

SHIATSU & MENSTRUAL / MENOPAUSE PROBLEMS



CASE STUDIES

Hala Zaluckowska, MRSS

Personal History

R is 53 and lives in a small coastal village with her 2 dogs. She is in a long-term relationship and has a business with her partner. She also has a demanding full time job, with a regional post, which often requires travel all over the country. She has 2 grown sons who have been through college and are now quite independent.

R is somewhat overweight with saggy flesh, her upper body being more densely built than her legs. She exercises regularly, taking her dogs for walks twice a day. She also goes swimming occasionally and tries to incorporate exercises into her daily routine. She enjoys cooking and has a healthy diet with no meat. She sees this phase of her life as quite positive as she embraces the changes and is able to make more time for herself. She has been able to concentrate more fully on her love of writing, which has been something she has wanted to do for a while.

Medical History

R generally has a healthy constitution. Her main issue has been joint problems, which she attributes to a huge iron infusion when she had her last child in 1979. She has been prone to flu type symptoms, which often develop into chest infections, most often in Autumn. She has also been prone to sinus problems in the past and has occasional wheezing or coughing episodes and dry skin on occasions. Another major issue has been her sleeping patterns with frequent insomnia.

R has been involved in 3 car accidents (1972, 1994, 2004) and often suffers from discomfort in her neck and shoulders exacerbated by having to do a lot of driving or computer work. R has suffered from menopausal symptoms (hot flushes, lacking in energy) over the past 5 years and these seem to have subsided now. Her mother died about 2 years ago and although this stirred up difficult emotions, it also felt quite liberating for R at time when she wanted to reassess her life. She has been coming to me for treatments since I first started studying Shiatsu in 2000.

Presenting Symptoms:

- Joint pain
- Work stress
- Reassessment of life – post menopause
- Tendency to overweight
- Intermittent sleeping – insomnia
- Neck and shoulder stiffness

Aims:

To support R in her reassessment of life. Work with joints to create greater flow of energy. Release of tension in shoulders and neck.

Treatments:

1. 20.10.04 Kyo: BL Jitsu: HT

R feeling well generally. Slight tightness in chest. Some shoulder pain in left shoulder. Talked about diet, in particular macrobiotic diet.

R would like to lose some weight. Talked about doing some exercises on a more energetic level i.e. Tai Chi, Yoga.

2. 10.10.04 Kyo: LI Jitsu: HT

R in car accident. Left shoulder is more painful. Week off work and generally feeling well and stimulated. Feeling unsupported at work.

Upper body felt full with lower legs lacking. Strong connections on LI. Worked to disperse Ki in upper body, working shoulder points and LI 10. R knee wanted attention.

3. 1.12.04 Kyo: LIV Jitsu: SI

Last night was awake from 3-6am. Tension in shoulders, due to a lot of driving and computer work. Scanning indicated banding. Worked heavily on the hips but R welcomed work. Legs felt more energised with upper body more yielding. Work on shoulders and neck always creates release.

4. 22.12.04 Kyo: SP Jitsu: LIV

A bit tired today. Doing some work in the house and is feeling a bit achy. Heaviness in the shoulders and neck. General banding of energy. Treatment worked to create a more even distribution of energy and also to disperse energy downwards.

5. 2.02.05 Kyo: LI Jitsu: ST

Helping partner move house – some back strain. Too much sitting/driving. Very hectic work month. Flu bug after Xmas. Not exercising. Strong connections on LI & ST. Left side of body lacking, more energised after treatment. Neck tight and banding of chest area.

6. 16.02.05 Kyo: SI Jitsu: TH

Feeling well. Some shoulder ache. Joints good and diet.

L & R of SI noticeably different. More similar and yielding after treatment.

TCM Diagnosis

Metal tends to figure primarily in R's symptoms. She tends to wake early at 5am (LI time) and is prone to colds, which can lead to bronchitis particularly in the Autumn. She also has periods of dry skin and occasional wheezing relating to the function of elimination in LI. Her neck and shoulder pain could be attributable to meridian problems in LI or SI.

