



For better
mental health

The Mind guide to massage

The Mind guide to massage

'Now I've had several massages, I understand better where I hold tension in my body.'

'Foot massage grounded me, so that I let go of the negative thoughts going round inside my head.'

'When you're ill, you have to talk to lots of people. With massage, it's good to have some quiet time feeling cared for.'

This booklet tells you about all the benefits of massage, the different types available, what to expect from a session and how to find a good practitioner.

What is massage?

The essential element across all kinds of massage is touch, a basic way of making contact with others, which we all need. For a baby, nurturing touch is essential for growth and development. If a child falls over, we instinctively 'rub it better'. Massage uses touch in a sensitive and respectful way, with the intention of promoting a sense of wellbeing in the receiver.

This means the therapist takes account not just of your physical symptoms, but of your mental, emotional and spiritual being, and the circumstances under which you live your life. For instance, if you have no housing and are unemployed, this could affect your physical and mental health. Understanding the context in which problems develop is as important as looking for the symptoms.

A holistic approach is often seen as being the very opposite of conventional medicine, but not all complementary therapists work holistically, and conventional medicine can be practised in a holistic way.

Massage therapies are often described as being complementary or alternative. Complementary means a therapy that can be used in addition to, or alongside, conventional medicine. Alternative means a therapy that claims to be a complete system, which can be used instead of orthodox medicine. In practice, all forms of massage can be, and are, used on their own or alongside Western medical treatments. For the future, there are moves towards 'integrated medicine', including the best of both worlds.

Complementary and alternative approaches share a belief in the body's ability to heal itself. Treatments are non-invasive, without unpleasant side effects, and the practitioner commits more time to the client than a GP is usually able to do. The quality of the relationship between therapist and client is important. It's a relationship based on trust, and is about 'being with' rather than 'doing something to' the client.

Massage practitioners are sometimes called 'bodyworkers'. Western science tends to foster a split between body and mind, but complementary therapists often try to reunite them as one, with the concept of a 'bodymind'. Practitioners believe that we are creatures whose mind and emotions are embodied in our physical existence. It follows that our memories and personal histories are also in our bodies, which is one reason why touch, in massage, can be both powerful and helpful.

What different kinds of massage are there?

Massage with oils

This is sometimes called Swedish massage. Various techniques such as stroking, friction and percussion are used to knead and stretch the soft tissues of the body.

Aromatherapy massage

This is usually a gentle massage, using essential oils from plants, because they have specific therapeutic purposes. Essential oils are chemically complex and very concentrated. For massage, they are usually diluted with a nut or vegetable oil, such as almond.

Shiatsu

Coming from Japan, this traditional massage works, like acupuncture, by stimulating and balancing the body's energy flow along 'meridians' or energy pathways. The practitioner uses techniques such as holding, pressing, and stretching, to balance Ki or Qi (energy) in the body.

Thai yoga

Another traditional massage, this time based on Indian and Thai forms. It consists of a flowing sequence of stretching and pressing on energy pathways in the body, using hand, arm, thumb and foot pressure. The treatment includes passive yoga stretches.

Reflexology

Reflexology is based on the principles of 'zone therapy' (similar to the meridians or energy pathways) and the theory that every organ and system of the body has a counterpart in reflex points in the feet and hands. Practitioners work largely on the feet.

On-site massage

A quick treatment, typically given in offices, which focuses on muscles and acupressure points on the back, arms, neck and head. Wearing normal clothes, you would usually sit leaning forward on a special chair, which supports you comfortably.

These are the most common types, but you may also hear of Indian head massage, Bowen, Hellerwork, Rolfing, Trager, biodynamic massage, pulsing and sports or remedial massage, among others. Practitioners may combine different types.

Your choice of massage will probably depend on convenience, cost and friends' recommendations. And you may need to try several kinds before you find a type of massage and a practitioner that suit you. (See *How do I find a practitioner?* on p. 9.)

Will I have to undress?

