiatsu can help

Shiatsu addresses stress on several levels. A central component is the physical treatment, in which – similar to acupuncture – meridians and specific points are incorporated for regulatory purposes. However, this is not achieved through needle stimulation, but primarily through targeted finger pressure, supplemented by stretching and mobilisation. Furthermore, touch, relationship, interaction, breathing and co-regulation also play an important role in Shiatsu treatment.

Unlike with yoga, tai chi, qigong or physical exercise, the person receiving treatment does not initially need to actively do or achieve anything. This can be particularly helpful in cases of severe exhaustion or feeling overwhelmed, as regulation in such situations does not have to rely solely on one's own efforts, but is supported by the physical treatment as well as by the presence and reliability of the practitioner.

A sense of safety is of particular importance here. Relaxation often arises not merely from the fact that nothing needs to be done at that moment, but above all when a person feels subjectively safe enough to let go of their inner state of alertness and the associated physical tension. The practitioner's posture, voice, touch and presence can support this regulatory process. Mindful

pressure or supportive contact can convey a sense of orientation, security and safety, thereby facilitating regulation.

Co-regulation: Regulation within a relationship

Co-regulation refers to the reciprocal regulation between two people and has its origins in early relational experiences. Infants are not yet able to regulate intense physical and emotional states on their own and are dependent on familiar caregivers. The caregivers' calmness, presence and reliability help to convey a sense of security. Over time, the ability to self-regulate develops increasingly from repeated experiences of successful co-regulation.

A similar principle may also come into play in body-oriented settings. If a person is only able to self-regulate their inner state to a limited extent during phases of intense tension or exhaustion, the empathetic presence, stable demeanour and sensitive responsiveness of the other person can, to a certain extent, facilitate a temporary form of 'borrowed regulation', the aim of which is to strengthen the capacity for self-regulation in the long term.

Touch itself also possesses a distinct social dimension; the C-tactile fibres addressed in treatment are specialised in responding to slow, gentle touch and are associated with the emotional quality of social touch. Pleasant touch can also promote the release of oxytocin, which, amongst other things, can foster trust, bonding, closeness and relaxation.

However, touch does not automatically have a calming effect: particularly in the case of stressful or traumatic experiences, closeness and deeper relaxation can also trigger feelings of insecurity. A safe environment, clear communication and respect for personal boundaries are therefore essential.

From relaxation to self-regulation

Ideally, the effects of Shiatsu do not end with the conclusion of a session, as the ongoing awareness of breathing, tension and general well-being allows physical changes to be experienced directly – enabling one to learn to recognise one's own stress signals – such as restlessness, increased tension, shallow breathing or exhaustion – at an earlier stage and to interpret them more effectively.

Repeated experiences of calm, safety and co-regulation can, at the same time, create a physically tangible reference point for what a more regulated state feels like. This also allows for a more conscious awareness of the shift between arousal and relaxation. In everyday life, it may then be

easier to recognise stress early on and take appropriate steps – for example, through conscious breathing exercises, short breaks, movement, releasing tension, grounding and other physical exercises such as power poses, through withdrawal and rest, or by deliberately seeking out supportive social contacts.

In this sense, yoga, taiji, qigong and physical activity are not in opposition to Shiatsu. Whilst Shiatsu can initially provide greater support through touch, relationship and co-regulation, active methods foster the ability to increasingly influence one's own state through one's own actions. Both approaches can therefore complement each other well when experienced regulation becomes the basis for increasing self-regulation.

Combining traditional and modern perspectives

Traditional and modern scientific models explain the mechanisms of action of Shiatsu in markedly different ways; however, they can complement one another effectively in their understanding of regulation, adaptability and the interplay between the body and experience. In Far Eastern medicine, a 'healthy' way of dealing with stress is associated with the free and balanced flow of qi. In Shiatsu, working with meridians and specific points, as well as pressure, stretching and mobilisation, are among the key elements at various levels of action.

These concepts cannot be translated one-to-one into modern scientific terms, but they can be related to processes involving the nervous system, muscle tension, breathing, body awareness and emotional regulation. Touch and pressure provide sensory stimuli; movement and stretching alter tension and body awareness, whilst concepts such as interoception and embodiment describe the interaction between physical states and emotional experience. Breathing, subjective safety and interpersonal co-regulation are also linked to the body's regulatory processes.

Viewed in this light, finding ways out of the modern stress trap is ultimately not just about being as relaxed as possible. Rather, health and resilience are reflected in the ability to mobilise oneself when necessary, and subsequently to let go, regenerate and regain balance. Far Eastern medicine and Shiatsu can help us to become more consciously aware of this alternation and support our capacity for regulation on a physical, emotional and interpersonal level.

Shiatsu must be clearly distinguished from medical or psychotherapeutic treatment. It serves as a form of preventive healthcare and promotes well-being and self-regulation; it does not replace medical or psychological diagnosis, nor does it replace any necessary medical or psychotherapeutic treatment. In the case of existing medical conditions or unclear symptoms, an appropriate specialist assessment is therefore absolutely essential.



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