Touch Me, Heal Me

Massage as a visible holistic solution

April 1, 1994 By Heidi Dorow

Physical contact – touch – is crucial for the survival and well-being of every person. For many of us, however, illness presents a serious obstacle to being touched, and even such simple acts as having our hand held or our hair stroked may become increasingly hard to come by. False fears about HIV transmission stigmatize PWAs and unnecessarily limit physical contact, while prolonged illness and weight loss can debilitate the body, making it fragile and extremely sensitive to touch. Yet it is precisely during illness that we may most need to be touched by and connected to others.

Massage, in its various forms, has been for centuries a vital element in both the promotion and the restoration of health. Nonetheless, in the ever-expanding field of alternative therapies and New Age culture that has integrated itself into PWA community, massage often gets overlooked, despite the fact that it has very real physical and psychological benefits. And as with other aspects of your treatment regimen, choosing a massage therapist and determining the type of work you want him or her to perform depends on your individual needs and goals.

Massage has two distinct applications: The better known is, of course, the more general one, as a method to improve your overall health and quality of life; equally important, however, is massage's medical application, as a means to treat specific illnesses, ailments or injuries.

The benefits of incorporating massage into your treatment regimen become apparent when you take holistic approach to your well-being. Considering your health holistically involves identifying and addressing all of its influences and aspects, including your medical, physical, emotional, social, economic and spiritual needs. People with AIDS have highly variable clinical profiles: Some suffer from one or more debilitating infections that demand the daily attention of a massage therapist; others suffer only from general malaise that accompanies night sweats, swollen lymph nodes and the side effects of anti-HIV treatment; still others are in robust health and not suffering at all. And, of course, over time, every patient's needs change, often suddenly and radically.

Medical massage is relevant to all of these phases. For example, it is very efficient at helping rid the body of waste, and "artificial" manipulation of the body provides assistance to a function that the body may have trouble performing due to illness or simple lack of proper exercise or nutrient intake. Mechanically, massage opens the blood vessels to increase circulation. In this way, it brings nutrition to the muscles without the need for increased heart action or fatiguing strenuous exercise. People who are unable to exercise or are homebound or bed-ridden may be in need of

practitioner-induced muscle stimulation for relief of frequent muscle spasms.

In addition, massage reduces certain types of edemas (swelling). Muscles rendered inactively by chronic disease become fatigued due to a buildup of waste (including uric, lactic and carbonic acids) in the tissue. As metabolic waste accumulates, the body's extremities begin to swell. Skillful massage can reduce this swelling through stimulation of the muscles and the circulatory system. This stimulation, in turn, helps to remove superficial layers of the epidermis that clog pores and prevent the elimination of waste products. Massage also generates heat and invites perspiration, which further removes waste. Additionally, massage assists in the drainage of the lymphatic system, an essential component in the production of certain antibodies that can be impaired by inactivity and decrease circulation. Other important functions massage performs include relieving pain, streching tissue and, of course, promoting an overall relaxed state.

While many of us think of massage as a quick shoulder rub, it actually has many different forms and variations: Shiatsu, Swedish, Reflexology, Therapeutic Touch and Polarity are the most common.

It is important to note that people of various stages of illness may require special care during a massage treatment. Skin disorder, such as fungal infections (e.g., eczema, psoriasis, etc.) or Kaposi's sarcoma may make a person extra sensitive to touch, and particular care should be taken during the massage.

Above all, when seeking a massage therapist, be sure that he or she is licensed and well educated about HIV disease. For more information or therapist referrals, call the American Massage Therapist Association at 312.761.AMTA.

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