



# RESTORATIVE RUBDOWNS

The Blissful Benefits of Massage

by Linda Sechrist

Other than a silent retreat or a loving and comforting embrace of a friend, child or another family member, few actions are as multi-beneficial to body, mind and spirit as massage.

Once considered primarily a pampering experience for the wealthy, massage and its counterpart, bodywork, is today acknowledged by the larger medical community for its therapeutic value. The U.S. Library of Medicine at the National Institutes of Health provides the largest source of published up-to-date research on the subject, including substantiation for claims citing the many positive effects of massage.

Among the reported improvements is an individual's ability to relax and sleep better following therapeutic massage treatment. Recipients also tend to enjoy a better immune system response, fostering the relief of fatigue, pain, anxiety and nausea. On this basis, some large U.S. cancer centers, such as the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, in Houston, now integrate massage therapy into conventional settings.

Judy Stahl, past president of the American Massage Therapy Association, is a strong, longtime advocate for acceptance of the therapeutic benefits, including some that haven't yet made it into the annals of conventional medicine. She became a professional massage therapist in 1987, and today continues the research she initiated for her master's thesis in counseling and psychology: *Touch Therapy in Enhancing Psychological Outcomes*. It's become her life's work.

"I regularly see practical evidence that supports research on the powerful and critical role that touch plays in the state of a person's mind-body health," Stahl says. Her years of patient/client sessions also provide her with a wealth of evidence that combining touch and talk therapy is far more effective than talk therapy alone.

## Beyond the Massage Table

What a difference 60 minutes on a massage table can make. The first rule of massage—to feel, rather than think—transforms the therapeutic stroking, rubbing, wringing, tapping, kneading and squeezing of muscles into deeply satisfying human contact. Concentrating on the practitioner's touch, while listening to relaxing music playing in the background and breathing in soothing aromatherapy scents, helps turn the mind off and focus attention on the moment. Such a restful state of mindfulness is key to successful meditation.

## A Natural Sleep Aid

It makes sense that a good night's sleep is essential to health. A study published in the *American Journal of Critical Care* showed that patients receiving a six-minute massage slept better than those in the control group, which participated in a teaching session on relaxation followed by a bedtime audiotope comprising muscle-relaxation supported by imagery and music.

## Easing Pain and Anxiety

While massage isn't meant as a replacement for regular medical care, it is being increasingly used in the allopathic community to help manage chronic pain. The results of a study by the Royal College of Nursing Research Institute, at the University of Warwick, in the UK, demonstrated that massage provides effective short-term relief for moderate to severe chronic pain. Patients receiving massage therapy reported significantly less pain immediately as well as one hour after treatment. They also experienced a significantly reduced level of anxiety.

Six years ago, when integrative family physician Fred Morgan discovered that massage helped to alleviate the back pain he had suffered from for 11 years, he began recommending it to his patients. "The first time I went to a massage therapist, the pain went away for a week," says the co-owner of Pleasanton Family Wellness Center, in California, which combines allopathic, complementary and alternative medicine.

## Stroking Blood Pressure in the Right Direction

Not only does massage help to lower blood pressure, it also helps ease stress levels. One study published in *Heart and Lung: the Journal of Acute and Critical Care* noted that patients that had massage after heart surgery showed a lower level of postoperative blood pressure. Another study of patients that underwent twice weekly, 30-minute massage sessions demonstrated decreases in blood pressure and cortisol (a stress hormone), as well as depression, anxiety and hostility.

## More is Better

Who wouldn't want to have a massage twice a week? The ongoing research of Dr. Maria Hernandez-Reif, of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami, and Tiffany Field, Ph.D., the institute's director, demonstrates that while an individual can benefit from even small doses of massage (15 minutes of chair massage or a half-hour table session), longer bodywork, performed two to three times a week, compounds the positive effects.

*Linda Sechrist is a senior writer and editor for Natural Awakenings.*