Frequent presentation of SI reflects the function of assimilation. Although there seems to be little evidence of physical symptoms relating to SI, emotionally R is going through a process of change as she digests the possibilities of what is available to her and makes appropriate choices, as to her own needs (rather than that of the family). The functioning of the Liver and Gall Bladder has been affected by R's process of planning and deciding on her life goals. The defensive quality of TH is evident in R feeling unsupported in her work role, with LI marking her ongoing struggle to 'let go' of associated responsibilities. Ongoing joint pain may be attributable to deficient Liver Blood where the Liver is slow to release blood to the muscles. Her abdominal structure with soft flabby flesh indicates a deficiency of Original Qi.

Zen Shiatsu Diagnosis

The last 2 years has been a time of significant change with the death of her mother and relinquishing of her financial responsibility of her sons, which has necessitated a period of 'letting go', mainly on an emotional level. The nature of her work can create a lot of stress with frequent travelling which tends to upset her diet affecting the functioning of the Spleen with Spleen Qi Deficiency evident

SI presents on three occasions and has presented regularly in past treatments. The disharmony evident in her body at times, with accompanying heaviness of legs is likely to be due to the process of assimilation. It is possible that the iron infusion that she had in 1979 created a shock to her body, (she describes it as this) with ongoing subsequent joint pain. The car accidents that she has been involved in are also likely to have created some inherent shock within the body, creating past hurts that may not have been fully assimilated, evident in her tendency to neck and shoulder pain. This is likely to have manifest in a Heart-Blood deficiency indicated by R's insomnia and pale complexion.

Results of treatments:

R's main focus for treatments was in relation to joint pain. This has progressively improved and she is only occasionally aware of any pain in her joints. Her neck and shoulder pain is relieved by treatments and is related to busy periods at work, which she is aware of. Her sleep is much more regular and she only occasionally suffers from insomnia. R is generally more aware of how her life and work affect her body and actively seeks to balance out elements.

Conclusions:

R comes for Shiatsu for 'general maintenance' and feels it supports her in her various roles. The last few years have been a time of change as she has been dealing with menopausal symptoms and coming to terms with her changing role in relation to her family. The Shiatsu has supported R to embrace all these changes and focus on her needs and where she wants to go with her life. In the past work has been a prominent stress, but this is now more of a functional role, allowing her more space to do other things which she has maybe not allowed herself to do in the past i.e. creative writing.

We have discussed the benefits of a macrobiotic diet and although R finds it difficult to follow this diet strictly she tries to incorporate elements of this diet, which she feels has benefited her joint pain. She also practices the Makho stretches as part of her daily exercise routine.

ARTICLES

The Menopause from the Perspective of Oriental Medicine By Carola Beresford-Cooke, MRSS(T)

Published in the Shiatsu Society News 81 Spring 2002

Originally written as a chapter for a book on the menopause aimed at the general public, Carola Beresford-Cooke has adapted the article for professional practitioners, while retaining the emphasis on self-help.

Giving a workshop on Shiatsu and the Menopause recently, I was surprised to hear participants reporting hot flushes as surges of power, and generally reflecting on the menopause as a wholly positive experience.

How can this be? Our work is founded on an understanding of the alternation between Yin and Yang, negative and positive, as a source of charge, like electricity. When the negative is eliminated, where is the charge? The experience of alternating pleasure and suffering, happiness and sadness, seems to me moreover an essential part of learning about life and thus acquiring wisdom and balance.

Do we benefit from persuading ourselves that the menopause is a wholly positive experience? Is it not rather, like adolescence and childbirth, the other great rites of passage, a tempest which tosses us willy-nilly out of one phase of life and into another and which each of us experiences in our own uniquely individual way? The New Age movement has already tried to persuade us that childbirth

should be an ecstatic experience – and how many women feel a sense of disillusionment and personal failure on that score?

We, those women born in the baby-boom, the Me Generation, the liberated, seem to feel that we should be exempt from the old traditions of pain in childbirth, the menopause, ageing. If we can only think positively, we can control the pains of life, put ourselves at the helm and steer a passage towards making our dreams real. There seems to be a reluctance to accept that we are not always in control, and that our souls may require some suffering, some less than palatable experiences, to learn and grow.

