

Massage Therapy for Health, Wellness and Prevention: OTs can get on board with this emerging healing approach

March 24, 2016 originally published in ADVANCE for Occupational Therapy Practitioners

Massage therapy is moving from spas into healthcare settings. Many are seeking massage therapy for health, wellness, relaxation, pain reduction, and medical conditions.¹ Massage therapy is growing as a holistic healing approach, and occupational therapists can integrate it into their practices to promote health, wellness, and prevention.

According to the 19th annual consumer survey sponsored by the American Massage Therapy Association, 85 percent of individuals claim their primary reason for receiving a massage was related to medical (52 percent) or stress (23 percent) reasons. Medical reasons included pain relief, soreness, stiffness or spasms, injury recovery, migraines, prevention, pregnancy or pre-natal, and general well-being.

Ninety percent of individuals surveyed view massage as being beneficial to overall health and wellness, and 91 percent of consumers believe that massage can be effective in reducing pain.²

Types of Massage Therapy

Massage therapy has been a part of health, wellness, and pleasure since ancient times, and may be one of the oldest forms of healthcare. It has been found in many cultures, including Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, and China — “The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine” from 2,500 years ago.

Massage therapy is manual manipulation of soft body tissues — muscle, connective tissue, tendons, and ligaments — to enhance a person’s health and well-being. The many types of massage therapy include relaxation or Swedish, deep-tissue, trigger point, medical, rehabilitative, and sports massage. Close cousins to massage are acupuncture, shiatsu and reflexology.

Massage Therapy Benefits

Massage therapy can be supportive for health and well-being along the lifespan for babies, children, teens, adults and older adults. There are many researched benefits of massage therapy.

Massage therapy has been shown to reduce tension and spasms, reduce cortisol levels, lower physical and mental stress and anxiety, induce the relaxation response, lower blood pressure, lower heart rate, lower breath rate, lower depression, relax muscles and soft tissue tension, reduce pain, reduce migraines, decrease swelling, increase range of motion, improve circulation, bring oxygen and nutrients to organs, increase lymph circulation, ease medication use, improve digestion, rehabilitate injuries, reduce scar tissue, reduce post-surgery adhesions and edema, improve immune function, improve energy flow, improve sleep, release emotions, stimulate the hippocampus (memory), release hormones and neuropeptides that have been linked to positive and uplifting emotions, boost mood, improve outlook on life, and promote overall health and well-being.³

The Power of Touch

Healthy touch can help people heal, grow, and thrive, and feel loved and connected. Touch is the first sense that develops as an infant, and the skin is the largest organ in the body.

Tiffany Field, head of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine, has found that premature and full-term infants, pregnant women, children and adults with chronic pain conditions or emotional problems, and healthy adults all benefit from healthy touch. Her research has found that 15 minutes per day can enhance growth and weight gain in children, but also lead to emotional, physical, and cognitive improvements in adults.⁴

Giving and receiving an embrace can flood the body with oxytocin, known as the bonding hormone that makes people feel secure and trusting toward each other, lowers cortisol levels, and reduces stress. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin at Madison tested stress levels among volunteers who gave a presentation. Participants who received a hug after their presentation from their mothers experienced reduction in cortisol levels.⁵

Massage Therapy And OT

In occupational therapy school, I learned how to provide retrograde massage to reduce edema, and deliver slow stroking along the spine as a form of sensory integration to induce the parasympathetic nervous system. These are wonderful approaches, and there are many additional applications of massage therapy that can enhance OT practice.

For example, massage therapy could assist an anxious client to engage more in their ADLs. It could help reduce pain and tension and improve range of motion in many conditions including contractures, cerebral palsy, arthritis, or stroke. It can assist someone suffering from a mental health condition to feel calmer and cared for, and perhaps induce a sense of joy and peace.

I went to massage therapy school after working as an OT with older adults because I believed that many diseases could be prevented or ameliorated with relaxation and stress reduction. Massage therapy was the quickest way I knew to help someone relax, next to guiding them in meditation. I am grateful to have learned a tool to decrease pain, tension, and anxiety, among many other benefits, with the use of only my hands.

One client came to see me for shoulder pain that was interfering with his ability to pitch for his university baseball team. His orthopedic surgeon wanted to perform exploratory surgery to determine the cause and solution for the pain. After one massage therapy session, his pain had subsided. I provided deep tissue massage to his shoulder, primarily to the anterior deltoid, and it relieved the soft tissue tension that likely had been building up over time. He did not require surgery and was able to return to the game.

Another client for whom I provided massage therapy told me afterward that it was the first time she'd experienced peace since her mother had passed away two years before.

Massage And Aromatherapy

Massage therapy is often provided in combination with the use of essential oils, also known as aromatherapy. It can be a wonderful way to enhance the sensory experience of massage therapy,

and the essential oils have their own healing properties. As the famous physician Hippocrates said, “The way to health is to have an aromatic bath and a scented massage every day.”

Aromatherapy is the art and science of utilizing naturally extracted aromatic plant essences, known as essential oils, to promote health and well-being of body, mind, and spirit. Research has shown that aromatherapy can assist with relaxation and calming, sedating, reducing stress, lowering pain, tension, anxiety, and depression, can be energizing, uplifting, and stimulating, and can promote health, heal injuries, improve the immune system, and restore physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being. Many essential oils have antibacterial, antiviral, and antifungal qualities.⁶

Getting Started with Massage Therapy

To get started with massage therapy, go get a massage. Experience the benefits. Then get more massages and learn how each massage therapist has their own unique style, gifts, and abilities to give.

Adopt it as a part of your own self-care. Take massage therapy classes. Read massage therapy books. Learn the precautions and contraindications. Practice on friends and family — they will likely be willing and happy participants!

To learn more and connect with OTs interested in mind, body, spirit medicine, prevention, and wellness, visit the www.HolisticOT.org website, the Holistic Occupational Therapy Page and group on Facebook and LinkedIn, HolisticOT on Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram, and join the Holistic OT e-mail list.

References

1. American Massage Therapy Association: Consumer Views and Use of Massage Therapy. Retrieved from <https://www.amtamassage.org/research/Consumer-Survey-Fact-Sheets.html>
2. American Massage Therapy Association: Industry Fact Sheet. Retrieved from https://www.amtamassage.org/infocenter/economic_industry-fact-sheet.html
3. The Benefits of Massage. Retrieved from www.massagetherapy.com/learnmore/benefits.php
4. The Power of Touch. Retrieved from www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/power-touch
5. Touching Makes You Healthier. Retrieved from www.cnn.com/2011/HEALTH/01/05/touching.makes.you.healthier.health/
6. Aromatherapy Can Enhance Health & Healing: Essential Oils Have Been Used Since Time Immemorial. Retrieved from <http://occupational-therapy.advanceweb.com/Columns/Holistic-OT/Aromatherapy-Can-Enhance-Health-and-Healing.aspx>