



# Synthesising Western Science and Eastern Wisdom

## In the “we-ness” we encounter ourselves

Both Western neuroscience and Eastern practices accentuate the bidirectional nature of touch and the notion that *"when we touch, we are also being touched"*. In every instance of touch, a **sensory exchange** occurs, activating brain regions in both individuals, influencing **emotional states and regulation**, **modulating stress**, and enhancing **social bonds**. (Cascio, C.J. et.al. 2019.)

- For the person being touched, this evokes feelings of **comfort**, **care**, or **connection**. (Cascio C. et al., 2019)
- For the one touching, it strengthens **empathy**, **compassion**, and provides **reassurance**. (Olausson, H., et al, 2016).

This mutual exchange releases **hormones** in both individuals (Uvnäs-Moberg, 2003), promoting trust and creating a shared sense of **"we-ness."** (Heinonen P. and Tainio, 2022)

This understanding of reciprocal touch is central to MTed's approach in fostering a more connected and compassionate educational environment.

## Enhancing Learning through Touch - The Role of Shiatsu in Mindful-Touch Education

Shiatsu, a traditional Japanese therapeutic touch practice, has been instrumental in shaping the philosophy and techniques of Mindful-Touch Education (MTed). Rooted in the principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Shiatsu views health as the



harmonious flow of life energy—referred to as Ki (or Chi)—throughout the body (Maciocia, G. 1989; Kaptchuk, T. 1983). By perceiving mind and body as a unified whole (Beresford-Cooke, C. 2022; Lundberg, P. 1992), Shiatsu seeks to restore balance by applying gentle, intentional and at times more deep pressure along energy pathways known as meridians. These meridians correspond with acupuncture points and influence the body's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual states. Through this integrative approach, Shiatsu aligns naturally with the objectives of Mindful-Touch Education (MTed), which emphasises holistic well-being and embodied learning.

Shiatsu's intentional, grounding touch fosters connection and a sense of safety, benefiting both physical and emotional well-being (Beresford-Cooke, C. 2022). It also serves as a powerful non-verbal form of communication that can bridge emotional and psychological gaps, making it a valuable tool in educational settings where verbal expression may be limited, such as among young children or those with communication barriers (Cignolini A. and Silva L. 2017). Shiatsu's approach is in line with MTed's goal to cultivate environments in which students feel seen and supported, even without words.

Recognized in Japan as a formal healthcare system since 1952, Shiatsu is known for promoting self-healing, well-being, and personal growth. It is one of eight complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices officially acknowledged in the European Union and integrated into various national health services as a respected therapeutic practice (European Shiatsu Foundation, 2024). By bringing Shiatsu into MTed, educators can create nurturing classroom environments that reduce stress and promote learning readiness.

While traditional Shiatsu emphasises energy flow through the meridian system, contemporary neuroscience offers insights into its physiological mechanisms, explaining how this practice activates specific touch receptors in the skin, fosters sensory and emotional depth, impacts the nervous system and supports student well-being:

- **Pain Modulation:** Applying pressure to specific points stimulates mechanoreceptors, which block pain signals before they reach the brain



(following the gate control theory of pain) (Campbell, T.S., 2020; Jarmey, C. & Mojay, G., 1999).

- **Stress Reduction:** Shiatsu activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which reduces cortisol levels and increases oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine – neurotransmitters essential for relaxation, bonding and emotional security. (Ridolfi, R., 1990; Goodman, S., 1996).
- **Improved Circulation:** Pressure techniques enhance blood flow, delivering oxygen and nutrients to tissues and promoting muscle relaxation and healing (Beresford-Cooke, C., 2022).
- **Neuromuscular Relaxation:** Shiatsu stimulates proprioceptors in muscles and joints, enhancing flexibility and reducing tension, which lowers injury risk (Jarmey, C. & Mojay, G., 1999).
- **Emotional Well-being:** Shiatsu activates the limbic system, which is involved in emotional regulation, promoting relaxation and well-being (Goodman, S., 1996).

While neuroscience highlights these physical mechanisms, Shiatsu's benefits are experienced holistically, encompassing emotional and mental dimensions as well (Masunaga, S., & Ohashi, W., 1977; Yibing, S., 2023).

## Techniques and Principles of Shiatsu in MTED

Shiatsu in MTED involves non-invasive mindful touch without the use of lotions or instruments. Practitioners mainly use their palms, thumbs, and fingers to apply stationary pressure. This practice is rooted in moving and leaning on from the core, while always using both hands. This mindful engagement enhances the connection between practitioner and receiver, contributing to both physical and emotional well-being.

## Cultivating Connection and Safety in the Classroom



In MTed, these principles of intentional, mindful touch are adapted to create nurturing educational environments. Research shows that affective touch positively influences children's behaviour, emotional regulation, and attentional focus (Croy, I., et al., 2019; Cekaite, A., & Kvist Holm, M., 2017). MTed applies these principles to support students in reducing stress, improving focus, and fostering a positive attitude towards others and towards learning (Routarinne, S., et al., 2020; Ekström, A., & Cekaite, A., 2020).

