

# Longevity Through Abhyanga

How this ancient Eastern practice can renew body & spirit.

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"Modern living offers us many comforts and luxuries. The pace of life has been constantly increasing, especially in the last two decades. Modern medicine has invented diagnostic tools and therapeutic formulations, which can identify diseases at the minutest levels, and suppress it. All these wonderful inventions of the modern times were originally discovered to enrich our lives with health, happiness, peace, and love."<sup>1</sup>

While being in the field of medicine for 12 years as an occupational therapist, I've seen my client's search for health, happiness, peace, and love go in the wrong direction by solely relying on allopathic medicine to help heal them. When I was an entry level practitioner I witnessed my clients ignore the root cause of their problems. As a result of my inexperience, I did not know how to ask the right question, or to offer them solutions at the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels.

Over the years of studying holistic therapies, I am now trained and certified in amazing modalities and treatments to put the work into action. I've been given the opportunity to help facilitate the rewiring of my clients' thinking patterns through the use of holistic modalities. I've embarked on a journey of wellness for myself, my family, friends, loved ones, and for the clients whom I treat.

The most recent training I experienced was at Ayurveda Healing in Santa Cruz, Calif., to become certified as a Panchakarma Technician. Panchakarma (PK) is a five-fold detoxification treatment involving massage, herbal therapy, diet, and lifestyle modifications. One of the treatments in PK is called Abhyanga, which is described below. The human touch is a beautiful healing modality, and when integrated into an occupational therapy session, improvements in self-care, healing of body and soul, and a greater sense of feeling at home in your body will occur.

## **The Science of Life**

"The body of one who uses oil massage regularly does not become affected much even if subjected to accidental injuries, or strenuous work. By using oil massage daily, a person is endowed with pleasant touch, trimmed body parts and becomes strong, charming and least affected by old age" (Charaka Samhita, Vol. 1, V: 88-89).

In Western culture a large number of the human population lives a sedentary life. They indulge by eating fast food, drinking alcohol, watching nearly 36 hours of television a week, and getting less rigorous exercise compared to 50 years ago. As a result of many social changes, not the least of which is the prevalence of single-parent homes out of circumstance and choice, women are more actively involved in the workforce. These changes alone, not to mention worldwide economic pressures, can result in many people experiencing physical, mental and emotional stress that can contribute to feeling emotionally disconnected from each other, and from the world. If our mind-body-spirit connections are not in sync, illness and disease may result.

Ayurveda is widely regarded as the oldest form of healthcare in the world, dating back approximately 5,000 years. This health support system can empower individuals to take control over their well-being.

Translated from Hindi, "ayur" means life, and "veda" means wisdom, knowledge, or science. It respects an individual's unique genetic makeup from birth (DNA). Ayurveda considers all levels of the individual (body, mind, and spirit) and offers natural ways of treating diseases and promoting improved health.

By establishing balance through nutrition, herbs, meditation, manual therapies, yoga, and routines, Ayurveda can instill lifelong change and identify the root cause of a person's imbalances early on before disease manifests. The Eastern medicine of India and China of today utilize unique therapeutic massages that are vastly becoming more widely accepted. This cultural change, it is hoped, may allow Western medicine to integrate new types of holistic treatments to allopathic care. Abhyanga is one of them.

### **Ancient Therapeutic Treatments**

Abhyanga and Shirodhara are ancient therapeutic, curative, and unique treatments used in Eastern medicine. They are unique because they are the only systems of massage that consider a client's genetic makeup as a way to balance his/her nervous system to instill homeostasis. These ancient treatments include the Art of Self Love that can heal and manage human physiological disconnections.

Abhyanga in Sanskrit (the ancient written and sometimes spoken language from India) is broken down into "abhy," meaning to rub, and "anga," meaning limb, so together they make up the word massage. Shirodhara is broken down into "shiro," meaning head, and "dhara," meaning flow, together. Shirodhara means a steady flow of oil poured on the forehead.

Abhyanga is a full-body massage performed in a unique manner using warmed organic herbal oil. The client lies on a massage table in a warm room to receive either an individual or synchronized treatment. It is designed to deeply penetrate the skin to break up impurities by squeezing out the toxin buildup in the body by anointing the body with warm oil often infused with healing herbs and balancing essential oils.

The toxins are either released from the body through the urine, bowels, or sweat, or are nourishment to be absorbed by the tissues. It heals the body at a cellular level, and stimulates the lymphatic and arterial circulation for overall health and well-being.

Shirodhara is an extension of Abhyanga performed at the end of the treatment session to instill a deeper state of relaxation and healing a person's nervous system. Oil is being poured on the forehead from a specific height and for a specific period continuously and rhythmically allowing the warm oil to run down from the forehead through the scalp. The skin is the largest organ of the body, and is the principal recipient of Ayurveda-Shirodhara, and why it is so healing.

