

The Implications of Bodywork

Human Touch Has Powerful Results

Cathy Ulrich

Whether in giving or receiving, touch is as essential to human survival as is food. Infants deprived of touch, even when they are getting adequate nutrition, will fail to thrive. Elders isolated by loss of partners and friends become depressed not only because of the absence of social interaction, but also because of the simple loss of physical contact.

We calm our pets by stroking them, we greet each other with a hug or a handshake, and we soothe our children by holding them. No other form of connection is as powerful and universal as touch. Taking a look at how this sensation is connected to the brain provides insight into the significance of bodywork.

because of our skin. Our skin tells us about our environment and ourselves. When we touch something with our fingers, we're not only sensing the object, we're also feeling our own skin, our own boundaries.

In the first few days of an embryo's life, the cells that eventually become a fully formed baby divide into three layers. The brain and skin come from the same layer, and they develop together, not only before birth, but well into the first year of life. When a baby is held, cuddled, and breast-fed, she's getting crucial stimulation to build neural connections between her skin and her brain that will ultimately last her entire lifetime.



No matter the age, human touch plays a significant role in mental and physical health.

Skin and the Brain

The adult human lives inside an envelope of about 18 square feet of skin. Every inch houses thousands of nerve endings and various kinds of sensory receptors, all working to tell the brain about its surroundings. The cold of an ice cube, the softness of a cat's fur, a warm breeze, the caress of a loved one--all of these feelings are possible

Study after study has shown that touch is not only important for development, but is crucial to survival. James H.M. Knox of Johns Hopkins Hospital reported in 1915 that babies left in orphanages and given proper nutrition died at a rate of about 90 percent. Other studies of the same era confirmed

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*If you find it in
your heart to
care for
someone else,
you will have
succeeded.*

-Maya Angelou

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these findings and showed that those babies who did survive were often mentally handicapped and stunted in their growth. These valuable studies helped institutions understand the importance of touch. When staff was added to provide enough time for each child to be held, handled, and touched, mortality rates dropped dramatically.

Massage for Children

Those early statistical studies showed how vital touch is to developing infants. Researchers are also finding that giving massage to premature infants can improve their growth and overall health. A study conducted by the Touch Research Institute (TRI) at the University of Miami found that when stable premature babies were given five, one-minute massages a day, they gained 47 percent more weight than their counterparts who didn't get massage.

A 2001 study conducted by TRI showed that when mothers gave their infants a 15-minute massage before bedtime, these sleep-challenged kids went to sleep more quickly and were more alert during daytime hours.

Conversely, clinical research and sociological studies link touch deprivation with aggression. A 2002 study reported that adolescents with a history of aggressive behavior showed less aggression and were less anxious after receiving a 20-minute massage twice a week for five weeks.

Massage also reduces the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder so kids can concentrate better, and it's even been found that the right kind of touch can help kids with autism relate better to teachers and family members.

Massage for Adults

Ongoing research by the Touch Research Institute continues to prove that massage is an important therapy for many conditions. After a massage, levels of the stress hormone cortisol drop in saliva tests, examinations show an improvement in alertness and relaxation, depression scores decrease, and mental focus improves.

The exponential growth of the bodywork field is a testament to the value of safe, therapeutic touch. Of course bodywork

can play an essential role in the healing of specific chronic or acute orthopedic conditions, but it also serves as a powerful aide in improving the quality of life for adults.

Stan, a former client, was going through a nasty divorce. He had friends to support him emotionally, but it seemed that the thing he missed most was the nurturing touch of his partner. He credits weekly massage appointments, along with seeing a counselor, to his emotional recovery. Massage can be a healthy way to get that much-needed human contact.

Massage for Elders

People confined to nursing homes rarely get more than daily hygienic care in terms of touch. Yet elders need touch as much as infants; studies show that when they receive regular massage, the elderly have less depression and anxiety,

experience better physical coordination, and show a decrease of stress hormone in their saliva.

Geriatric massage is a growing field requiring specialized training, and many massage therapists offer it in their practices. Some nursing homes now provide massage to their residents. Elders appear to respond as well to bodywork as, if not better than, their younger counterparts.

Contact for All Ages

Before babies learn about their hands and feet, they need the touch of loved ones and caregivers. We retain that need our entire lives. Remember to savor touch the next time you're lying on a massage table. Your therapist is not only working out tight muscles, she's contacting your entire nervous system, calming you through pathways that were put in place before you were born.



