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The value of therapeutic massage/touch in promoting physical and mental health

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Abstract

Humans have relied on their five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell—for purposes of communication within their environment. The most crucial of all the senses is that of touch. Touch is a basic human need and is the first form of communication humans experience (Jones, 1994). According to Colton (1983), touching is necessary throughout the lifespan. As humans mature, their reaching and touching needs change. Infants and 1 children progress from relying on their parents to being more independent and self-sufficient. The process of maturation is an important component to personal growth and development and manifests different touch needs. Buscaglia (1984) suggested that humans' ability to become emotionally involved with others is directly related to their experiences of being stroked, caressed, and cuddled as children. Human beings learn affection, security, and tenderness through the sense of touch. Small children rely on touch to soothe their bumps and bruises. Reassuring hugs comfort adults who have experienced grief, hurt feelings, or failure. Professional athletes can be seen exchanging hugs of celebration on the field or court (McAuliffe & McAuliffe, 1984).

THE VALUE OF THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE/TOUCH IN
PROMOTING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Humans have relied on their five senses--sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell--for purposes of communication within their environment. The most crucial of all the senses is that of touch. Touch is a basic human need and is the first form of communication humans experience (Jones, 1994).

According to Colton (1983), touching is necessary throughout the lifespan. As humans mature, their reaching and touching needs change. Infants and children progress from relying on their parents to being more independent and self-sufficient. The process of maturation is an important component to personal growth and development and manifests different touch needs. Buscaglia (1984) suggested that humans' ability to become emotionally involved with others is directly related to their experiences of being stroked, caressed, and cuddled as children. Human beings learn affection, security, and tenderness through the sense of touch. Small children rely on touch to soothe their bumps and bruises. Reassuring hugs comfort adults who have experienced grief, hurt feelings, or failure. Professional athletes can be seen exchanging hugs of celebration on the field or court (McAuliffe & McAuliffe, 1984).

Touch is the first sense humans use. While intrauterine, a fetus is in touch with its mother,

feeling the mother's heartbeat and the warmth of the amniotic fluid in which it lives. Touch is important before, during, and after birth according to Montagu (1978). It was previously believed that mammals routinely lick their newborns immediately after birth to cleanse and groom them. Montagu (1978) reported that newborn animals are touched by their mothers from the time they are born to stimulate their respiratory and digestive systems. Without this stimulation, they would soon die. Human babies experience this necessary touching during the birth process, more specifically the period of labor (Montagu, 1978). Montagu (1978) believed the uterine contractions during birth served the same purpose for the human baby as licking does for newborn animals.

Colton (1983) reported that humans are born with intense "skin hunger." Montagu (1978) reported that the average human body has eighteen square feet of skin, studded with millions of tiny nerve endings or touch transmitters. When someone is touched, the appropriate touch transmitters are activated and relay sensory messages via the central nervous system to the brain. At birth, infants derive all sensations and information through their skin, the largest organ of their bodies. The tactile sensations infants receive, either through snuggling with a parent/caregiver, listening to a

heartbeat, or drinking from a bottle, send electrical impulses along their nerves and help stimulate biochemical reactions that enable their brains to develop and function. The chemicals produced by the sensations of touch nourish their blood, muscles, nerve cells, hormones, and internal organs. Deprived of touch to stimulate the chemicals, infants may be starved just as if they were deprived of nourishment.

Spitz (1965, cited in Colton, 1983) observed abandoned babies, both in a hospital setting and in a Mexican orphanage. One out of every three babies in the hospital was listless, withdrawn, and very slow in mental and physical development, despite being well-fed and living in sanitary conditions. The conditions of the orphanage were less sanitary, but the infants were happier, more alert, more active, and cried less. The Mexican babies were rocked, held, and sang to on a daily basis by the village women. Touched babies were able to survive and thrive under less than standard conditions, while those left in incubators and isolettes tended to become ill, were less social, and developmentally delayed. Spitz (1965, cited in Colton, 1983) observed that marasmus (Greek for "wasting away") occurred when the babies were not touched, cuddled, or held.

Touch needs continue across the lifespan, despite cultural restrictions on touching. Jourard (1966, cited

in Colton, 1983), a psychologist, performed an observational study of touch habits among Americans and Frenchmen. In an hour's time, he found the French touched each other at least 100 times, while Americans touched each other no more than 4 times. Jourard (1966, cited in Colton, 1983) suggested that Americans are raised to think that touch must be either aggressive or sexual.

From our first moments to our last, touch has the power to soothe, comfort, and heal. It is the means by which we satisfy our most basic human needs. The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical origin of therapeutic massage/touch and its role in promoting physical and mental health.

