

HISTORY OF HOLISTIC MASSAGE THERAPY

Holistic massage evolved from the ancient massage therapies of Egyptian, Greek and Chinese civilisations as well as from the principles of self-development disciplines such as Yoga and Thai-Chi. However, the main methods and techniques used for holistic massage derive from Swedish massage developed by Per Henrik Ling (considered to be the father of western massage).

Modern holistic massage and its meditative methods have often been attributed to the studies of the Esalen Institute in California founded in 1962. The Esalen Institute grew as a retreat aimed at personal growth using subjects such as massage, meditation, psychology and spirituality to enhance human potential.

Holistic massage owes its development and popularity to the growing awareness of complementary therapies during the last few decades and draws on other therapeutic models such as counselling.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The human body instantly responds to touch. Rubbing affected muscles and joints gives relief through the release of natural pain-killing chemicals (called endorphins). Touch can also give comfort by reducing emotional stress and mental strain.

Holistic massage treats the individual as a whole and aims to improve physical, mental and emotional well-being through touch. Holistic massage looks to correct imbalances in the body and mind that have built up over a period of time by understanding and treating the body's structure and function.

Your holistic massage practitioner will adapt treatment to the individual using techniques to induce deep relaxation and create an environment that nurtures healing. Massage improves physical movement and joint mobility, eases muscle tension and flushes out toxins that can be the cause of poor circulation. The relaxing nature of holistic massage enables stress reduction and increases emotional well-being.

A TYPICAL APPOINTMENT

Be prepared - It is advisable to choose a holistic massage practitioner who is a member of, or is accredited by, an association or professional body. This ensures your therapy session is carried out in a suitable environment and by someone who has received formal training and ongoing development. Members are also bound to a code of ethics and practice. The main holistic massage organisations are listed at the foot of this article.

Do not drink alcohol on the day of your appointment but do drink plenty of water. Have a light snack (nothing spicy or fatty) a couple of hours before you see the practitioner. Wear loose, comfortable clothing and allow plenty of time to get to your appointment; hurrying will affect your physical and mental well-being and be detrimental to the effects of the therapy.

Before your appointment, spend time thinking about your condition and what you expect to achieve with holistic massage - you may want to reduce muscle tension, gain a sense of calmness in your life or stimulate energy. Make some notes about your expectations as this will aid your therapist.

Be aware that holistic massage requires the practitioner to be hands-on and you will need to be fully or partially undressed during the treatment. Your holistic massage therapist will provide you with a robe or blanket. If you feel uncomfortable undressing, they may provide alternative techniques for your therapy. Holistic massage is sensitive to your needs so don't be afraid to discuss them with your practitioner.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Your holistic massage will take place in a warm and relaxing environment. Your therapist will spend time during your first appointment questioning you about your medical history, general health, lifestyle and sleep patterns. They will then examine your body for muscle imbalances and from this be able to diagnose your problem and recommend a course of massage treatment.

Your holistic massage therapist will have a wide range of skills and may employ other techniques depending on your condition. These may include Swedish massage, deep tissue massage, yoga stretches or breathing exercises. They will discuss this with you during your session.

During your massage, the therapist will use their fingers, knuckles, hands and elbows to apply various massage techniques around the body. They may apply pressure and stroking movements (called 'effleurage') using their fingers and palms. As the session progresses, deeper pressure (called 'petrissage') may be applied to stretch out and separate muscle tissue and encourage better circulation of fluids in the body. The method used for deep tissue massage (called 'frictions') involves breaking down built up scar tissue and separation of muscle fibres. This can be uncomfortable but the therapist will not go beyond your comfort zone.

Following the holistic massage session, the therapist will discuss the treatment with you and any further sessions that you'll require. The therapist may also offer post massage care advice.

TIMINGS / SESSIONS / COSTS

Your first session may take longer than subsequent sessions as your practitioner questions you about your medical history and then recommends a course of treatment. Expect this session to last 60 - 90 minutes and follow-up sessions 45 - 60 minutes.

The cost for holistic massage varies so check with your local practitioner before making an appointment. Expect to pay £30 - £60 for your first session with subsequent sessions costing £25 - £40.

Many people feel the benefit of holistic massage after one session. However, building a rapport with your therapist is an important part of holistic massage and a course of sessions is recommended.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Holistic massage is a safe therapy that is beneficial to overall physical and mental health. As contact with the skin is essential to the therapy, any areas of the body with wounds, infections or bruising on the skin may not be treated. If you are diabetic or pregnant, inform the therapist before starting any treatment.

Consult with your GP and holistic therapist about any medical problems or concerns you have as they are trained to recognise what can and cannot be treated with the therapy.