There are no books that I have read which mention that the menopause and the experience of ageing are inseparable; somehow it is glossed over. Yet at the heart of the menopausal experience is the unpalatable nugget of truth whose acceptance and assimilation is the rite of passage; we are no longer fertile; we are becoming old women, and thus preparing for the end of our lives.

I am reminded, in observing women as they age, or fight ageing, of a quote from Kierkegaard, from Richard Reoch's wonderful book on dying (1997), "To let go is to lose one's foothold temporarily; not to let go is to lose one's foothold forever". Joan Collins, though her tenacity is admirable, has not let go of her youth and is frozen forever in her plastic image of someone no longer young but somehow not old as we think of old. Although she must, in terms of fertility, have gone through the menopause, she is, through heaven knows what sacrifice in terms of time, money and physical ease, avoiding changing, and is thus not coming to terms with the basic human condition, which is to change. The menopause, the Change, is what propels us into ageing, each of us with our own unique combination of factors dissolving into the personal maelstrom from which we one day emerge – changed.

What is happening during the Change

From the viewpoint of Chinese medicine, the menopause is the last of the great life experiences known as the Gateways of Change. In a system of medicine which sees our basic constitution, formed at birth, as a determining factor in our health history, the Gateways of Change stand out as periods of life when we can change that constitution for better or for worse.

The Gateways of Change are all periods of intense hormonal activity, namely:

- Birth and the peri-natal period
- Puberty
- The beginning of full sexual activity
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Menopause

Hormones act as messengers between our bodies, minds and emotions, so, incidentally, all of these "gateway" periods influence our emotional life and are influenced by them.

The menopause, this great hormonal storm, this Gateway of Change through which we must pass, is basically a process of adaptation or awakening, as the body realises that it is becoming depleted through losing Essence and Blood at the time of the Period.

Essence is the core substance of our being, given to us by our parents at the moment of conception. We hand some of our Essence on to our own children. Men thus lose essence most when they ejaculate, and this is the idea behind Chinese sexual practices designed to conserve Essence. Women lose it most during pregnancy and childbirth. Essence is material: it is the seed of our future physical form, of every cell that we manufacture during our lifetime. It is also dynamic: it supplies

the core energy or “Pilot light” which fuels every action we take in our lives, as well as every metabolic transformation. Essence is used up in the process of living: it is the sand in our hour-glass, so to speak. Each time we replace a worn-out cell, digest a meal, raise an arm, menstruate or breathe we use Essence. We can conserve it by good diet, breathing exercises or Qi gong and moderate living – or we can deplete it by having too many children too close together, late nights, overwork, sex, drugs, rock and roll, etc.

“Blood” is, in Chinese thought, a more magical substance than just red stuff that flows in our veins and arteries. It nourishes and strengthens, soothes and calms. It gives us the ability to rest and feel satisfied, to be rather than do. Women store Blood in order to nourish a baby, and lose it each month if no baby implants itself. This constant loss of Blood, together with the slow and steady leak of Essence, ultimately reaches a critical point and the body becomes deficient. It is this state of deficiency that creates menopausal symptoms.

But the symptoms of menopause do not arrive on a clean slate, so to speak. Nearly all of us have already compromised our basic health to some extent by our late forties, whether through lifestyle or from emotional causes. Some of us will already be deficient in energy or substance, some of us may be particularly stressed, and almost without exception those of us living Northern Europe will suffer from what the Chinese call Dampness.

Dampness is a heavy, sticky energy which builds up in us as a result of poor dietary habits, over use of the mind or poor digestion resulting from emotional causes, and is encouraged by living in a damp climate of damp surroundings. Most of us Western women lay the foundations for Dampness in our teens (another Gateway of Change) when we worry about our looks, study for exams, diet, binge, drink too much and often sit around in wet swimsuits. The Damp energy is exacerbated as our defences weaken through stress and is further weakened by the average working woman’s diet. By our late forties, most of us have built up quite a residue of Dampness, which adds its symptoms to those of the menopause. Dampness builds up Heat as it lies stickily about in the body, in much the same way that heat builds up in compost heap, so Heat is often present too.

Another contributory factor is Stagnation, which is a clumping-up of Ki as a result of emotional holding. This is a separate issue from Dampness, but the mental states characteristic of the two conditions have a similar quality of frustration and blocked energy.

