



## EveryBody Deserves a Massage Week: Massage as a Wellness Strategy

Celebrate this annual event and promote the benefits of massage in your community. You may consider massage as part of your wellness strategy.

Massage as a Wellness Strategy, Partnering with Your Therapist Key to Best Results (written by Ruth Werner). Originally published in Body Sense magazine, Summer 2011. Copyright 2011. Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals. All rights reserved.

Every now and then we all need a special treat. Here are some of my favorite indulgences, and I'll go out on a limb to suggest that I'm probably not alone on some of these:

--A big piece of cake (dark chocolate, with raspberry preserves oozing between the layers).

--An evening with a silly movie or two--as mind-numbing as possible, please.

--Shoe shopping--OK, any shopping. I'm not picky.

--A massage.

In the words of the old song, "One of these things is not like the others ..."

How many indulgences can you think of that don't have profoundly negative consequences on your waistline, your time management, or your credit card bill? How many luxuries can you think of that both promote health and improve productivity?

Surveys suggest that people today get massage for one of three reasons: to address a specific injury or condition, to manage stress, or as a self-rewarding luxury--a pampering treat.

These motives might be determined by the setting in which massage is delivered. It seems reasonable to think that massage in a spa or resort might be viewed as a luxury, while massage in a multidisciplinary clinic--maybe along with a session of physical therapy or a chiropractic adjustment--would be viewed as a medical treatment. In actuality, the recipients of massage don't always make that distinction. Lots of people go to their spa therapists for help with sometimes complex medical conditions, and those in medical clinics often view their post-physical-therapy bodywork session as a reward for their hard work.

I would suggest that the distinction between indulging in a massage as a treat and using it for stress relief is pretty fuzzy. And as someone who has made a career out of studying where massage fits for people dealing with chronic and acute illnesses, I can say with confidence that the line between massage for stress management and massage for a medical condition is practically invisible. The central point here is that massage is a powerful health-care modality, regardless of whether it is being delivered in a spa, a franchise, a home, or a clinic.

### The Role of Massage

There aren't many health-care professionals who regularly spend an hour of completely focused time and touch on the well-being of the person in their care. Dental hygienists and surgeons come to mind--and of course, massage therapists. Which of these would you most prefer to spend time with? The unique position massage therapists hold as professional, educated "touchers" sometimes puts us in interesting positions. We have some clients who feel that because we are providing a treat--an indulgence--and not health care per se, it's not important to let us know that they are taking antibiotics for a sinus infection, or that they have a new and mysterious rash on their arm, or that they're nervously waiting for their biopsy results.

On the other hand, we have some clients who, because we have some education and a lot of compassion, and because they have our undivided attention for a full hour or more, feel we can help them deal with serious health issues--that we can suggest a treatment for that sinus infection, or diagnose that pesky rash, or assure them that their biopsy will be OK.

I recently had an interesting conversation with a woman who is both a nurse and a massage therapist. She said that in her experience, the people under her care in the hospital often have less complicated health issues than the people at the resort where she does massage. This is because the hospital patients' health profiles are fully documented and prioritized, but resort visitors are sometimes looking for a type of care that is out of the scope that massage therapists can provide.

I once wrote an article about massage for patients of Lou Gehrig's disease. Several years later, I got a letter from a woman whose mother had just been diagnosed with this condition--a serious disease, with many possible complications, that is ultimately terminal. She asked me if the massage therapist at the local hair salon would have the skills to help her mother maintain muscle function and stay off a respirator.

I have dozens of stories like this, mostly about clients keeping something from their therapist that needs to be shared, or clients wanting a level of medical expertise that is beyond the reach of their massage therapist. Have you been diagnosed with a blood clot in your leg? Maybe the student clinic at the local massage school is not the place to go for your leg pain. Are you on your way to the hospital to be tested for a blocked artery in your neck? It might be good to share that information before you get on the massage table.

Massage is consistently among the most popular and sought-after complementary health-care interventions, perhaps because it has such great potential for providing a soothing oasis in our jangled, tangled lives. People are increasingly interested in taking good care of themselves without invasive procedures. Massage offers a multitude of benefits without using knives, needles, or drugs, but that doesn't mean a massage therapist can "fix" or even successfully "treat" everything.

### Share Your Information

A good massage therapist working in a responsible facility will invite you to share important information before you work together. Your first appointment probably involved an intake form, but just because you've done that once doesn't mean your therapist has all the information she or he needs to give you the best possible experience today. Be sure to let your therapist know if your health status changes: a new prescription, a change in your workout routine, even when you notice a new lump or bump--all this can help your therapist provide you with the best care.

### Bodyworkers aren't Doctors

In all this discussion of massage and health, it is important to understand that your massage therapist is not a doctor. We cannot diagnose your rash, or prescribe which antibiotic to take for your sinus infection. In some states, licensing laws dictate that we cannot even recommend what stretches or exercises might serve you best as you deal with muscular issues. What your massage therapist can do is offer you excellent advice for your own care. If your therapist says you need to see a doctor about that funny-looking mark on your skin, it's a good idea to go. If your therapist says your rash is probably nothing, but it might be contagious, please listen, and have it checked out. If your therapist suggests that because of whatever health challenges you have today, Swedish or deep-tissue massage might not be in your best interest, I encourage you to trust her or his judgment--it comes from a place of caring.

This is a hectic world. None of us has time or money to throw away--we want to derive the best value we

can with whatever we do. So, while you're getting ready for your massage, do yourself and your therapist the favor of sharing the information that will allow you to get absolutely the very best massage she or he is able to give. Then relax and know that this is a treat, but it is also an investment in your well-being that will benefit you to your core.

Ruth Werner, LMP, is a massage therapist, educator, and writer, with a special interest in the role of massage therapy in the context of imperfect health. Her book, *A Massage Therapist's Guide to Pathology* (Lippincott Williams Wilkins, 2009) is used in massage schools all over the world. For more information, visit [www.ruthwerner.com](http://www.ruthwerner.com).

*Source: [http://www.massagetherapy.com/articles/index.php/article\\_id/2099/Massage-as-a-Wellness-Strategy](http://www.massagetherapy.com/articles/index.php/article_id/2099/Massage-as-a-Wellness-Strategy)*

[www.commonhealth.virginia.gov](http://www.commonhealth.virginia.gov)

The contents of the CommonHealth weekly emails may be reprinted from an outside resource in the area of health, safety, and wellness and is intended to provide one or more views on a topic. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth of Virginia, CommonHealth, or any particular agency and are offered for educational purposes. If you have questions or concerns about this article, please email us at [wellness@dhrm.virginia.gov](mailto:wellness@dhrm.virginia.gov)