

The Healing Touch: Massage and the Elderly

By Kate McCarthy

Human touch provides amazing benefits to the aged and has been used since ancient times to relieve discomfort in the body, mind and the soul. A simple caress or gentle massage can make an enormous difference in the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of people of all ages, yet for the elderly it can be especially helpful in relieving pain, reducing anxieties and warding off loneliness.



Touch is a natural and therapeutic way of interacting with the elderly. Yet according to leaders in touch therapy, the elderly are often denied touch and its life-enhancing benefits. In fact the majority of residents living in facilities designed for the elderly are rarely touched outside the hands of those who care for them. Ashley Montagu, author of TOUCHING, says that people are “unwilling to face the facts of aging” and so shy away from the elderly, failing to recognize their need for physical contact. One only has to notice an elder’s response to a hug or caress to understand how important the tactile stimulation of touching is for their well-being. Many elderly people are starved for a gentle touch.

Massage is a natural and efficient way of administering touch to the elderly. It is an effective complimentary therapy to traditional and conventional treatments for the many physical ailments associated with aging. The physical benefits of massage for the elderly include:

- Restores range of motion - Arthritis and osteoporosis stiffen and cripple the aged, but massage softens tight muscles and restores natural joint lubrication increasing mobility. Massage also aids in increasing muscle strength and coordination.
- Reduces high blood pressure - Massage improves lymph and blood circulation and relieves the tension that often leads to high blood pressure. Better circulation increases the amount of oxygen flowing to muscles and cells and effectively removes toxins from the body. Lower blood pressure reduces stress on the heart.
- Relieves pain - The gentle pressure of massage can decrease the need for pain medications. By temporarily blocking pain nerve signals and encouraging the release of endorphins, massage can reduce pain and in some cases eliminate it completely. Massage is extensively used for rehabilitation after surgery to hasten the healing process.
- Improves sleep and mental clarity - Massage helps combat insomnia and other sleep problems that are common among the aged. Cognitive functions are

improved as massage temporarily interrupts patterns of stress, giving the elderly more clarity and control over their situations.

- Assists in skin preservation – Massage has long been used in preventing pressure sores and bed sores. Combined with oils or lotions, massage soothes dry and rough skin.
- Aids in digestion – Massage increases appetites as well as assists with the digestion and elimination processes.

Beyond physical benefits, massage also assists with psychological and emotional issues often faced by the elderly.

- Manages stress – Aging has its own stressors, including illness, depression, and anxiety, all of which can be alleviated by the healing power of massage.
- Diminishes dementia – Massage, even a simple hand massage, has been shown to diminish the agitation and confusion experiences by individuals suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. The calming effect of massage restores a sense of well-being and aids in facilitating communication for those who live with dementia.
- Releases emotions – Massage can be a powerful tool in allowing an aged person let go of long suppressed emotions. By bringing feelings to surface through touch, many people are able to talk about issues they had been unable to discuss previously.
- Alleviates loneliness – The physical contact of massage reassures the aged that they are not alone. The process of caressing and touching reinforces the idea of human connection by giving one-on-one attention to the aged. A gentle and caring touch can address major quality of life issues, such as depression, feelings of isolation, lack of self-esteem, fear and anxiety.

Massage for the elderly requires special care and those who provide it should have special training. Fragile skin and bones, pain medications and multiple medical conditions must be taken into consideration before providing massage. Avoid deep muscle massage and vigorous movements, as they may not be safe for the elderly. When performing massage on an elderly person, it is important to listen to their desires as well as their nonverbal communication or body language, to determine what kind of massage they prefer and how much pressure to use.

There are massage therapists who specialize in the healing power of the gentle touch massage for the elderly. Chris Anderson, LMT LPN, is a massage practitioner and instructor in the Fox Valley. Her business, Gentleheart Therapies, brings the healing power of therapeutic massage to the elderly in their own homes. Call (920) 984-0037 or visit www.gentleheart.com to learn more about gentle healing touch and massage for the elderly.

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Kate McCarthy is Director of Operations for HomeAid Health Care which provides non-medical home services for the elderly who wish to remain safe and independent at home. HomeAid is a sister company to Prairie Home Assisted Living which has served the physical, spiritual, mental and health needs of their residents since 1999. Together the two companies provide comprehensive care that meets the needs of the elderly in the Fox Valley.