So this is the background to the menopausal scenario. The basic picture is one of depleted Essence and Blood. There will also be an individual overlay of Dampness, heat or Stagnation, or a combination of all three (plus some other factors, too complex to explain here). The body wants to re-adjust its patterns so as to stop losing Blood and the little bit of Essence that leaks away with each period. But it has to battle with the Dampness and Stagnation and their accompanying Heat to do so. So some modification of our lifestyle is essential if we want to help it.

Each of us has some kind of pattern on which we have relied through the years, a habit (or several) so dear to us that life without it is a dreary prospect. Far be it from me to say we must give it up: but we can question it; negotiate with it. We can see how much we can relinquish and what the effects are’ let the menopause be a Gateway of Change.

Helping yourself through the change

Here are the four recommendations that I most frequently give my menopausal clients, and they are the ones that I try, within reason, to follow myself. Later in the article you will find more specific recommendations for particular symptoms or tendencies.

Rest

Your body is going through enormous changes now, and like most of us you are probably trying to meet twenty-five year old expectations with a fifty-year old system. You will get more energy after the menopause when you have adjusted. But for now, adjust your priorities. Be ruthless with unnecessary activity. It is a cultural expectation we don't have to subscribe to at this time, so prune your activities to make time for rest. Take a snooze after lunch. Go back to bed with a book when you can. Go to bed at nine o'clock, whatever you want. But rest!

Cut down on alcohol, drugs and stimulants

This is the hardest one for me. A good wine at night and nutty, rich real coffee in the morning is what I like. But cutting down to one cup of coffee (a religious experience, almost!) in the morning and a few nights a week without alcohol definitely create more clarity and energy. Stimulants stop you resting and deplete your Essence further (the temporary burst of energy or mood alteration they give you comes from your "core store"), create Heat and in the long term make Stagnation worse (you feel better after a glass or two of wine but worse again soon). Be wary even of "healthy" stimulants such as guarana or ginseng. They may be too heating.

Drink water and/or green tea

No, you don't have to get through two litres of water a day unless you really are thirsty. Chinese medicine makes no hard and fast rules. But many of us don't drink enough cool, clean, pure water, and need a few glasses a day. It cools Heat and helps your body maintain its dwindling Essence and Blood. Green tea can be delicious, with a taste as complex as wine and a refreshing uplift. Get the best quality you can find. Green tea traditionally gets rid of Dampness, and Western research has shown it to contain powerful anti-oxidants. (We may look like Joan Collins yet!)

Take some exercise

Even though we are depleted at the time of menopause, we still need a little exercise. Gentle, regular exercise improves the functioning of all our systems and encourages the working of the Spleen, which reduces Dampness. It also helps to remove Stagnation. The exercise you take should be enjoyable so that it can become a habit. The more exhausted you are, the gentler it should be. Tai Chi and Qigong actually help to increase your energy, while relaxing you at the same time.

These recommendations work for all types and all menopausal conditions, but each of us has a different energetic configuration, which accounts for the many different types of symptoms we experience.

Symptom patterns and how to cope with each

Now let us examine these different symptoms, grouped according to their cause in Chinese medicine, and explore remedies for each group. Choose one group of symptoms from below closest to your own, to avoid the "I've got everything" syndrome!

Symptom Patterns of Menopause

Kidney Yin Deficiency

- Night sweats, hot flushes, headaches, insomnia, irritability, stiff neck, eye problems, joint pain. This is a classic combination of depletion, Empty Heat and Stagnation (Kidney Yin Deficiency with Liver Yang rising, to be precise). As well as following all the recommendations above, you need some help with relaxing. Try some Shiatsu! Evening primrose oil can help with stagnation, and Royal Jelly (without ginseng) or Floradix blood Tonic from health food shops can help with the depletion.

Acupuncture together with dietary therapy has been proved to be 80% effective in relieving hot flushes experienced by breast cancer patients (who get the worst flushes). The dietary therapy involved reducing food intake generally, detoxification and inclusion of soy protein (tofu) pulses and

hoummous, nuts and seeds and phyto-oestrogenic herbs such as sage, fennel and parsley, which incidentally combine in a tasty herb tea (Tukmachi, 2000)

The article in the Journal of Chines medicine does not mention the points used, but useful points are: Liv2 and 3, Kid 1, 3 and 6, Sp6.

