



# Therapeutic Benefits of Massage Therapy

-By: Cindie Leonard

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The myriad health benefits of massage therapy are being validated by a number of fascinating scientific research studies. In the past, massage has been associated largely with exclusive, exotic, luxury spas and upscale health clubs. With more affordable opportunities -- along with increasing support from the medical community, massage therapy is gaining in popularity.

Exciting and proven benefits of massage begin with the very young. In one study, preterm infants gained 47% more weight, were discharged six days earlier (at a hospital cost savings of \$10,000 per infant), and become more socially responsive. If the 470,000 preemies born in the U.S. each year were to receive this simple, soothing,



and natural treatment, that would translate to annual savings of 4.7 billion dollars.

Preschool children who receive massage right before bedtime fall asleep sooner and stay asleep longer. In another study, preschoolers were given tests before and after receiving a 15 minute massage or spending 15 minutes reading stories with an experimenter. Performance and accuracy improvement were greater for the massage group.

Massage has also been shown to help troubled adolescents. In an interesting study, depressed, hospitalized, adolescents were divided into two groups. One group received 30-minute back massages daily for five days. Another group watched relaxing videotapes. The massaged subjects were less depressed and anxious and had lower cortisol (a stress hormone) levels after the massage. In another study, seventeen aggressive adolescents were randomly assigned to a massage therapy group or a relaxation therapy group.

Each group received massage or relaxation therapy for twenty minutes, twice a week, for five weeks. The results demonstrated that the massaged adolescents had lower anxiety and reported feeling less hostile. The parents of the participants perceived their children as being less aggressive after the massage therapy. Significant differences were not found for the teenagers in the relaxation group.

Anorexia nervosa is extremely difficult to treat. Massage therapy is showing great promise with this population. In a study with women diagnosed with anorexia, the results demonstrated that after receiving a massage twice a week for five weeks, the patients reported lower stress and anxiety levels. These women also had lower cortisol levels and increased dopamine and norepinephrine (the "feel good" hormones) after the treatments. A promising result of the treatment was that they reported decreased body dissatisfaction on the Eating Disorders Inventory.

In a study exploring the role of massage therapy for treating migraine headaches, researchers designed a randomized study comparing two groups of subjects. One group received massage therapy for 13 weeks, the other did not. The subjects from both groups were asked to maintain a daily log recording their perceived stress levels and coping efficacy. They were also asked to keep a daily journal of their perceived levels of stress and sleep. Levels of anxiety, heart rate, and cortisol levels were assessed. Compared



with the control group, the massage participants showed decreased heart rates less anxious moods, along with lower cortisol levels. The highlight of this study was that the massage group experienced fewer migraines during the study period.



Studies demonstrating the success of massage therapy in treating stress number over one thousand.

Currently there are vast arrays of theories as to

why massage therapy is so successful in managing stress.

One can read through extensive scientific studies focusing on measuring neurochemicals and reactions in the SNS (sympathetic nervous system) and the PNS (peripheral nervous system) in order to solve the mystery as to why massage is so effective on various stress disorders. Yet, a simple explanation might be that stress increases muscle tension, massage decreases muscle tension. When a muscle is tensed, circulation is reduced, blocking the absorption of oxygen and nutrients. Massage, on the other hand, loosens up the muscles, increasing circulation, bringing oxygen and nutrients back to the area of tension. Massage may also release stored toxins, which might explain the sense of wellbeing after a massage.

In a recent study in New Zealand involving nurses working in emergency departments, aromatherapy massages with music dramatically reduced stress levels amongst the study participants. The researchers of this study found that *sixty percent* of the nursing staff in their experiment reported that they suffer from moderate to extreme anxiety due to their work. The percentage of nurses reporting anxiety dropped to just *eight percent* after aromatherapy massage treatments. The massages were provided by a licensed massage therapist who sprayed an aromatherapy mist above the heads of the participants. The participants were able to choose the scent. The essential oils were rose, lavender, lime, ocean breeze, or a combination of lavender, ylang ylang, bergamot and patchouli.

A reduction of anxiety from sixty to eight percent is statistically significant. This study demonstrates that massage therapy is a powerful tool with tremendous potential. Introducing such healing therapies in the workplace would be a valuable tool for employers for treating, managing and possibly preventing stress disorders.

Other recent studies have shown that massage therapy can help with pain management (including labor), aiding children with diabetes, sports-related soreness, alcohol withdrawal, immune function, and cancer treatment.

Who knows? Maybe someday, a trip to the spa may be just what your doctor orders.

**About the Author:** Cindie Leonard has a Master's degree in Psychology and specializes in research (namely psychoneuroimmunology), enjoys savoring time with family and friends, spoiling her pets, travel, beaches, cavorting around San Diego, volunteering at Torrey Pines State Reserve, and working on perfecting the art of "il dolce far niente." <http://www.cindieleonard.com>