

Stress Relief with Therapeutic Massage

By making massage a regular part of your life you can experience ongoing, cumulative effects of reduced muscle tension, increased vitality, and a calmer state of mind.

Though stress can be unpleasant, it is an important and useful part of life. It stimulates learning and personal growth, and is a natural part of any important accomplishment. In fact, the most effective and healthiest people are not those who avoid stress, but those who respond successfully to it.

Therapeutic massage is a remarkable tool for helping you cope with stress. In the short term, a deeply relaxing massage can give you a welcome break and help you feel better both physically and mentally. Over time, you can use massage to help you develop healthy and productive responses to the stressful challenges in your daily life.



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The Stress Response: "Flight or Flight"

Under stress, your body reacts just as your ancestors' did when confronted by a physical threat: you mobilise to fight or flee. Your nervous system becomes highly activated and hormonal changes, such as the release of adrenaline, prepare your body to respond to an emergency. Muscles tense for action, heart rate and blood pressure increase, breathing becomes rapid and shallow, and digestion and other maintenance functions are put on hold.

Unfortunately, fighting or running is rarely a useful response to modern difficulties. Much of our stress comes from an accelerated pace of living. Major life changes occur with increasing frequency such as moving to a new city, relationship upheavals, or changes in employment. In addition, today's stresses are often ambiguous and ongoing, for example money worries, environmental concerns, interpersonal conflicts, or job expectation. Without a sense of resolution - knowing that danger has passed - your body and mind receive no clear signal that it is safe to stop, relax and recuperate.

The Stress Cycle

With little chance to rest and recover, you may find that your stress leads to a self-perpetuating cycle in which you become less and less able to unwind. Stress-related muscle tension can develop into painful conditions such as chronic headaches or shoulder and back pain, which are themselves stressful. Worry and physical tension can interfere with sleep, leaving you exhausted with little energy or mental focus to deal decisively with your problems. You may even find that your normal coping strategies add to your stress as you struggle to find time for exercise or to organise recreational outings.

As pressure mounts, the background level of stress hormones in your bloodstream can become elevated to the point that very little is needed to trigger the stress response. You may find yourself in a constant state of agitation, reacting not only to actual events, but to anticipated events and memories. In fact, with energy so depleted, you may come to rely on a stress-induced jolt of adrenaline just to get through the day.

Therapeutic Massage: Emergency Relaxation

In a "stress emergency", massage is an easy and pleasant coping strategy that requires nothing more from you than to let go and receive. Massage provides immediate relief with soothing sensory input that refocuses your attention on the here and now, interrupting your cycle of mental agitation. Studies show that massage triggers the "relaxation response", taking your body off alert and setting in motion the biological processes needed to restore your physical resources. Heart rate and blood pressure decrease, breathing slows and deepens, tense muscles relax. Digestion and restorative functions return to normal, and your hormone balance shifts to create a state of deep relaxation.

Renewing Your Energy Reserves

When you are overtaxed and running on empty, massage can help you recharge and restore the energy and creativity you need to successfully meet your challenges in a number of ways.

Release of Muscle Tension

Massage can relieve painful muscle tension that can sap your energy. Your massage therapist may use kneading and stretching to loosen your muscles and their connective tissue coverings (called fascia). Another common technique is to use skilfully directed pressure to release painful "trigger points" in both muscles and fascia. Though the effects of a single session may be temporary, a well spaced series can actually reverse chronic muscle contraction. Massage also stimulates the release of endorphins, your body's natural pain killers, giving you a "pain break" and creating a sense of well-being.

Increased Circulation

Massage increases circulation, clearing out accumulated stress hormones and waste products that can make you feel tired and sore, and bathing your cells with nutrients vital for tissue repair. A short-term increase in oxygen to your brain can reduce mental fatigue and improve your ability to concentrate and attend to your problems. As your tissues are cleansed and flooded with nutrients, you may even experience relief from emotional symptoms such as anxiety or depression, along with a renewed sense of optimism which can last for days.

Improved Sleep

The quality of restful sleep usually improves in the days following a massage. This gives your body a chance to further repair and restore your energy levels.

Psychological Support

Finally, massage gives you a measure of control. Just knowing there is something you can do to take care of yourself when you need it helps you feel less at the mercy of external events.

Learning How To Relax

Relaxation is a skill that can be learned. Through massage you can experience the feeling of deep relaxation, making it easier to consciously recreate that state in your daily life.

Massage also focuses attention on sensations in your body which can help you become aware of areas where you store tension. This awareness can help you recognise early stress warning signs such as a stomach ache or shoulder pain. You can then act to take control of both your situation and your response to it.

Support For Healthful Changes

Massage is something good you can do for yourself that requires no extensive planning or physical exertion. As you take care of yourself in this simple way, you may find yourself developing the energy and inclination to pursue other healthful activities such as exercise, good nutrition, or spending time with family and friends.

Your massage therapist can be a valuable source of information on other avenues of support as well. She or he may be able to recommend counsellors specialising in stress management or other areas such as grief, family issues, recovery or depression. Your massage therapist may also be able to recommend books or instructors for stress reduction techniques such as yoga or stretching, biofeedback, nutrition, or exercise alternatives.

Is Massage Always Appropriate?

Massage for relaxation is almost always helpful. However, there are certain conditions for which massage is not appropriate. Keep your massage therapist informed about any medical conditions you may have so he or she can make sure your massage is suited to your health needs.

Finding What's Best For You

When and how often to get a massage varies from person to person. You may want to schedule one just before or after a stressful event to cultivate a calm state of mind or to help you recover. If you are in crisis or want to reverse the effects of long-term stress, consider scheduling a series of massages.

If you feel you are under so much pressure you can't afford to relax, or if the thought of being 'soothed' seems unwelcome, this may be the time you most need to take time out to strengthen your reserves. Talk to your massage therapist. There are many styles of massage, and you can request a massage that leaves you feeling alert and energised.