Spleen Yang Deficiency

- Exhaustion, overweight, depression, palpitations, nausea or feeling of fullness, inability to concentrate, vaginal discharge, mucus, wheezing, sneezing, eczema or other skin problems, frequent colds.

This is a combination of Spleen Yang Deficiency and Dampness. As well as following all the recommendations above, you really need to change your diet. Shiatsu will support your Spleen and help you feel better while you make the necessary changes. Your symptoms will improve dramatically if you eliminate sugar, wheat, and dairy products from your diet. Food intolerances are a major factor in causing Dampness, and they arrive at the time of menopause, if not before, because the body has a tremendous adjustment to make and can't cope.

If you can manage the new food programme without resorting to "low-fat", "lite" or otherwise treated foods, you will benefit far more. Fresh, organic, high-quality food still contains essence and Ki, while chemically adulterated or processed foods have little or none however many added vitamins they may contain.

Points for Dampness and Spleen Deficiency include Sp3, 6 and 9: St36; CV6.

Kidney Deficiency

- Exhaustion, anxiety, insomnia, night sweats, loss of libido, vaginal dryness, stress incontinence, headaches, lower back pain.

If you belong to this group, your symptoms are mainly those of Kidney Deficiency. Rest and relaxation is paramount for you, and you should let your body, not your willpower, decide how much activity is right for you. Try and find a Qigong class (cut another activity!) or get a good book about Qigong and do a little Qigong every day. Do the abdominal breathing described above.

Supplement your "core store" with the right foods – soups made with bones, cooked long and slowly or if you are vegetarian, blue-green algae (Spirulina). Take a really good vitamin and mineral supplement and extra anti-oxidants.

Chinese herbs are wonderful tonics. Avoid the "Chinese medicine" centres which are springing up in every High Street and go to someone who has been personally recommended, or consult the Register of Chines Medicine to find a practitioner.

This group of symptoms is likely to respond well to Shiatsu.

Good points include Bl23, Kid 3, Sp6 and CV4 and CV6.

Abdominal breathing

Gentle abdominal breathing at night both restores the Essence and relaxes you. Place your hands on the midline of your abdomen just below the navel. Relax your hands and arms. Let your body grow soft and heavy. Be aware of the sensation of your hands on your abdomen, whether warm or cool. Listen with your hands for any little movement of your abdomen as you breathe normally. If there is no movement, don't take bigger breaths but imagine your breath longing to travel down to the area

below your hands, like a child wanting to go to its mother. Stay relaxed and wait for some movement below your hands, however small. Even a “feeling” below your hands is a sign that the Qi is moving down to replenish your vital centre.

What to expect from self-help along these lines

While the self-help measures outlined here form a good general health-improvement strategy, it may be that your own particular pattern is an unusual one, or that you have underlying issues which require a more specific approach.

For example, I myself am typical of the Spleen Yang Deficiency group. My Dampness (nearly all of the symptoms mentioned) became so bad after moving to damp Wales that an acupuncturist whom I consulted informed that I was “riddled with candida” and she couldn’t help me unless I changed my diet. I am sceptical about candida, but its symptoms are similar to those of Dampness and I had no other options. Eliminating wheat, sugar and dairy products from my diet worked.

These are gentle, supportive measures, designed to build up your constitution and to help you adapt to change as a result. Any changes you notice will therefore be gradual and take place over a period of weeks or months rather than days. You should not expect a “quick fix”, rather a growing sense of stability and increased energy, with a gradual reduction in the severity of your menopausal symptoms.

You are unlikely to experience side-effects from any of these methods, unless you are over-enthusiastic. Several litres of green tea a day may have some adverse effect, but a couple of cups will not. Caffeine withdrawal is well known to cause headaches for a short while, and you may encounter an emotional reaction to doing the abdominal breathing. This is often caused by resistance and contraction, so relax. These methods are meant to make you feel better. If they don’t, don’t do them.

Once back on track, we find that we have moved into a more comfortable space with regard to our cycle of becoming, one of acceptance and openness to whatever this new phase may bring.