Historical Overview of Therapeutic Massage/Touch

Massage in ancient times was one of the earliest remedial practices of humankind and was believed to be the most natural way to relieve pain and discomfort (Beck, 1988). Artifacts have been found to support the belief that humans used herbs and oils in prehistoric times to massage their ailing bodies. In many ancient cultures, a special person such as a healer, religious leader, or doctor served as the administrator of massage. Therapeutic massage was used as an analgesic as well as a means to improving people's general sense

of well-being and physical appearance (Beck, 1988). The therapeutic use of hands is an ancient example of how individuals have the ability to help others in the healing and recovery process following injury or illness (Krieger, 1979).

Records as early as 3000 B.C. revealed the extensive use of massage. Massage was used by the Chinese, Japanese, Persians, and Egyptians to reduce fatigue, induce relaxation, and provide relief and comfort from back pain (Beck, 1988). The use of touch by Egyptians was depicted in cave paintings and in carvings on the walls in Egyptian tombs (Jones, 1994). The practice of massage moved to Europe before 300 B.C. The Greeks were proponents of physical fitness and used massage regularly as a relief from physical injuries and mental exertion after a contest. Greek women were also athletic and participated in gymnastics and dancing; they used massage as part of their beauty regimen by using herbs and oils as healing and protective agents. Today's holistic health concept, which encourages the total health of body and mind, originated with the Greeks (Beck, 1988).

The Romans adapted the principles of massage developed by the Greeks (Beck, 1988). They viewed massage as an art and used it regularly in public bath houses. Fragrant oils were used and were thought to

bring relief from physical conditions such as stiff or sore muscles and debilitating diseases (Beck, 1988). Celsus, a distinguished Roman physician, recognized the value of massage to relieve headaches, to strengthen muscles, and to ward off paralysis. He also found that massage improved circulatory conditions and internal disorders and reduced edema. Roman emperors and mighty kings of France and England viewed massage as beneficial in relieving or curing goiter and other throat ailments (Krieger, 1979). As the Roman Empire declined, the use of public bath houses and massage diminished as well; the arts and sciences experienced setbacks due to wars and religious superstitions that downplayed the importance of self (Beck, 1988). The Catholic Church had a very powerful influence on the Romans during the Middle Ages and viewed any type of massage with suspicion and as a work of witchcraft or the devil (Krieger, 1979).

The Renaissance brought about a renewed interest in the sciences and arts (Beck, 1988). Physical health and appearance were important to people again, and better health practices were utilized. The use of massage as a healing technique was reintroduced and produced positive effects for athletes, the physically disabled, and the mentally impaired (Beck, 1988).

By the late 1700s, the Swedes were using massage as a treatment for physical conditions (Beck, 1988). The Ling System, developed by a Swedish physiologist, consisted of passive and active movements, an extension of the Japanese philosophy. Modern massage therapy has been credited to Dr. Johann Mezger of Holland. Through his efforts, massage became recognized as a fundamental practice in the rehabilitation of physical conditions (Beck, 1988).

The late 1800s and early 1900s brought about more organized efforts to promote massage and the benefits of massage (Beck, 1988). World War I brought an avid interest in massage to the battlefield; massage was very therapeutic in the treatment of war injuries. Military hospitals used massage on a larger scale during World War II. The years following World War II brought a decline in the use of massage. Mechanical means of physical therapy were introduced, and manual massage played a minor role in physical rehabilitation. Manual massage is being reintroduced today and its popularity is rising. Modern techniques of massage have roots in systems originally developed by the Swedes, Germans, Japanese, French, English, and Chinese (Beck, 1988).

Historically, massage has been viewed as a means to enhance the physical health and sense of well-being for individuals of all ages. It is a safe and useful

component in holistic health for everyone across the lifespan.

Role of Therapeutic Massage/Touch As It Relates
To Physical and Mental Health

Massage has physiological and psychological effects and benefits. It is one of the more influential ways to ensure greater bodily functions and more stable mental health (Jones, 1994).

Manipulation of the limbs, muscles, and skin stimulates better circulation, reduces stiffness and soreness, and imparts radiant skin. Regular and systematic manipulation of the muscles causes muscles to become firmer with a greater supply of blood in the tissues (Wine, 1992). The use of massage and touch therapy has had profound effects on diverse individuals of all ages. The following four sections will articulate and summarize the findings of various research studies on massage/touch as they relate to infants, adults, the elderly, and athletes.

Infants

Infants need the gentle touch of a caregiver to help them adjust and adapt to their environment. Rice (1978, cited in Campbell, 1992) was a forerunner in the area of infant massage, both prenatal and postpartum. Rice developed a stroking method to stimulate more activity within the womb. Rice's studies found that touching,

movement, and sound stimulated the nerve pathways of the fetus. Intrauterine massage resulted in increased neurological growth, more rapid weight gain due to increased levels of growth hormones, and greater brain activity. Massage is beneficial in and outside of the womb; growth is enhanced in both environments by massage techniques.

