

MESSAGE IN THE TREATMENT OF EATING DISORDERS

By Jean Ives

"I'm starving to death!" A harmless exaggeration to most of us, but not so lighthearted to the more than 10 million Americans who struggle with an eating disorder. The causes of eating disorders are many and not fully understood, and the treatments are not altogether predictable. Massage, however, holds promise for some relief.

The [National Eating Disorders Association](#) identifies anorexia nervosa, binge eating and bulimia as the three most common eating disorders.

- Anorexia nervosa is characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss.
- Binge eating is characterized by frequent episodes of eating large quantities of food in short periods of time.
- Bulimia is characterized by a cycle of bingeing and self-induced vomiting.

Eating disorders are serious and life-threatening. In fact, victims of eating disorders [have a far higher death rate](#) than the general population. A [2001 study](#) of the long term prospects of anorexia nervosa sufferers found that "approximately one half of patients with anorexia nervosa were fully recovered at 21 years but the other half had a chronic or lethal course."



The reason eating disorders can be fatal is that people with eating disorders believe they are obese when they're actually starving to death. Symptoms include preoccupation with food and diet, poor body image, low self-esteem, high anxiety, depression and perfectionist behavior. The symptoms of eating disorders on which massage has the most measurable effect are a person's perception of body image and levels of anxiety and depression.

Eating disorders arise from a complex variety of physical, psychological, emotional, social and cultural issues. Some individuals who struggle with eating disorders have a history of sexual abuse or of having been ridiculed for their weight. Social issues include a pervasive culture that glorifies what "the perfect body" should look like. [Recent research](#) has also confirmed a genetic predisposition to the development of eating disorders.

Because of this complexity of issues, eating disorders are highly resistant to treatment. No treatment for eating disorders has yet been found that is consistently effective and successful. For example, [a June 2006 study](#) funded by the National Institutes of Health concluded that Prozac, an antidepressant frequently used to treat anorexia, was not effective. Common approaches to helping treat eating disorders or alleviate symptoms include psychotherapy, medication, behavioral therapy and alternative therapies such as yoga, acupuncture and massage. A study conducted at the [Touch Research Institute](#) (TRI) concluded that massage alleviates anxiety, depression, eating disorder symptoms, poor body image and biochemical abnormalities for women diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. You can read an extended [summary of this study in a Word document](#).

In this study, "Anorexia Nervosa Symptoms Are Reduced by Massage Therapy," massaged patients reported improved attitudes on the Eating Disorder Inventory, a 64-item self-report that scores drive for thinness, bulimia, body dissatisfaction, ineffectiveness, perfectionism, interpersonal distrust, interoceptive awareness (stimuli arising within the body) and maturity fears. In addition to the self-report data, decreases in saliva cortisol levels of the massage participants suggested reduced stress. The study also showed an unexpected increase in dopamine and norepinephrine levels, suggesting a positive effect on depression. These findings support [previous findings on the benefits of massage therapy for bulimic women](#).

The authors of the TRI study suggest that a possible factor in the effectiveness of massage is that anorexic individuals report a strong desire for more nurturing touch. Compared with a nonclinical sample, anorexics have reported greater touch deprivation during their current lives as well as their childhood.

Studies suggest that the inclusion of positive touch experiences such as massage therapy may be important for successful treatment.

Massage is included as part of the treatment regimen at [The Anna Westin House](#), a residential eating disorder treatment center for women, which opened in Chaska, Minnesota, in 2003. In addition to giving massages, therapists there teach patients how to use self-massage for reducing anxiety, how to talk about their own physical sensations and how to set healthy and safe boundaries for touch.

The authors of the TRI study conclude, “By helping women feel more comfortable with their bodies, massage therapy may have facilitated close physical contacts in intimate relationships, thereby satisfying the need for tactile nurturance. Continued research is needed to determine the relationship between body image and the need for tactile nurturance among anorexic women receiving massage therapy.”

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