Can Massages Help Depression?

by ERIC PATTERSON

The Benefits of Massage for Depression

You're stressed! Physically, you feel tense, tight and uncomfortable. You feel the knots in your back, and even when you try to relax, it seems that you can never unwind.

Mentally, your mind never slows down. Instead of thinking about what is going on around you, you are thinking about what had happened and what must be done in the future.

You're stressed, but you know the source of your stress: depression. Your depression makes everything worse and overwhelmingly negative. Unfortunately, stress and depression have developed an intimate relationship with each other. Your depression makes your stress worse, and your stress returns the favor by making your depression worse.

Despite their benefits, it seems that therapy and medication just have not been enough to alleviate all of your symptoms. You need something that can melt away the stress you experience. You need something that can treat your depression. You need another option that will complement the current treatments. You need a massage.

What is Massage?

Chances are excellent that if you ask someone to describe their perspective of massage to you, it will differ greatly from your perception. Everyone knows what massage is, but there are many different types.

Generally, massage refers to the act of pressing, rubbing, or manipulating someone with the intention of targeting their skin, muscles, tendons and ligaments. Some massage can be gentle and relaxing. Others can be rigorous and invigorating.

Physical Benefits of Massage

For thousands of years, people have experienced the positive effects related to massage. Although some claims have been stretches of the imagination with no proof to support their claims, others are well substantiated. Massage is believed to aid in:

- Enhancing the immune system.
- Treating various levels and locations of pain.
- Increasing alertness.
- Improving digestion.
- Relieving headaches and migraines.
- Treating injuries to muscles and connective tissue.

Mental Health Benefits of Massage

As it turns out, the benefits of massage cross over from physical health to mental health. An analysis of many studies found that depression, anxiety and ratings of stress improved with massage therapy.

This is significant because depression is not merely having a low or irritable mood. Depression is a multifaceted condition that includes problems with:

- Poor sleep.
- Weight loss without trying to lose weight.
- Lower levels of energy.
- Lower interest in activities you used to enjoy.
- Feeling slowed down.
- Feeling high levels of guilt with low self-esteem.
- Thinking a lot about death.
- Reduced ability to think clearly and concentrate.

It seems that massage can aid in improving all of these symptoms to alleviate overall depression. The best part is that massage is not associated with a high risk of side effects or unwanted results like some other treatments.

The Science of Massage

Massage can treat physical problems through a direct interaction with the body. The mental health aspects are a bit less direct but still profound.

Massage will change and disrupt the chemicals that are distributed throughout the body in the brain. Most notably, massage interacts with cortisol, serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine.

- **Cortisol is a hormone produced by the adrenal glands during times of stress.** Problems emerge when your body is under high levels of stress and produces high levels of cortisol chronically. Too much of this substance is related to poor cell health that may lead to the death of cells and premature aging. Massage is shown to reduce current levels of cortisol in the body, which can boost mood, appetite and ability to sleep.
- **Serotonin is the neurotransmitter most associated with depression.** Many medications used for depression focus on increasing amounts of serotonin available in the brain. Low serotonin is related to low mood, poor sleep, poor memory and low sexual desire. High amounts of serotonin are associated with good mood and happiness. Massage may decrease depression by triggering a surge of serotonin.
- **Oxytocin is often called the “cuddle hormone” because it is released during physical touches like hugs, kisses and cuddles.** High levels of oxytocin lead to someone feeling connected to the others in their life. Without this strong sense of belonging, a person can feel isolated, frustrated and unhappy. Unsurprisingly, the physical touch of massage increases oxytocin.
- **Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that creates a rush of pleasure when available in the brain.** It is a highly rewarding sensation that people try to recreate often. Many drugs like heroin and cocaine release dopamine to produce their addictive effects. To a lesser extent, dopamine may be released during massage.

Trial and Error

Though there is good evidence pointing to massage being helpful, there is not a good understanding of what types of massage are best for various types of people.

Since massage differs greatly in type, style and level of expertise of the person giving the massage, it would be unreasonable to think that the first massage you get will dramatically change your level of depression. Because of this, it will be helpful to engage in a trial and error method of investigation to experiment with several options to note what works for you.

Massage Alternatives

Based on your resources, frequent appointments with a professional massage therapist might be difficult to obtain due to availability, finances and insurance coverage. If this applies to you, consider these alternatives:

- **Locate an amateur.** If professional massage therapists are not an option, you will have to seek out the services of an amateur. Hire, bribe, or otherwise try to convince a friend, family member, or trusted loved one to give you a massage. If they lack expertise, be sure to provide feedback on what seems helpful and what seem uncomfortable.
- **Find substitutions for physical contact.** Kiss. Have sex. Since these forms of physical contact release oxytocin, they may be able to produce some of the same massage benefits.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR).** What PMR lacks in the physical touch from another, it makes up for with its ability to relieve tension and de-stress your body. PMR works by alternating the process of tensing and relaxing sections of your body, which creates a self-massaging effect.

Don’t stop your medications when trying massage for depression, and be sure to keep your therapy appointments.

Massage seems to be an effective measure to alleviate depression, but it appears that the best success comes when the physical touch is added to your existing treatment plan rather than as an alternative. This low-risk, high-reward option might be the intervention need to gain the happiness you have been seeking.