### **Integrating Abhyanga into OT Practice**

As a holistic occupational therapist and a certified Abhyanga technician (manual therapist), "organic" or "natural" healing substances are used to implement this touch therapy or healing

treatment. The substances utilized are oils (i.e., sesame, coconut, avocado, mustard, etc.), powders, herbs, aromas, and spices. They are mixed into a decoction using warm oils as mentioned above, and are massaged into the skin by applying pressure to the entire body, one body part at a time, or in a synchronized fashion (two technicians working on a client at once).

On the first visit the therapist has the client complete a holistic medical form, provides a brief history on Abhyanga and the benefits, assesses a client's pain or stress level using standardized rating scales, and reviews a client's Ayurvedic Questionnaire. This questionnaire gives the therapist a good sense of their client's Ayurvedic body constitution (for more information on Ayurveda please read our column "Two Sister Sciences" posted on ADVANCE, Dec. 10, 2013). A holistic treatment plan is then developed combining Abhyanga within a holistic OT session.

Occupational therapists have a license to touch and perform manual therapies. My intention is to provide Abhyanga treatment to appropriate clients to facilitate the relaxation response, for detoxification secondary to treatments such as radiation, chemotherapy, antibiotics, or ingesting prescription drugs, to provide rehabilitation, and for body/mind integration for an overall improved quality of life.

I've used Abhyanga on 16 clients in the past two months with outstanding results that all have been documented and clinically written into a SOAP note. Clients who have ADHD, insomnia, arthritis, gastrointestinal issues, migraines, and depression have reported increased focus and feeling grounded at work, improved sleep, a change in mood, lubricated in the joints, overall lightness, and reduced abdominal pain improving activities of daily living skills (i.e. bowel management) and instrumental activities of daily living skills.

Adding these treatments to occupational therapy practice benefits both client and therapist. When working together, the client becomes accountable for taking a key role in their own healing, which is valuable to the therapist who can further treat the root cause using billable treatment approaches such as manual therapy.

ABHYANAGA	SHIRODHARA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Reduces Anxiety, Fatigue, and Stress</li> <li>*Boost Immunity</li> <li>*Alleviates Gastrointestinal Irregularity</li> <li>*Ameliorates Migraines</li> <li>*Soothes Joint Pain (i.e. Fibromyalgia and Arthritic Conditions)</li> <li>*Enhances Skin Tone</li> <li>*Improves Energy, Vitality, and Life Longevity</li> <li>*Promotes Mental Clarity</li> <li>*Build Strength</li> <li>*Produces Anti-Depressant, Anti-Cancer</li> <li>*Nourishes the Skin</li> <li>*Decrease Bacteria on Skin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Calms the Mind</li> <li>*Enhances Deep State of Relaxation</li> <li>*Reduces Neurological Disorders (i.e. memory loss)</li> <li>*Promotes Restful Sleep</li> <li>*Hair becomes Lustrous</li> <li>*Diminishes Symptoms of Meniere's Disease (i.e. ringing in ears and vertigo)</li> <li>*Balances the Right and Left Hemispheres of the Brain</li> <li>*Suppress Allergy Symptoms</li> <li>*Aids in Controlling Skin Diseases (i.e. psoriasis)</li> </ul>

## Research

According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), in 2007 the National Health Interview Survey included a comprehensive survey on the use of complementary health practices by Americans and found more than 200,000 U.S. adults had used Ayurveda in the previous year.

The following research shows how beneficial complementary health practices such as Abhyanga is beneficial for injuries and to reduce stress. The first research article demonstrates that "Ayurveda emphasizes the role of Abhyanga (massage) after the tenure of exercise. In fact the ancient techniques of massage are of great importance in the field of sports. These techniques can be made useful during training periods for fitness and as a therapeutic measure after an injury."

"Connective tissue massage is useful in the management of a person of the soft tissue lesions, seen in sport. It helps in re-absorption of hematoma and stimulates blood flow in the affected parts." (Ebner and Maughan)

Another study investigated the effects of Ayurvedic Abhyanga massage to reduce stress. "Subjects showed high statistically and clinically significant reductions in subjective stress experience." Findings indicate that Abhyanga massage is promising in reducing subjective stress experience. It may be beneficial in lowering HR in all, and BP in prehypertensive subjects." (Basler)

To connect with OTs interested in mind, body, spirit medicine, prevention, and wellness visit the [www.holisticot.org](http://www.holisticot.org) website, the Holistic Occupational Therapy Page and Group on Facebook, LinkedIn, and HolisticOT on Twitter.

## References

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