For massage with oils, including aromatherapy, you will need to take off some clothes. How much depends on what feels comfortable for you. Your privacy should always be respected. The practitioner will usually leave the room while you undress, and should give you a large towel to drape around your body. During the massage, you will be covered with towels, except for the part being massaged. Normally, to have a massage with oils, you would lie on a massage table or couch. You can ask to have only your neck and shoulders, or back massaged if you want to try out how massage feels.

You don't have to undress for reflexology, but you need to have bare feet. You will be treated while on a massage table, or in a special chair. For Shiatsu and Thai massage, you wear loose clothes, and lie on a mat or futon on the floor.

What happens in a massage session?

Sessions can last for anything between 20 and 90 minutes, depending on the type of massage. One hour is typical. At your first appointment, the practitioner will ask about your current and past illnesses, accidents or surgery, and whether you are taking any medication. Such information is confidential.

It's part of the therapist's job to make you comfortable, by using supports for your head or neck, or a cushion under your knees to help support your lower back. The room should also be kept warm.

If there are parts of your body where you prefer not to be touched, tell the practitioner. For instance, the belly is a sensitive area where many people feel vulnerable. A therapist should never touch the genital area, or a woman's breasts. But the lower back, buttocks and thighs are normally included in a whole-body massage.

The therapist may have soft music playing in the treatment room. This helps some clients let go of worries or negative thoughts. Others find music distracting, so tell the practitioner if you don't want it.

The massage often starts with the practitioner gently placing their hands on your back, head or feet for a few moments. From this connection, an aware practitioner will gain information that will help them give you a treatment that is right for you.

For people who have had negative experiences of touch in the past, such as physical punishment or sexual abuse, a massage may stir up painful memories. You might start crying, or want to stop the massage. Clients who have been abused may find it difficult to ask the therapist to stop. If this applies to you, you could discuss with your therapist a pre-arranged signal, such as raising your hand or using a neutral word like 'tree', which will tell them that you want to stop the treatment. A good practitioner will help you through this process if it occurs. Knowing that you are in a safe place, with clear, professional boundaries, will make it easier to cope with your reactions.

The practitioner will often ask for feedback, such as, 'How's the pressure? Is it too light, too strong, or about right?' If you have massage regularly, your response to this question will vary, according to your state of health and energy levels. The practitioner may encourage you to take a more active part in the treatment, for instance by suggesting how you can breathe more slowly.

It's not necessary to chat during a session, and you are more likely to benefit if you can quietly focus on your breathing and bodily sensations. You may find it more relaxing with your eyes shut, but if you are troubled by upsetting thoughts, having your eyes open may be a kind of 'reality check' to help root you. Sometimes the therapist will touch an area that feels sore, but also feels as if it needs to be held or pressed. This is sometimes called 'nice pain', or 'good pain'. Before you get up, take time to notice how you are feeling and what feels different.

What are the benefits of massage? How does it help?

Having a treatment can be part of how you look after yourself, and can help you discover what deep relaxation feels like. A common effect is a balancing one. If you are feeling agitated, it will help to calm you. If you are tired and lethargic, it will make you feel lighter and more energetic. If you are in severe distress, massage can help you feel more 'in your body' and grounded.

Emotionally, massage enables you to feel nurtured and cared for, and can help you feel more positive about your body. For those who lack physical touch in their daily lives, for instance many elderly people, massage can be affirming and nourishing. If you find talking about yourself difficult, bodywork is another way that could help you explore how you are feeling.

On a physical level, massage actively promotes the circulation of blood and lymph through the body, aids digestion, and alleviates chronic muscle tension. It helps with the symptoms of anxiety and panic, such as palpitations, a tight chest, and shallow breathing. It may also relieve some of the side effects of medication. Massage is good at times when orthodox medicine has little to offer, for example for relieving headaches, backache and other chronic pain.

Shiatsu and Thai massage are especially good for loosening stiff joints, such as shoulders and hips, because treatments include passive stretches and joint rotations.

When will I start to feel the benefits?

