

How to deal with Stress

by Wilfried Rappenecker

Stress means tightness and compression affecting a person's body and life. Stress does not hit us from the outside rather we produce it from within. It is an active effort of the energetic and physical body in order to be able to stand up to particular challenges. But why can this essentially normal and healthy reaction of the body turn into a burden that makes us ill? Which mechanisms give rise to stress? How can we deal with stress in a meaningful way so that it doesn't result in illness but in joie de vivre? And what can support us best on our way to leaving stress behind?

Stress is an important part of our life. In stressful situations we mobilize our reserves, we 'dig in our heels' in order to successfully deal with a particular situation. On a physiological level the stress hormones of the adrenal cortex, such as adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol, are released. From the point of view of Shiatsu, during times of stress Yang becomes mobilized and temporarily forces Yin into the background.

The body and mind prepare for dealing with a difficult situation like this: heart rate and blood pressure increase, breathing becomes more rapid, the brain and the muscles receive more blood and oxygen, the digestion slows down. From an energetic point of view the person becomes tighter and their tension increases, which manifests itself in increased emotional and physical tension.

This is a healthy and positive reaction. When exposed to exceptional situations it allows a person to perform actions which may otherwise appear inconceivable. This is also referred to as eustress (in contrast to distress which causes illness). Once the challenge has passed the physical functions return to a normal level; Yin and Yang regain their balance; the person can relax and recover.

If situations of exceptional pressure recur at short intervals, the human body does not have the time necessary to relax and recover after the high performance; the body remains in 'high performance mode'. If this state persists for a long period of time, a feeling of fatigue and being overburdened will arise. With chronic stress, the 'high performance mode' becomes a normal state.

In our modern society people are considerably challenged most of the time. Periods of recovery are not a given as a matter of course; one has to practically fight for times of rest; a contradiction in terms. Thus more and more people feel overwhelmed; they are afraid of not achieving what they believe is required of them.

Fear and suppression of perceptions and feelings

The actual cause of stress is fear. The fear of not being good enough, of not achieving something, but *having* to achieve it. The fear of not being able to cope with a stressful situation; fear that it is getting worse and worse; fear of losing control. Also the fear of losing something, such as one's job, partner, money, position, health. The fear of not being recognised or loved and so forth can cause great stress.

It is fear that has the effect of people taking on more than they can actually handle. In this way their lives and the lives of others become more *compressed*. Fear in particular results in people becoming *internally* more compressed; they become tight and are under high pressure. The ability to cope with exceptional challenges is,

per se, very positive but when it becomes a permanent feature it turns into a curse.

It is then that people feel permanently overwhelmed and overly tired. The ability to regenerate deteriorates noticeably, sleep becomes poorer. The zest for life decreases. The continuous tension makes people irritable, even angry, and not infrequently depressive.

Headaches and back pain increase, the organs don't function optimally anymore, and symptoms arise. There may be, for example, digestive, menstrual or cardiovascular problems. After years of constant stress some organs may eventually cease to cooperate; this may result in serious organ disorders. All these signs together describe the condition of burnout syndrome.

A state of constant stress is associated with a limited perception of one's body and bodily sensations. Positive feelings are barely allowed anymore; life focuses purely on what has to be done. People suffering from chronic stress are caught in the narrow confines of 'Functioning is All that Matters'.

There is no space for dreams or joy. People are no longer able to work meaningfully and effectively on their life issues since this takes time which is not available. The internal reasons for the fear and the pressure cannot be recognised in this state.

Pathways out of Stress

There can be external circumstances which make it likely for stress to arise in a person. However, the actual state of stress in a body is an act of the energetic and physical body. *We actively generate stress within us.*

Once we recognise this, what can we do in order to avoid stress being generated within us? Two ways come to mind: on the one hand changing the external conditions which trigger the generation of stress within us; and on the other hand changing the internal conditions which give rise to stress.

External factors can be influenced, for example, by changing our own time management and that at our work place. This will provide us with more space, breaks and clear time structures. It may also become necessary to address relevant issues, for example at the workplace, and to come to concrete arrangements. This usually requires courage: the courage to admit that we are stressed beyond our limits, that we are at end of our tether; but also the courage to make suggestions and demands. Influencing external stress factors may require changing the external environment, for example getting a new job.

Influencing the *internal factors* is at least as challenging as influencing the external ones. One of the first steps should be to talk about one's situation with family and friends, colleagues or neighbours and exchange views. It can also be extremely helpful to keep a regular journal and, through writing, reflect on what is happening and one's inner state. Both the exchange with others and the writing will reduce the inner pressure which represents one of the fundamental prerequisites for chronic stress. Highly recommended is regular exercise, especially in the outdoors, such as hiking, power walking, jogging etc. Exercise releases internal physical and emotional blockages, lifts the mood, and thus opens the space for possible changes.

To create spaces in one's everyday life where there is time for those things that are not necessary or immediately meaningful represents another way to let inner expanse arise. This can be a major challenge since such spaces have, not infrequently, to be enforced against the resistance of other people, and especially against one's own rigid sense of duty. However, once gained, one will no longer want to give them up because one can feel how important they are for one's balance.

Shiatsu, exercise, meditation

On the way out of stress, Shiatsu, regular exercise (e.g. yoga, qi gong) and meditation can all provide great

support. All three methods can improve a person's sense of body and self. In contrast to the physical experience of stress they are experienced as rather positive and pleasant.

One of the reasons Shiatsu can be very helpful in this situation is because Shiatsu directs unconscious attention into the depth of the body in a very pleasant way. In stressed people, this unconscious attention is very much located in a person's periphery and environment. The more the unconscious attention reaches into a person's depth, the easier it will be for him/her to slow down, take time and let joie de vivre, not fear, determine their sensations. As if on its own accord ideas will arise as to how one's life could be changed in a stress-free direction.

In Shiatsu, this getting-in-touch with oneself is initially a mainly passive experience which occurs as a result of the treatment. However, regular physical exercise offers the opportunity to create this experience oneself in an easy manner. In yoga or qi gong as well, a person can get in touch with him/herself and their depth. In this way, they can become more relaxed, content, calmer and slower. The resulting feeling of wellbeing allows the zest for life to return, an important antidote to chronic stress. Ideas how to improve one's life will arise as of themselves.

Meditation, too, allows a person to become calm and to get in touch with themselves. During meditation space and expanse can arise; the opposite of stress. But meditation goes a step further: with this mindfulness training one can learn to look calmly at one's situation, fears, inner pressure and lack of freedom, rather than trying to understand and recognise them intellectually. In this way, people will gradually discover important deeper levels of their reality and their lives. Tranquility, strength, and joy are rediscovered and strengthened in a sustainable manner. It becomes much easier to change external and internal circumstances towards a more stress-free life.

All three paths described here can engender a true turning point in one's life. Shiatsu can be the initial spark but it can also be an essential support during the later stages. Physical exercise and meditation require regular practice for their beneficial effects to unfold.

Especially in the beginning, it can well happen that regular practice is not found to be easy at all. This can express itself in feelings of 'can't be bothered' as well as in the various reasons which regularly come to mind at the beginning of the practice: all the important things that need to be done, or why there simply is no time today. In this case the only thing that helps is to persevere with the practice one has planned. It can be helpful to reserve a fixed time for practice in the daily schedule which one consistently adheres to (nearly) every day.

There is a way out of stress.