

The Benefits of Massage

Bodywork Goes Beyond Relaxation

As you lie on the table under crisp, fresh sheets, hushed music draws you into the moment. The smell of sage fills the air and you hear the gentle sound of massage oil being warmed in your therapist's hands. Once the session gets underway, the daily stressors and aching muscles fade into an oblivious 60 minutes of relief, and all you can comprehend right now is not wanting it to end.

But what if that hour of massage did more for you than just take the pressures of the day away? What if that gentle, Swedish massage helped you combat cancer? What if bodywork helped you recover from a strained hamstring in half the time? What if your sleep, digestion, and mood all improved with massage and bodywork? What if these weren't just "what if's"?

Evidence is showing that the more massage you can allow yourself, the better you'll feel. Here's why:

Massage as a healing tool has been around for thousands of years in many cultures. Touching is a natural human reaction to pain and stress, and for conveying compassion and support. When you bump your head or have a sore calf, the natural response is to rub it to feel better. The same was true of our earliest ancestors.

Healers throughout time and throughout the world have instinctually and independently developed a wide range of therapeutic techniques using touch. Many are still in use today, and with good reason. We now have scientific proof of the benefits of massage -- benefits ranging from treating chronic diseases and injuries to alleviating the growing tensions of our modern lifestyles. Having a massage does more than just relax your body and mind -- there are specific physiological and psychological changes that occur, and even more so when massage is utilized as a preventative, frequent therapy and not simply mere luxury. Massage not only feels good, but it can cure what ails you.

The Fallout of Stress

Experts estimate that 80 percent to 90 percent of disease is stress-related. Massage and bodywork is there to combat that frightening number by helping us remember what it means to relax. The physical changes massage brings to your body can have a positive effect in many areas of your life. Besides increasing relaxation and decreasing anxiety, massage lowers blood pressure, increases circulation,

improves injury recovery, encourages deep sleep, and increases concentration. It reduces fatigue and gives you more energy to handle stressful situations.

Massage is a perfect elixir for good health, but it can also provide an integration of body and mind. By producing a meditative state or heightened awareness of the present moment, massage can provide emotional and spiritual balance, bringing with it true relaxation and peace.

The incredible benefits of massage are doubly powerful if taken in regular "doses." Researchers from the Touch Research Institute (TRI) at the University of Miami, found that recipients of massage can benefit even in small doses (15 minutes of chair massage or a half-hour table session). They also note that receiving bodywork two to three times a week is even more beneficial. While this may not be feasible, it's nice to know that this "medicine" only gets better with frequency.

What It Does

In an age of technical and, at times, impersonal medicine, massage offers a drug-free, non-invasive, and humanistic approach based on the body's natural ability to heal itself. Following is a brief list of the many known, research-based benefits of massage and bodywork:

- Increases circulation, allowing the body to pump more oxygen and nutrients into tissues and vital organs,
- Stimulates the flow of lymph, the body's natural defense system, against toxic invaders. For example, in breast cancer patients, massage has been shown to increase the cells that fight cancer. Furthermore, increased circulation of blood and lymph systems improves the condition of the body's largest organ -- the skin,
- Relaxes and softens injured and overused muscles,
- Reduces spasms and cramping,
- Increases joint flexibility,
- Reduces recovery time and helps prepare the body for strenuous workouts, reducing subsequent muscle pain of athletes at any level,

- Releases endorphins -- the body's natural painkiller -- and is proving very beneficial in patients with chronic illness, injury, and post-op pain,
- Reduces post-surgery adhesions and edema and can be used to reduce and realign scar tissue after healing has occurred,
- Improves range-of-motion and decreases discomfort for patients with low back pain,
- Relieves pain for migraine sufferers and decreases the need for medication,
- Provides exercise and stretching for atrophied muscles and reduces shortening of the muscles for those with restricted range of motion,
- Assists with shorter labor for expectant mothers, as well as reduces the need for medication, eases postpartum depression and anxiety, and contributes to a shorter hospital stay.