Because the treatment is individually tailored to your needs at the time, massage helps bring you into a more balanced, tranquil state. It can be both calming and stimulating, so that you may notice sluggish areas feel more active, and 'busy' areas quieter. Many people report sleeping better after a treatment.

After a massage, while toxins are shifting out of your system, you may experience mild flu-like symptoms or aches. This is a 'healing reaction', and won't last long. Drinking plenty of water after a treatment will help to cleanse your system.

The longer-term benefits of regular treatments include becoming more aware of your own body and its needs. You can learn to notice the signs of stress in your body sooner, and find new ways of coping with, or preventing illness. Massage can help you build up your self-esteem through recognising that you deserve to receive something good for yourself. Your therapist may suggest self-help exercises to improve your posture or relieve back pain.

How often should I have a massage?

This will depend on each person's particular circumstances, their health, and their finances. Even a one-off or occasional massage can be helpful, and may put you in touch with your own body in a way that could lead you towards other activities, such as meditation, yoga or tai chi. A massage once a month is good, if you can afford it.

Is massage always helpful?

If you are generally healthy, massage can help maintain good physical and mental health. If there are times when you are unwell, massage may or may not be a good idea. Many people who have used mental health services recognise their own early signs of illness or crisis. At this stage, it's important to seek known sources of support, which could include massage, especially if you have benefited from it before. If you are in mental health crisis, for instance feeling suicidal, wanting to self-harm, or hearing voices, whether massage can help will depend partly on your personal situation. Are you in a place where you feel safe and supported? This could be a residential project or a day centre, or at home with a good level of support from people you trust. If so, massage may be helpful. If you're not sure, or if you live alone and are in distress, without much support, it's better to wait until you are through the acute phase of your crisis.

If you are physically ill, it may not be wise to have a massage. If you have a fracture, sprain or bruises, it's fine as long as you avoid the site of the injury. If in doubt, ask your practitioner or GP.

Massage in pregnancy is unlikely to be harmful, though many practitioners will not treat women in the first 13 weeks of pregnancy, because of the risk of miscarriage. In later pregnancy, massage can relieve back pain, sciatica and general tiredness.

How do I find a practitioner?

A good way is by word of mouth. Ask your friends or colleagues if they can recommend someone. You could approach a therapist and ask to speak to an existing client. Or you could ask a friend to go with you the first time, or meet you afterwards.

Remember that massage is an unregulated profession, so you need to be aware of safety issues. Unfortunately, there have been cases of clients being exploited, sexually and emotionally, by therapists. Making a complaint is usually a long process, and may not achieve the redress the abused client seeks.

When making contact with a therapist, trust your gut instinct, or share your doubts with a friend. If it doesn't feel right, take your custom elsewhere. Recent governments have encouraged massage schools to develop their own self-regulation, and this is happening, although it's a slow process. Organisations such as the British Complementary Medicine Association will give out names to enquirers. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 13.) Practitioners should have completed a training of at least a year. They should have insurance, and should, preferably, be registered with a body that has a code of ethics and a complaints procedure. It's fine to ask about any of these, and a reputable therapist will be glad to answer your questions. It's also fine to ask if a practitioner has specialist experience, for instance in working with people who have disabilities, or mental health needs.

A good practitioner will be aware of the limits of her or his competence, and should refer you on elsewhere, if they are unable to help you. Beware of any massage therapist claiming in a leaflet, for example, to 'cure' psychological or medical problems. Such claims can't be backed up and are not ethical.

How much will it cost?

A private practitioner will charge £30 to £40. Thai massage appointments are often for one-and-a-half hours; expect to pay £40 to £50. On-site massage takes around 20 minutes, costing £15 to £20. Some therapists offer concessionary rates, or a reduction, if you book a series of treatments.

Access to massage within NHS mental health services is rare. It's available in a few day hospitals, inpatient wards and residential crisis projects.

Many NHS trusts are now listening, more than in the past, to the views of service users. While managers will often say there is no funding available, the more users ask for treatments like massage, the more likely it is that funding will eventually be found.

