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WEEKLY COLUMN

Massage Therapy: Why You Knead It
Women's Health

By Martin Brown, updated 6/4/2008 at 7:10:09 PM

Saying "Ahhhhh...." comes naturally to anyone who gets regular massages. In fact, this form of physical (and emotional) therapy is a uniquely personal experience, for a number of reasons. But is it right for you?



It is, if—

—You are comfortable disrobing and lying nude under a sheet and light blanket,

—You are comfortable having an individual who is (at least on your first visit) a stranger to you rub their hands over most, although not all, of your body.

—You are willing to try one therapist and then another, and perhaps another after that, to discover which one's technique you most prefer; and finally

— You are willing to invest the money to give massage therapy a try.

If your answer is a flat-out "No!" to one or more of these, then at this time of your life massage therapy is probably not for you.

If on the other hand your answer to all of these questions is "yes," or "maybe," then read on because massage therapy on a regular basis may add a wonderful new dimension to your life.

Done properly, massage therapy provides you with a window into a healthier you. Its potential mental and physical benefits are both impressive and far-reaching. In America we grow up in a culture that, essentially, separates the needs of the body and the needs of the mind. Only in the last twenty years has the American medical establishment signaled acceptance of the idea that people who are stressed, unhappy, anxious, and suffer from a variety of other emotional issues are taking a serious toll on their overall health. If you are a woman of twenty, forty, or sixty, stress is a threat to your having a long and healthy future.

The massage industry claims a laundry list of physical benefits for massage: from improved blood circulation to stimulating the lymph system to fight off disease. Much of this is yet to be proven in scientifically performed studies with large study and control groups. But what does seem to work, and work well, about massage is quite impressive. From stress reduction, to helping people beat a dependency on alcohol, massage therapy is gaining recognition as an important tool in creating overall wellness. The Mayo Clinic reports that the body's immune system responds better in those who receive massage, including HIV patients and mothers in labor. **The Mayo Clinic's summary report** also notes that massage helps women who suffer with both depression and anxiety regain a positive view to their lives.

What has been recognized for years is that massage provides great benefits for female athletes, whether they be professionals or simply weekend warriors. Recovery times are much faster, chronic pain is greatly reduced, and movement is brought back to sore muscles.

Traditionally in America, getting a massage was an added treat to a resort or spa holiday. For millions of people, it is still just that. This was my case—up two years ago, when a shoulder injury motivated me to see a massage therapist on a weekly basis. After a couple of months, movement was restored to the arm.

But when my therapist left the Bay Area, I fell out of the routine. Six months ago I went in search of a new therapist. I tried three different masseuses before I finally found one who gave me the kind of vigorous sports massage I was seeking. My therapist, Manny Eleazar, of Sausalito, California, is a good example of the degree to which massage therapists can differ. Just about any massage therapist can make you feel good at least while you're laying on the table, under a warm blanket, in a room with low lighting, soft music, and perfumed with the scent of massage oils. But if you're looking for massage as being worthy of your ongoing investment then you need to have more than just a pleasurable experience.

Did your massage do what it is suppose to do under optimum conditions?

Did it relieve stress, help heal sore muscles, and help keep you fit and healthy in between visits?

And there, pardon the pun, is the rub. Still, not all masseuses have similar skills or touches. In fact, the types of massage vary greatly. Shiatsu, a Japanese method, is quite popular, as is Swedish massage. When done properly, deep tissue massage can actually elicit groans of pain, but that's a good thing if you want some neuromuscular therapy.

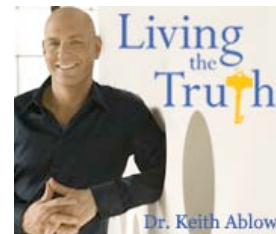
Masseuses go through intense training. Here in the United States, that means 500-1,000-hour programs from one of the 1,300 massage schools accredited by the Commission of Massage Therapy Certification, or the **National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork**. For a comprehensive overview, click here to the **American Massage Therapy Association's website** for tips and information.

Beyond that, massage therapy is a truly wonderful art when practiced by someone highly-skilled like Eleazar. It's akin to saying that the violin is a wonderful instrument in the hands of concert soloist. Give that same violin to a student taking her third lesson, and it has a whole different sound. Having experienced the work of more than twenty different therapists I can tell you first hand that they range from very effective to passable at best. There is a big difference between a massage and a rubdown.

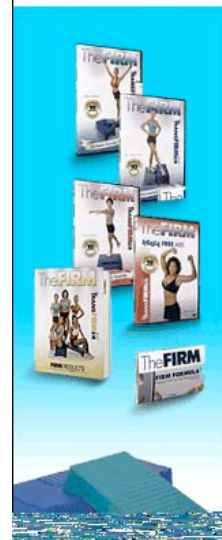
My personal take, and that of many others, is that finding a massage therapist that works well for you is worth the time and effort. With the spiraling cost of health care, one visit to an emergency room may well equal a year's worth of weekly massages. If you want to stay healthy and stay as far away from hospitals as you can, consider massage therapy, which along with a responsible diet, and some light consistent exercise (yoga stretching especially) can keep you in great shape.

If traditional massage is not your thing, or you're just not sure, try starting with a twenty-minute chair massage. It will bring you a lot more mental and physical relief then you will get from doing nothing at all, and it might help ease you into doing full body massage on a regular basis. When you do have a full body massage book a full hour. Thirty minutes is not an adequate amount of time.

Your body is a precious gift; with a qualified and caring massage therapist it will be in good hands.



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