

Massage – An Ancient Therapy For Modern Times.

By Terri Henry

As we are born with an instinctive inclination to touch, the most ancient and basic of healing therapies is massage. When any part of our body is in pain our most immediate reaction is usually to put our hand in the area and 'rub it better'. The earliest mention of massage treatment dates back to 2700BC in a Chinese medical book and many other ancient texts from India, Egypt and Greece refer to massage and its' beneficial effects for the prevention and cure of diseases and in healing injuries. The actual word 'massage' is a relatively new one, which comes from the Arabic "masah" which means 'to stroke with the hand'.

Whilst many cultures around the world have and continue to use massage in their daily lives, massage as a therapeutic treatment emerged in the 18th century as a result of the work of Henrik Ling from Sweden who established specific strokes and sequences which now form the basis of the most commonly known massage technique – "Swedish Massage". In realisation of the healing power of therapeutic touch, massage has evolved into a skilled profession in the modern world with potential therapists being required to study Anatomy and Physiology, complete case studies and sit rigorous exams before qualifying as licensed practitioners. Massage is now accepted as a highly effective preventative and restorative health care treatment with numerous benefits and complements many other medical interventions. It is often recommended by doctors to enhance or to be used as an alternative to medicines as does not have the harmful side effects associated drug based prescriptions.

A therapeutic massage works on the whole body concentrating particularly on areas of specific pain or tension. By holistically treating the entire body we stimulate all systems and promote greater and more long lasting healing effects. Each appointment lasts for at least an hour and to start the session the client removes their clothing and their body is covered with a light cloth as they lay on the massage couch. The body is worked on, one section at a time with various movements from slow strokes to kneading actions and pummelling. Each stroke has a different effect and the therapist will use the most appropriate ones for each body part and to suit the individual. A vegetable based oil such as sweet almond or grape seed, is used as a lubricant and is often combined with essential oils to enhance the effects of the treatment with Aromatherapy. This branch of herbal medicine is an established system, which uses extracted essences from plants for their multiple benefits from alleviating physical tension to relaxing the mind and uplifting the spirit.

Massage works on the muscular system of the body which constitutes the largest tissue in the body – around 23% of a woman and 40% of a man's body mass. Its' most obvious and immediate results are to relieve muscle tension, strain or fatigue, increase mobility in the joints and to remove build up of toxins in the muscle fibres. In addition to these primary benefits the positive secondary effects of massage are numerous and diverse. Massage treatment increases circulation of both blood and lymph fluids, which provide a greater flow of oxygen to vital organs and speeds up the elimination of waste products from the body. This helps in detoxification, weight loss and may improve skin tone and radiance. Manipulation of the muscles reduces lactic acid build up in the fibres. This is a natural result of physical exertion yet can cause pain if not removed effectively and therefore treatments are highly useful to be used in conjunction with an exercise training programme and will assist anyone engaging in physical activities to recover faster and enhance their training performance. Consistent massage treatments can also improve digestion, strengthen the immune system, relieve tension headaches, ease eyestrain and alleviate water retention.

Massage is also a highly effective treatment for more emotionally based conditions such as depression, irritability, insomnia, tiredness and bad moods. Hardly anyone these days can escape the feelings of stress which comes as a result of many life situations such as working long hours, bringing up children, organising large events, studying for exams, bereavement or many other aspects of daily lifestyle. Due to its' calming effects on the sympathetic nervous system and the subsequent positive psychological responses, regular massage is suggested in any program for stress management. Taking time for yourself, honouring your body, relaxing and actively treating yourself well all have additional benefits of raised self-esteem, confidence and joy. Any emotional or mental stress manifests as physical stress within the body and thus at the same time as muscular tensions are released, anxieties and fears can also be eased. This result's in enhanced capacity for clear thinking, increased energy flow and the client is able to progress on mental, emotional and spiritual levels.

The wonderful aspect of massage as a health treatment is that whilst it is doing you good it also feels so good. The majority of clients feel immediately better after a massage yet the effects vary according to each person. Whilst some feel exceptionally relaxed and sleepy others bounce up from the couch energised and ready to run! After a session clients are given a glass of water and are advised to drink plenty more for the duration of the day to flush out the toxins from the body, which, through the manipulation of the muscle tissue, have been released into the bloodstream. Clients should not drink alcohol within 24 hours before a session and should refrain from doing so as long as they can afterwards. Although massage is suitable for the majority of people young and old there are a few medical conditions that prevent a person from receiving treatment such as heart problems, cancer or highly infectious disease. Persons experiencing any medical condition or on medication should consult the therapist and if necessary their doctors before receiving treatment.

Massage has so many positive health benefits it is a necessity for anyone wishing to optimise their health, experience increased feelings of wellness and obtain an abundance of energy. Giving and receiving massage with friends and loved ones is encouraged as touch is so important to experience in our everyday lives yet to obtain the numerous health benefits for mind, body and spirit that are possible through regular massage treatments it is advisable to see a professionally trained therapist. The human body is a magnificent gift from the Creator that deserves to be honoured, appreciated and cared for with gratitude. We can obtain a state of vibrant health from the food we eat, exercise we take and lifestyle we lead and regular massage treatments are an integral part of our journey to achieve and maintain high levels of fitness, strength and vitality for an entire lifetime.

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