

## Sample Material -Spacing Treatments for Maximum Therapeutic Benefit

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In my efforts to help Acupuncturists improve their chances of building a successful practice I often find myself stressing how “vital” or “very important” a certain ability or approach is. I really do think it takes several skills to give an acupuncture practice the best chance of succeeding but if I was to narrow down the list of the most vital of the vital, how to space treatments in order to get the most benefit out of the least number of treatments would be at the top of the list. I like to say that understanding how many treatments will be needed and how to space those treatments to get the maximum benefit out of acupuncture is like understanding just what dosage of a drug or herb you would need to get its full benefit.

The issue of spacing acupuncture treatments has been badly neglected in the last several decades as acupuncture has been making its remarkable comeback from its low point in the first half of the 20th Century. There has been much study and work done on issues like the kind of training practitioners need, the hours to provide that training, the many schools of thought of diagnosis and point selection and so forth, but very little discussion regarding how to space the treatments once you choose whatever points you chose. While my attempts to highlight this very important (there I go again) oversight has been focused on how spacing treatments affects one’s ability to build a successful private practice, I also feel improper treatment spacing has had a significant negative impact in acupuncture research. Many acupuncture studies, especially in the West, often underestimate acupuncture’s therapeutic potential because the researchers did not know how to space treatments. This is like trying to study a drug without knowing the correct dosage, use a sub-clinical dose, and then conclude the drug was not effective. Just as the right dosage can be as important as the right chemical agent, the proper spacing of acupuncture treatments is as important as the points.

The big difference in comparing drug dosages to acupuncture treatment spacing is that, unlike the case with drugs, there is little to no health risk of giving acupuncture treatments more frequently than necessary. Stretch the treatments out too far and you can lose momentum so one could argue that the more frequent the better. Most would say that daily acupuncture works better than 2-3 treatments a week in both acute and chronic conditions. While I agree this is true for acute conditions and seems to be true for chronic conditions, there are reasons in chronic conditions why one should learn how to get the most therapeutic effect with the least number of treatments by proper treatment spacing. Treating more often than was necessary will cause the patient to have a greater demand on their time and perhaps money and this might cause them to stop the treatment too soon. A good, rough rule of thumb is that problems the patient has had for years (or that were years in the making) will take months to treat. Problems the patient has had for months will take weeks to treat. Problems the patient has had for weeks can take days to treat and problems the patient just developed in the last few days may respond to just one or two treatments.

Because getting the most out of acupuncture treatment – also known as reaching maximum therapeutic benefit - when treating chronic conditions often takes months, learning how to get the most benefit out of the least number of treatments will make it easier for the patient to stay with the treatment. In the real world, the number and frequency of acupuncture treatments is as much influenced by time, cost, and payment methods concerns as it is by clinical concerns. While it might in theory be better to treat chronic conditions daily for months, that is not practical and we clinicians need to learn to take these practical factors into consideration.

### More Steps Forward

When I first opened my practice, I made the mistake of trying to schedule my patients' treatments in such a way as to get the maximum improvement in the least amount of time. This is what is done in the TCM hospital clinics in China and was what I had been taught and observed in my school's clinic. But, as we considered above there is a difference between how to help your patients the fastest and how to help them the most with the least number of treatments. You should assume your patients prefer to get better with fewer treatments and less cost rather than as fast as possible. There are some exceptions of course but assuming that your patients' preference is to squeeze the most benefit out of the least cost is the best way to proceed in the vast majority of cases. The protocol I developed to achieve this is one that focuses on taking more steps forward and fewer steps backward. The steps forward refers to improving the way the body/mind/spirit heals or manages its problems with the treatment. The steps backward refers to factors that aggravate the condition that should be avoided as we will consider later.

A good way to put the issue of treatment spacing into perspective is to consider a hypothetical. Suppose, for example, you have a fixed number of treatments—say 10—that will be all you get to use to try to help someone suffering from frozen shoulder. How will you space these treatments? Will you see the patient every day for 10 days? Will you see them once a week for 10 weeks or twice a week for 5 weeks? Of course, unless you are dealing with something like a health insurance plan (or a research project) that has a set limit in the maximum number of treatments allowed and your patient lets you know up -front that they will not keep coming for treatment once that limit is reached, you rarely have a situation where you know for certain you have a fixed number of treatments to work with. And that is how it should be because no one could know in the beginning exactly how many treatments a patient will need to get the most benefit out of acupuncture as there are too many variables that will change the number of needed treatments as treatment progresses. What I learned from years of practice, however, is that even though there is nothing formally limiting the number of treatments you have to work with, market realities impose such limits. In other words, in private practice there is ultimately a set number of treatments you will have to work with but you won't know what that number is when you start treatment. Your patients will not have thought this out before beginning the treatment process so they won't warn you in advance. They also often won't tell you when they are about ready to stop treatment. They tend instead to just stop coming without a word, maybe call your office saying they

need to cancel their next appointment with you and that they will call you back to schedule another one but then never call back. While it may be possible to convince a patient who stopped attending treatment to return for more treatment, you really want to do all you can to prevent this from happening.

In the recent years, some senior acupuncture/Chinese medicine practitioners in the U.S. have commented on this issue of how to space treatments noting that most acupuncturists here treat at once a week while in the hospitals and clinics in China treatment is usually done daily or every other day. Some of these authorities advise treating three times a week to reduce the regression that can occur when you stretch treatments out too far. While I certainly agree with the basic premise that spacing treatments out too far is less efficient, I personally think treating three times a week runs the risk of being too expensive for many patients that require treatment over an extended period of time. Treating daily or every other day can be best for recent, acute conditions that will only require a few treatments but for chronic conditions needing a longer period of time to treat, getting the most from the least by proper treatment spacing is critical.