

Orlando Sentinel

A Magic Touch for many...Massage moves into the mainstream as more of us see it as essential to our well-being.

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April 24, 2007

Once, before she developed osteoporosis, Kathryn Olson considered her occasional massages an indulgence. Now, she partakes of weekly sessions for a different reason.

"It not only feels good, it's a wellness thing," says Olson, who lives at Mayflower Retirement Community in Winter Park, of the massages she receives to curb pain from osteoporosis.



One in six Americans annually enjoys a massage, most regarding it as pampering. But an increasing number seek relief from injury or pain, or want to maintain overall health and wellness.

"As Americans focus more on wellness and disease prevention, many healthy practices that once were viewed as luxuries are moving to routine use. Massage is among those practices," says M.K. Brennan, president-elect of the American Massage Therapy Association, a consumer-education and professional group for massage therapists. "Taking time out from one's busy day to get a massage is a step toward wellness. It points to a conscious decision to spend time paying attention to how one is feeling."


Help for weekend warriors

Indeed, more people are paying attention, according to the massage association's most recent annual survey. Thirty percent of people who have received massages in the past five years did so not to alleviate stress but for "medical/health reasons," and 48 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds have sought a massage to palliate pain.

Dr. Walt Larimore, a spokesman for the American Academy of Family Physicians, says that though no evidence backs claims that massage can cure illnesses, it might relieve some types of pain, help reduce stress and aid in relaxation.

"Most family physicians understand the evidence favoring the benefits of massage," says Larimore, co-author of *Alternative Medicine: The Christian Handbook*, "if conducted by someone trained, experienced, and certified in providing" massage.

How massage works largely remains a mystery, but a growing body of research has given a positive rundown on rubdowns, suggesting massage provides benefits such as relaxation, pain relief, stress reduction, dips in blood pressure and boosted immune response.

Cherie LaFaver, a licensed massage therapist with Massage Therapy Specialists at Orlando Regional Wellness Center, says she is noticing more clients "coming in for pain management, whether post-injury, rehab, or weekend warriors." 

Clients who overdo it on the Stairmaster or suffer from post-surgical pain also stream into the Florida Hospital Rehabilitation and Sports Medicine center, says Jana Carrington, a licensed massage therapist. And she is seeing an "increasing number" of students with upper neck and back pain because of overstuffed backpacks.

Massage can provide muscle-pain relief, Carrington says, and through "kneading and twisting," help dissipate residual chemicals that cause pain and soreness.

Find a therapist

There are more than 80 varieties of massage, according to the National Center of Complementary and Alternative Therapies at the National Institutes of Health.

Predominant styles include Swedish, designed to relieve muscle tension and aid flexibility; deep tissue, effective for muscle soreness; sports, which aids in flexibility and injury prevention; and chair, a fully clothed form that focuses on relaxation and improving circulation.

Generally, Swedish massage evokes relaxation, and other types, such as deep tissue or neuromuscular therapy, are linked to pain relief. Brennan says "clearly discussing your desired results with the massage therapist . . . is strongly recommended."

Which is why choosing a credentialed therapist is critical. Ask friends for referrals. If you pluck names from the Yellow Pages, do your homework. Before you schedule an appointment, ask the therapist:


Is he licensed to practice massage?

Is she nationally certified in therapeutic massage and bodywork?

What modes of massage are offered?

Ask where he or she was trained. And make sure a therapist has a license number or establishment license number on any advertisements, Carrington says.

You should expect to pay \$65 to \$80 in Central Florida for a basic 50-minute massage, Carrington says.


But don't expect your insurance company to pick up the tab for a "wellness" massage. Insurance companies have been slow to cover costs without a prescription -- although the number of people whose massages were defrayed by an insurance company or co-pay doubled to 10 percent last year, according to the massage association survey. 

Ready to dance

At the Mayflower, massage has long been part of the wellness routine. Though the center doesn't employ therapists, wellness coordinator Elyse Baclar says the staff advocates and encourages massage. Last year, the Mayflower hosted a lecture on the benefits of massage, and residents regularly receive rubdowns from visiting therapists.

"Nobody ever loses their need to look good and feel good," Baclar says. "You feel great and it relaxes you. You can work out sore muscles, loosen up joints."

Just ask Olson, 89. Living with osteoporosis means a steady ache for the widow, "unless I sit or lie down, and I don't want to give into it like that." Steady doses of massage, she says, help her put up a fight.

Sometimes, in fact, after massage, she feels the urge to spin some Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw records and cut a rug -- as she and her husband often did. 

"I," she says with a certain spryness in her voice, "have to keep on keeping on."

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