In another study, Gregory (1993) massaged high-risk babies in a neonatal intensive care unit in California and taught their mothers how to use massage. Gregory's newborns were drug-exposed, underweight, and premature; they also had various physical disabilities which included congenital abnormalities, heart disease, and pulmonary disorders. Prior to the advent of regular massages, the newborns experienced withdrawal and exhibited irritability, tremors, and inconsolable crying. Gregory's (1993) preliminary data found an increase in oxygen levels during and after massage and babies had longer sleep intervals. Drug-exposed babies were more responsive to social stimulation after two or three massages. Gregory's techniques included Swedish and Indian strokes, reflexology, touch therapy, and gentle exercises. Gregory's (1993) study supported the idea that the proper use of touch made a difference in the recovery and outcome for high-risk infants.

Field, Scanberg, Scafidi, Bauer, Vega-Lahr, Garcia, Nystrom, and Kohn (1986) also studied the effects of massage on premature infants. They discovered that newborns who received massage treatments were more responsive, gained weight faster, and were discharged from the hospital sooner than those who were not massaged. Field and her colleagues (1986) also studied preterm newborns prenatally exposed to drugs; these infants benefitted greatly from daily massage and passive limb exercises. Field's studies suggested that infants gained weight faster, scored better on the Brazelton tests, were more receptive to social interaction, and were discharged from the hospital four to six days sooner, reducing financial and emotional strain on the baby and family.

These studies suggest that massage helps to facilitate healthy growth and development of infants. It also provides a soothing way to stabilize and enhance their emotional well-being as they adjust and adapt to their surroundings.

Adult/Hospital Inpatient

Infant massage programs have opened the doors for more hospital-based massage programs for adults. Williams (1993, cited in Pasini, 1993) studied the effects of massage on patients at the Planetree Unit of San Francisco's California Pacific Medical Center.

Since 1985, therapeutic massage has been an integral part of the healing process at this hospital for patients who suffered from a variety of medical conditions. Massage was used to help the patients bring about their own healing; it was geared toward relaxation achieved through skilled therapeutic touch. Massage not only assisted the body in relaxing, but helped to reduce the anxiety associated with hospitalization and medical procedures according to Williams (1993, cited in Pasini, 1993). He found many benefits of patient massage, such as pain relief, reduced edema, and improved circulation, as well as relief from extended bedrest and an improved body image. Williams (1993, cited in Pasini, 1993) believed that massage enhanced the mind as well as the physical body. Relieving anxieties and tensions through massage facilitated the healing process and allowed patients to access their own healing.

Therapeutic Touch also enhanced individuals' ability to bring about their own healing. It is used in hospitals across the United States and has been added to nursing curriculums at several large medical centers. Krieger (1979), founder of Therapeutic Touch, based her research on the therapeutic use of hands, which she posited is a universal human behavior. Therapeutic Touch replicated an ancient mode of healing and combined it with modern science. Krieger's (1979) study included

individuals with severe neck and back pain, chronic migraine headaches, and seizures. The study findings reported that Therapeutic Touch increased the hemoglobin of red blood cells and had dramatic effects on brain wave activity, generated a relaxation response, and relieved pain. Krieger (1979) also suggested that Therapeutic Touch invoked a sense of responsibility in the recipient for his or her own physical and mental health.

The use of massage and Therapeutic Touch with hospital patients facilitates the recovery process and helps to reduce general feelings of anxiety. Relaxation helps them to access their physical healing and to reduce their psychological stress.

Elderly

The need for touch in the later years is as important as it is in the beginning of life. Fanslow (1983, cited in Barnard & Brazelton, 1990) suggested that the human need for touch increases with the aging process. Physical, psychological, and emotional touches are necessary for the development and maintenance of security, self-image, trust, and independence during the aging process (Jones, 1994). Over a four-year period from 1979-1983, Fanslow studied the effects of Therapeutic Touch, a technique developed by Krieger (1979), as a primary modality with the elderly.

Fanslow's (1983, cited in Barnard & Brazelton, 1990) study involved individuals who endured and coped with varying limitations due to medical conditions. Medications were also used in addition to Therapeutic Touch. Fanslow (1983, cited in Barnard & Brazelton, 1990) also used Therapeutic Touch as a treatment modality to assist elders with the death and dying process by facilitating the predeath separation period, making the transition from life to death more manageable, and helping family members adjust to the impending death. Therapeutic Touch enabled them to bring closure to their relationships and helped reduce the fears, anxieties, and insecurities associated with the finality of death; touch helped make the transition from life to death less traumatic.

