

Pain Management: Massage Therapy **Ms Iris Hoiting, Project Officer**

Massage techniques (for example, acupressure, reiki, deep tissue massage or shiatsu¹) involve working with pressure on various areas of the body, in order to improve health and well-being. In the second century B.C., massage therapy was already described in China, and soon thereafter in India and Egypt as well (Field, 1998). This makes massage one of the oldest healing methods. Today, the effects of massage are still a topic often discussed in the literature, and massage therapy is a commonly used type of alternative therapy in end-of-life care, as it can improve the quality of a patients' life (AMTA, 2009).

Evidence for Massage Therapy in Pain Management

As for the mechanism through which massage can help mitigate pain, the conventional wisdom is that when soft tissue is stimulated through massage, this increases blood flow that warms up painful joints and muscles. This way, the massage alters venous, arterial and lymphatic flow which results in pain reduction. Another explanatory mechanism is that the brain perceives the stimulus of touch before the actual stimulus of pain (Field, 1998; Shrestha, Schofield & Devkota, 2013). The effects of massage on the experience of pain has been thoroughly discussed in the literature. Massage therapy (as well as music therapy, distraction, and family presence) was advocated as one of the most helpful non-pharmacological intervention for managing pain in a study conducted by Gélinas et al. (2012). In this study, the researchers compared the impact of different non-pharmacological interventions for pain management in an intensive care unit. Patients expressed that the effectiveness of simple massage techniques for reducing pain was due to the reduction of the stress that often underlies the pain. Even a 5-minute brief hand-massage, was found to reduce the stress levels of terminally ill patients in Japan (Osaka et al., 2009).

In addition to decreasing the levels of stress, this aforementioned relaxation response may also help lower the heart rate and blood pressure, and decrease muscle tension (Adams et al., 2010). A pilot study in Taiwan demonstrated that a full-body massage had positive effects on the pain intensity and anxiety experienced by cancer patients (Jane et al., 2009), and in their extensive literature reviews, Shrestha, Schofield & Devkota (2013) and Lee et al. (2015) also demonstrated that massage has consistently proven useful for reducing pain in older people and patients suffering from cancer pain respectively.

'Comfy Acupressure' in Hong Kong

A specific type of massage that may be helpful for elderly people in Hong Kong is acupressure massage. The [South China Morning Post](#) recently reported on the 12-step 'comfy acupressure' massage, which is a 15-minute treatment, developed by the local Chinese medicine professor, Dr. Li Lei. According to Dr. Li the acupressure massage "*can improve the blood circulation, brighten the senses and release the stress of the frail elderly, and therefore improve their psychological well-being. They can perform better in daily activities and lead a better social life*" (SCMP, 2016).

¹ For an extensive list of specific massage techniques, please see this article on [massage therapy](#), on the website Massage Today



Image: www.projectcompassioninc.com/

Besides Dr. Li's massage treatment, self-massage or a massage given by a family member or friend, preferable established and demonstrated by experienced massage therapists, may also relieve the pain experience. Older people are most often very receptive to touch—even a gentle touch or holding the hand of a loved one can create a sense of relaxation and the feeling of being supported and comforted. As older people or ill people can have difficulty communicating, besides the physical benefits of massage, touch can also be a meaningful expressive tool for communicating psychological and emotional needs.

A nurturing massage specifically created to address the needs of older and/or ill people, is Comfort Touch. Please click [here](#) for more information on this technique.

In conclusion, in the midst of the challenges commonly faced by older people and/or ill people, the tactile senses, whether they are exercised through massage or gentle touch, can sooth pain and make a person feel more comforted and cared for.

Please note: if a patient is currently undergoing radiation therapy, you should avoid massage on the part of the body that is being treated. For cancer patients, very deep massages should be avoided. Please seek advice from you doctor before you use any type of massage, to make sure the treatment is appropriate for you.

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