Infant massage has shown great benefits in calming babies and helping pre-term infants thrive.

Managing Arthritis

Exercise and Bodywork Keep Joint Pain at Bay

The word arthritis strikes fear in the hearts of older adults. It often signifies aging, pain, inactivity, and disability. However, new research shows moderate physical exercise can actually ease arthritis symptoms by decreasing pain and increasing a person's likelihood of living a normal life.

Understanding Arthritis

The most common form of arthritis--osteoarthritis, or also known as degenerative arthritis--affects more than twenty million Americans. Osteoarthritis (literally meaning "bone-joint inflammation") is caused by wear and tear on joint surfaces and most frequently involves the hips, knees, lower back, neck, and fingers. More than half of people over sixty-five have some evidence of osteoarthritis on X-rays, although it doesn't always manifest as symptoms.

Many problems arise from a sedentary lifestyle. Joints lose flexibility and muscles lose strength, feeding the cycle of pain, inactivity, and more pain.

Exercise Offers Sweet Relief

Vigorous walking, swimming, and bicycling boost the release of powerful endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. When done four to five days a week, these aerobic activities improve general cardiovascular health and aid in weight management (obesity is the single biggest risk factor for osteoarthritis).

Strengthening and stretching exercises targeted at maintaining joint flexibility and muscle strength--especially for at-risk joints--slow the progression of degenerative arthritis. Yoga classes and moderate weight lifting programs are excellent ways to improve strength and flexibility. Bodywork can also provide relief.

If arthritis is slowing you down, get serious with your exercise plan. Consult your physician; work with a professional trainer, physical therapist, yoga instructor, or bodyworker; and start a gentle, progressive exercise program. Your joints will reward you for it, and you'll free yourself from arthritic pain.



Stretching can slow degenerative arthritis.

The Scoop on Meditation

A Simple Practice with Profound Benefits

People who meditate regularly appear internally and externally five to 10 years younger than their non-meditating peers, according to author Deepak Chopra. That's good news for the estimated 10 million people who practice meditation on an ongoing basis and experience the resulting calm it cultivates.

The rich benefits come from doing something that looks like nothing: Sitting still, being quiet, and breathing deeply. Meditation works simply but profoundly by defusing the onslaughts of life -- a racing mind, busyness, deadlines, commutes, all of which have physiological effects on well-being. Meditation calms the nervous system, decreases metabolic rate, heart rate, and

blood pressure, and lowers levels of cholesterol, stress hormones, and free radicals. It also has a direct effect on breathing, slowing and deepening respiration so more oxygen circulates throughout the body. Not only that, meditation is said to lessen feelings of anxiety and depression and improve memory and concentration. And all of this culminates in slowing the aging process, as Chopra notes.

There are many meditation techniques, including focusing on a mantra, a sacred word or phrase, or your breath. But the basic intent of all meditation is focus and attention. And it doesn't take hours a day in an ashram to meditate effectively. Benefits kick in with even a short period of devoted time.

How to begin? Wear comfortable, unrestrictive clothes, sit on a cushion or chair with your back straight (think once again, comfort), rest your hands on your legs, let your eyes go soft and out of focus or close them, breathe slowly and deeply, and -- the hardest part -- attempt to empty your mind of thoughts and quiet the internal dialogue. When thoughts flit through your mind, let them pass without judging them and come back to your focus (your mantra, counting, etc.) and breathing.

Start with this sitting meditation technique for five minutes a day, and add on time as you get more at ease with the process. For more information on techniques and benefits, check out www.abc-of-meditation.com.

*Whatever words
we utter should
be chosen with
care, for people
will hear them
and be
influenced by
them, for good
or ill.*

-Buddha

It's never too late to re-energize your personal care regimen. Make a list of the things you do each day to maintain your vitality. If you're already eating healthy, are there any healthy foods that you can add to your diet to boost the healthful benefits? Do you have an exercise plan in place? If so, is there anything you can do to push yourself a little harder or add an element to keep your program interesting? Are you making time in your schedule for fun or using meditation to ease stress? And don't forget the benefits of massage therapy and reflexology to ease those aches and pains and rejuvenate yourself. It's always a good time to add or adjust elements in our personal care tool kit. Remember, it's all about living our best life.

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