## The Power of *Leaning Touch*

A key technique is “*leaning touch*” , which involves applying gentle, sustained pressure through the practitioner's body weight rather than muscle strength. This pressure originates from the practitioner's “Hara” (core) and can be delivered through various parts of the body, including palms, thumbs, or even the whole body. The touch felt by the receiver is steady and calming, rather than forceful (Beresford-Cooke, C., 2022).

“*Leaning touch*” plays an essential role in regulating the nervous system, activating the parasympathetic response to induce relaxation in both the receiver and the practitioner (Goodman, S., 1996). A study from the University of Helsinki recently demonstrated that leaning touch in classrooms significantly improves student well-being and motivation, contributing to a positive learning environment (Heinonen, P., & Tainio, L., 2023).

This idea of mutual support is beautifully captured by the Japanese character “hito” (人), meaning “person” or “human being.” The character consists of two strokes leaning toward each other, symbolising the belief that mutual support strengthens us all. This concept encapsulates the essence of Shiatsu and, by extension, Mindful-Touch Education: both thrive on connection, trust, and the recognition that we are stronger when we uplift each other (Masunaga, S., & Ohashi, W., 1977).

## The Emotional Connection



A central aspect of “*leaning touch*” is the deep emotional connection it fosters. Tokujiro Namikoshi, founder of the Japanese Shiatsu Therapist Association, famously stated, “Shiatsu no kokoro wa haha gokoro” — “The heart of Shiatsu is mother’s love” (Namikoshi, T., 1981). This compassionate aspect of Shiatsu aligns seamlessly with MTed’s principles, where touch serves as a tool for building empathy, trust, and emotional security in educational settings.

## Techniques for Emotional and Physiological Support

The following Shiatsu-derived techniques are incorporated into MTed to support emotional and physiological well-being:

- ***Leaning Touch and Palming:*** Reduces tension, enhances body awareness, and promotes emotional balance (Masunaga, S., & Ohashi, W., 1977).
- ***Intentional and Compassionate Touch:*** Regulates emotions and pain perception, fostering resilience in students (Masunaga, S., & Ohashi, W., 1977; Beresford-Cooke, C., 2022; Ackerley, R., et al., 2014; Croy, I., Fairhurst, M.T., & McGlone, F., 2022).
- ***Stroking and Caressing:*** Stimulates oxytocin release, aiding in bonding and stress reduction (Croy, I., et al., 2022; Banissy, M., 2023; Montague, A., 1986).
- ***Holding and Squeezing:*** Lowers cortisol levels, preparing students for better focus and engagement (Olausson, H., et al., 2016; Ackerley, R., et al., 2014; Croy, I., et al., 2022).
- ***Stretching, Tapping, and Tickling:*** Activates brain areas related to alertness and cognitive processing, enhancing focus and mental engagement (Masunaga, S., & Ohashi, W., 1977; Beresford-Cooke, C., 2022).

## The Value of Shiatsu in Mindful-Touch Education



Incorporating Shiatsu's techniques and philosophy into Mindful-Touch Education has transformative potential for educational settings. By emphasising a compassionate, embodied approach to learning, Shiatsu in MTED creates a foundation of trust, connection, and mutual support. Through intentional, culturally sensitive application of these techniques, educators can promote children's learning alongside emotional well-being, fostering classroom environments that support students holistically and help them thrive.

## Mindful-Touch is a language and a tool

Central to the MTED Program is the concept that touch serves as a powerful and intentional "language" of non-verbal communication. Just as learning a native or foreign language involves skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing, Mindful-Touch uses the language of our hands as a profound tool for mindful communication.

**Listening:** The MTED Program teaches children to "listen" by being aware of their own emotional and physical responses, as well as those of others. This non-verbal listening involves attentiveness to the sensations and feedback that arise from simple mindful touch interactions.

**Speaking:** Just as we use words to speak, we can "speak" with our hands through different types of touch and intention. Various touches convey different messages—such as comfort, support, or affection—much like words express thoughts and feelings.

**Reading:** Children learn to "read" the language of touch by observing and understanding the meaning behind various types of touch. This involves recognizing the nuances of touch interactions and interpreting their emotional significance.

**Writing:** In Mindful-Touch Education, "writing" involves actively using our hands as tools to create meaningful tactile interactions, for instance, expressing a story with



our hands on the back of a partner. By practising and refining how we touch, we communicate nonverbally, distinguishing between care, empathy, and compassion, and learning about "the other" without using words.

Just as learning a language begins with individual words and progresses to grammar and sentence construction before storytelling, touch also has its own vocabulary, grammar, and capacity to form sentences and tell stories. The MTED Program is structured around these elements to provide a comprehensive understanding and application of touch.

The program can also be taught as part of a **linguistic immersion program** as it uses the vocabulary of the body, senses and forms of touch, emotions, colours and movements, appropriate at an early stage of language learning.

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