Cheung (1992) studied how massage altered the negative moods of the hospitalized elderly, who manifested a variety of medical diagnoses. Cheung (1992) suggested that anxiety in the later years may be associated with helplessness due to the loss of control in lives of the elderly.

Cheung (1992) asked individuals to complete a Mood Chart before and after the study; the Mood Chart was originally developed by Rowland (1984) for research on the benefits of touch with the depressed elderly. Throughout the study, Cheung (1992) observed

individuals' behaviors and asked for their feelings during and after each massage. Results indicated that massage enhanced relaxation, reduced physical pain, and elevated an individual's mood.

Depression in the elderly can upset their usual sleep patterns, create emotional distress, increase feelings of sadness, boredom, and helplessness, and decrease their appetites. Therapeutic massage has been found to help the elderly feel better physically and psychologically in their senior years.

Athletes

Athletes have benefitted from the use of therapeutic massage just as the elderly have, only in different ways and for different purposes. Wine (1992) studied the benefits of pre-event massage on Russian athletes and replicated research conducted at the Institute of Physical Education in Moscow in 1963. The 1963 research indicated that pre-event massage enabled long distance runners to run faster, power lifters to lift greater weights, and shot putters to hurl farther in consecutive tries. Wine (1992) reported that the primary goal of the pre-event massage was to get the Olympic athletes mentally ready for competition. Wine (1992) made four different massage techniques available to the athletes: warm-up massage, heating massage, massage for the lethargic athlete, and massage for the anxious athlete.

Wine (1992) incorporated principles first used by the Greeks and techniques later refined by the Swedish (Beck, 1988). Petrissage and effleurage strokes were used to increase arterial blood circulation in the skin and muscles and applied the use of massage to enhance athletic performance and maintain physical readiness to endure training and competitions. The results of Wine's study (1992) suggested that massage enhanced athletic performance by reducing muscle cramping, increasing blood circulation to the muscles, and increasing mental alertness and concentration during workouts and athletic events.

In another study by Kresge (1985), athletes used massage as a part of training and basic conditioning. Massage enabled the athletes to recover more rapidly and completely from injuries or soreness, to maintain muscle flexibility and relaxation during workouts, and to improve their overall performance and endurance during training and competitions. Kresge applied the technique of Swedish massage in addition to other forms of compression to injuries and muscle groups.

The effects and implications of massage to the athletes were found to benefit four areas: the vascular, lymph, muscular, and skeletal systems. Kresge (1985) found that massage positively affected each of the systems by increasing circulation, relaxing muscles,

reducing muscle fatigue and pain, and removing metabolic wastes. Massage also assisted the athletes in identifying areas of tension and trigger points; muscle relaxation and trigger point relief reduced the tension and resistance of the muscles effected by maximum training or over-training. The athletes' mental alertness also improved as a result of the massage, and they were better able to concentrate on their training and performance.

The therapeutic value of massage has numerous physiological and psychological effects on athletes as reflected in the studies by Wine (1992) and Kresge (1985). Massage was effective in improving their overall training and performance and in increasing their mental alertness and concentration during practice and athletic events.

Conclusion

Our society is becoming more aware of the need for touch. Colton (1983) cited five reasons for this increased awareness. First, touch was considered to be a component of sex and was viewed as an act of procreation. Over population has resulted in abolishing ancient laws and religious implications of sex. The second reason focuses on the medicinal qualities of touch. High medical costs have created opportunities for humans to learn touch techniques that promote

physical and psychological healing; we have learned that the pain centers of our brain do not function when endorphins are activated and released into our bloodstreams. The women's movement has created a third reason for our interest in touch. Strong double-standards of touch between genders is decreasing as a result of the feminist movement. Fourth, the age of high technology has also caused an awareness of touch; working with computers and machines has created a longing for the warmth of soft flesh and gentle stroking. And finally, our desire for touch is directly related to the depersonalized conditions of modern life that produce angry, depressed, anxious, and often violent people. By nature, we long to love others and to be loved in return. Touching helps to harmonize bodily functions and psychological needs.

Touch is not only nice, it is necessary to life. Cheung's (1992) research supports the theory that touch is a vital component of our physical and emotional well-being. Touch can relieve pain, depression, and anxiety (Keating, 1984). According to Jones (1994), touch is more than a physiological need and a facilitator to communication; it is directly related to our self-identity. Gregory's (1993) study posited that touch helps us to feel better about ourselves and our environment, has a positive effect on children's

development, and produces physiological changes. According to Keating (1984), we are just beginning to comprehend and facilitate the power of touch.

In our touch-starved society, massage and Therapeutic Touch can lend themselves to creating a culture that is more satisfied, less stressed, and more alert. Touch is a powerful communicator. Touch is a basic human need, and touching is every bit as important as being touched.

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