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Therapeutic Massage: What Are the Benefits?

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The term massage therapy encompasses a variety of hands on techniques from muscle manipulation to light touch to the body, all of which are designed to promote self-healing. Massage is defined as “manipulation of tissues (as by rubbing, kneading, or tapping) with the hand or an instrument for therapeutic purposes” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/massage>). According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, over 18 million adults and children in the United States had used massage in the previous year for a variety of reasons, including relief from pain, as treatment for a sports related injury, stress management, anxiety, depression, and to aid in general wellness.

History of Massage

Massage therapy is deeply rooted in the history of medicine. Before there were antibiotics, surgery, pharmaceuticals, and other technological advances that modern medicine has to offer, there was massage- basic rubbing with herbs and oils. Both the Bible and the Koran mention the use of aromatics to lubricate and anoint the skin. The practice was well established by 400 B.C. when Hippocrates defined medicine as the “art of rubbing” (Field, 1998). Hippocrates and other physicians of the time recommended therapeutic massage and exercise for gladiators and athletes before contests to prevent fatigue and injury, not unlike the sports massage for triathletes of today. Beck (2011) published the definitive history of massage in his text, *The Theory and Practice of Therapeutic Massage*, which outlines modern therapeutic

massage techniques used throughout the world today. Dr. Per Ling first documented Swedish massage, which uses long strokes and muscle kneading, as a technique in the 19th century. Dr. Johan Mezger established massage as a scientific subject for medical doctors in the remedial treatment of disease in the 1800’s, and it was then that physicians began performing massage to bring comfort to their patients. By the 1900’s physicians delegated the intervention to nurses; and massage became a routine nursing intervention for every patient at bedtime (Beck, 2011). Eventually, the nightly backrub was replaced by sleeping pills and the art of touch was lost to healthcare. Now touch is re-emerging as research supports its value as a therapeutic intervention.

Benefits of Massage

People use massage for a variety of health-related purposes. Massage is used as preventive care, as well as for management of chronic health conditions. Luskin and Pelletier (2005) assert that 70% - 80% of all chronic diseases are exacerbated or caused by stress. One of the major benefits of massage is the reduction of stress through the promotion of relaxation. With regular usage, and when provided by a skilled licensed professional, most people realize health benefits from massage. Research has shown that a reduction in cortisol, the stress hormone, can be achieved after one 45-minute massage session. The same study also noted a decrease in cytokine proteins responsible for the inflammatory and allergic response, as well as an increase in white



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blood cells that are responsible for fighting infection (Peterson, 2012).

There is a renewed interest in massage in the scientific community, evidenced by the National Institutes of Health budget of over \$2.5 million for studying massage as compared to their 2002 research budget of \$1.2 million. Research in the field of massage therapy is still fairly new in comparison with pharmaceuticals. The biomedical standard double blind randomized controlled trial model does not work well for studying massage. Using different modalities such as acupuncture and comparing the outcomes to those of massage is like comparing apples and oranges. New research techniques are being developed to address these design issues (Peterson, 2012).

Much of the early research work done in the field of massage therapy was done at the Touch Therapy Institute at the University of Miami in the mid to late 1990's. Some of the findings reported are enhanced immune systems in HIV patients; decreased stress and pain levels in burn patients, and improvement in post partum depression. Researchers are also looking at the possibility of massage having a positive impact on alertness, math computation skills, and anxiety in healthy people (Field, 1998).

Other studies focus on disease specific ailments and the effectiveness of massage. One area is the use of massage therapy in oncology and palliative care. A review of the nursing literature found 20 articles evaluating the use of massage therapy for decreasing pain, anxiety, and depression in oncology patients receiving palliative care. The patient outcomes included reduced need for opioids analgesics, and patient reports of decreased anxiety; no negative side effects were found in any of the studies. The literature review summary stated, "massage therapy is to be considered a cost-efficient, non-invasive intervention positively influencing and contributing to the reduction of pain, anxiety and depression in seriously ill cancer patients" (Falkensteiner, 2011, p. 7).

Massage therapy shows promise for improved patient outcomes, and there is an ongoing need for more research to support its use in the healthcare environment and beyond. Physicians are realizing the benefits and encouraging their patients to seek out professionally trained and educated massage therapists. The American Cancer Society recommends massage as one of the tools people can use for symptom management. The American College of Physicians and the American Pain Society endorse massage therapy

for low back pain. Whether you are healthy or living with a chronic disease massage therapy may benefit you when done on a regular basis, as the effects of massage are cumulative. For the best possible health benefits, seek out the services of a certified massage therapist.

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