How Shiatsu Massage Can Help With Chronic Pain

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Healing Massage to Improve Your Quality of Life

When you suffer from chronic pain, you suffer from lack of sleep, and vice versa. Pain brings worry and stress, which interferes with sleep, but sleep deprivation lowers your pain threshold, and your discomfort is more pronounced. One new approach to chronic pain management and sleep quality is self-administered shiatsu massage, a drug-free option that gives you the control in your pain treatment plan.

How Self-Administered Massage Can Help

A recent pilot study from the University of Alberta sought to determine how well shiatsu massage can work for chronic pain, and the results were promising: after performing certain pressure techniques on their hands at bedtime, many patients were able to fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer. In some cases, the technique was so effective that participants actually fell asleep before they finished administering the treatment. After two and eight weeks of treatment, sleep patterns improved markedly.

These positive effects of self-massage likely rest on two important elements:

Physical stimulation. The specific motions and pressure will target certain muscles and nerves to relax the body, relieving tension and encouraging relaxation. Japanese shiatsu techniques are gentle but firm, with some patients describing the pressure and subsequent release as a “good pain”.

Cognitive attention. Since self-administered shiatsu requires quite a bit of concentration, your mind is also put to work. It’s active rather than passive therapy, meaning chronic pain sufferers must keep their focus on the treatment, leaving no room for negative thoughts or worries. Without that psychological interference, sleep will come more easily.

Although the study was small and more work needs to be done, there is enough evidence to support that shiatsu massage can be a valuable part of any chronic pain treatment plan.

How Shiatsu works and Why It’s the Better Choice

In traditional Chinese medicine, shiatsu is thought to release pathways in the body to resolve energy imbalances, while western medicine suggests that shiatsu techniques calm an overactive sympathetic nervous system, improving circulation and relieving tension. In either case, the approach is the same: using fingers, thumbs and palms, pressure is applied in a firm and rhythmic sequence on a localized area of the body.

One great aspect of the self-administered shiatsu in the study is how easy it is to master. Patients in the study were taught by physiotherapy and occupational therapy students to apply pressure to very specific points along the hand and fingers; once they could locate the points and manipulate them appropriately, patients had no trouble carrying on the therapy by themselves.

Since shiatsu is such a specific massage technique, it’s important to work with a trained therapist to understand where the pressure points are, which ones to target, and how exactly to apply the pressure. Ask your therapist questions to understand why some movements will work better than others, and have them walk you through a visual chart of the specific points on your hands. Keep a diagram for reference, and be sure to practice the technique each night to get the best results when your head hits the pillow.