Many voluntary sector projects offer massage in day centres. Some are free, but some make a charge. It's worth checking in your area for massage or shiatsu training schools, which often have a student clinic. This has two advantages: much lower prices, and the fact that students are working under the supervision of their trainers.

Can I learn to do it myself?

You can massage most parts of your body, except the middle part of your back, which is hard to reach. One of the best things about receiving massage is that someone else is doing the work. With self-massage you have to make a certain effort, but it does have advantages. You can give yourself a quick neck and shoulder massage, while sitting at your desk at work, and you know exactly how much pressure is right for you.

Applying the techniques

The basic skills are not difficult. There are many short and introductory courses, from one day, to six or ten weeks, at adult education colleges. Courses are sometimes advertised as, 'Massage for friends and family'. The idea is that you enrol with a friend or partner, and you learn to massage each other.

Massage is good to give as well as receive, as long as you remember a few tips:

- Keep your shoulders loose and relaxed.
- Use the weight of your body to create pressure, rather than just your hands.
- Don't be afraid to use firm pressure.
- Ask your partner for feedback. Pressure that is too light may make him or her feel uncomfortable.
- Remember that long slow strokes are relaxing, while faster energetic ones, such as percussion or friction strokes, are stimulating.
- Always make sure the room is warm.

There are many books on massage, including self-massage, available at public libraries and in bookshops.

Baby massage

Baby massage is a great way of spending quality time with your baby. Most children appreciate a massage at bedtime, to help them settle. Many GP practices and health centres have baby massage groups, where you meet other mothers with babies and learn simple massage techniques.

References

Aromatherapy for common ailments S. Price (Gaia Books)

Baby massage P. Walker (Piatkus)

Healing minds J. Wallcraft (Mental Health Foundation)

Indian head massage N. Mehta (Thorsons)

Massage S. Mitchell (Element)

Thai yoga massage K. Balaskas (Thorsons)

The new book of massage L. Lidell (Ebury Press)

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or *Mindinfo*line on 0845 766 0163.

Association of Reflexologists

27 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3XX,
tel. 0870 567 3320, web: www.aor.org.uk

The British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA)

PO Box 5122, Bournemouth BH8 0WG
tel. 0845 345 5977, web: www.bcma.co.uk

Massage Training Institute

PO Box 44603, London N16 0XQ
tel. 020 7254 7227, web: www.massagetraining.co.uk

On Site Massage Association

Avon Road, Charfield, Wotton-under-Edge, GL12 8TT
tel. 01454 269269, web: www.aosm.co.uk

Prevention of Professional Abuse Network (POPAN)

1 Wyvil Court, Wyvil Road, London SW8 2TG
helpline: 0845 450 0300, web: www.popan.org.uk

Shiatsu Society

Eastlands Court, St Peters Road, Rugby CV21 3QP
tel. 0845 130 4560, web: www.shiatsu.org

Further reading

- Anxiety and tension: symptoms, causes, orthodox treatment and how herbal medicine will help* J. Wright (How To Books 2002) £6.99
- The food and mood handbook* A. Geary (Thorsons 2001) £12.99
- Good mood food* M. Van Straten (Cassell 2002) £10.99
- Healing minds* J. Wallcraft (Mental Health Foundation 1998) £12
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with the stress of student life* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to rebuild your life after breakdown* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2003) £1
- Lifting depression the balanced way* Dr L. Corrie (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- Making sense of homeopathy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Making sense of traditional Chinese medicine* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Manage your mind: the mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, T. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £13.99
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to spiritual practices* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to surviving working life* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Mind troubleshooters: stress* (Mind 2003) 50p
- Mind troubleshooters: panic attacks* (Mind 2002) 50p
- The secrets of self esteem* P. Cleghorn (Vega 2002) £7.99
- Sunbathing in the rain: a cheerful book about depression* G. Lewis (Flamingo 2003) £7.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding mental illness* (Mind 2003) £1

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Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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