

Fluctuating hormone levels, broken sleep and the physical changes that accompany the menopause can make it a challenging time mentally for many women. Incorporating regular stress-relieving massages can give you that much-needed 'me time' to decompress and relax.

When we experience an event that makes us anxious or stressed, our body responds physically: heart rate and blood pressure rise, and muscles tighten. In evolutionary terms, our bodies were preparing for 'fight or flight' and the ensuing physical activity would have worked off those physical manifestations of stress. These days, however, we have no need to fight or run away and often there is no physical outlet for the physical tension that stress creates. When feelings of stress continue for long periods, the pent-up physical effects have a detrimental effect on the body.

Stress causes an increase in levels of a stress hormone called cortisol which prepares the body for the fight or flight response. Although occasional small amounts of stress can be good for a person, too much stress can cause sustained high levels of cortisol, which can affect metabolism, the immune system, memory and cause depression.

Stress, and the accompanying higher levels of cortisol, may also lead to other physical symptoms like headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain and disturbed sleep. Research suggests that stress also can bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases.

Some common signs of stress include:

1. Behaviour Changes

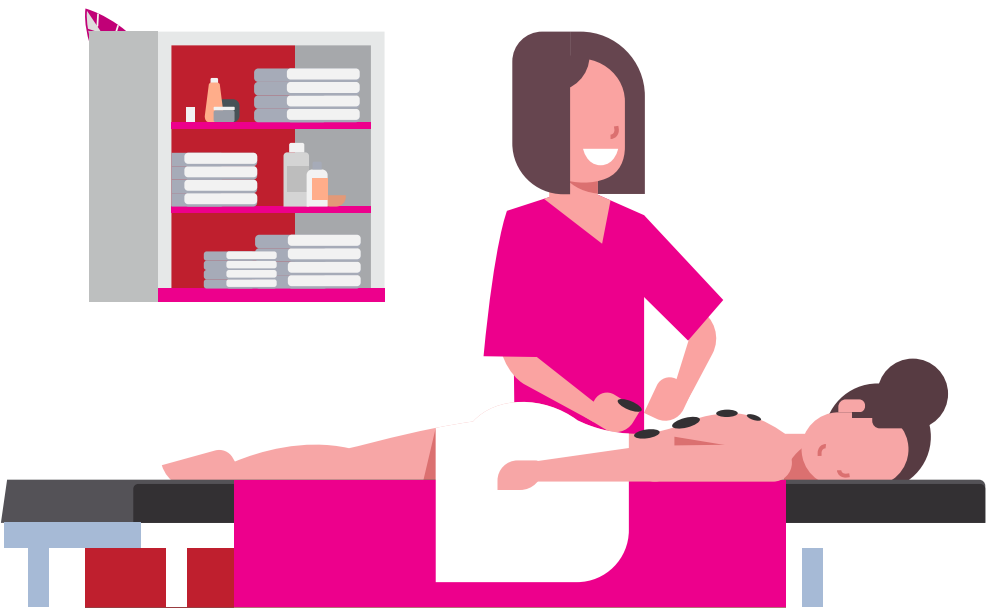
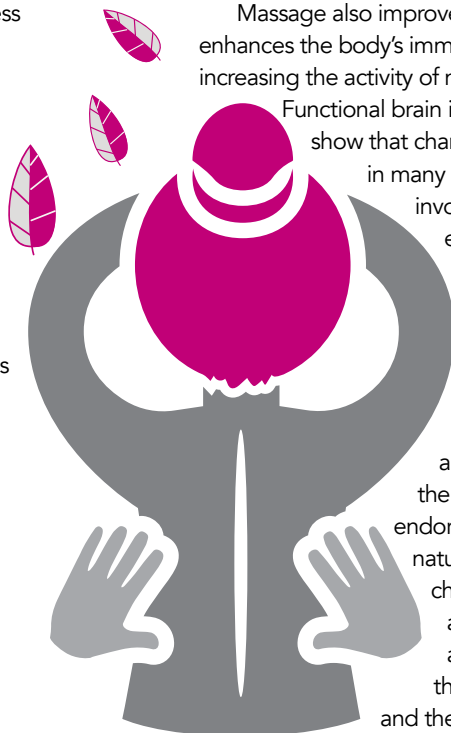
- angry outbursts
- drug or alcohol abuse
- over- or under-eating
- social withdrawal
- tobacco use

2. Mood Changes

- anxiety
- irritability or anger
- lack of motivation or focus
- restlessness
- sadness or depression

3. Body Changes

- chest pain
- fatigue
- headache
- muscle tension or pain
- lost sex drive
- disturbed sleep patterns
- stomach upset.



Stress Relief Through Massage

Massage is widely used in many cultures to evoke feelings of deep relaxation and reduced anxiety. The anxiety-reducing and mood-enhancing benefits of massage are related to changes in brain activity, decreased levels of cortisol and increased activity of the parasympathetic nervous system, which acts automatically to calm the body and brain during stress.

Massage also improves attention and enhances the body's immune response by increasing the activity of natural killer cells.

Functional brain imaging studies show that changes take place in many areas of the brain involved in regulating emotions and the stress response.

Massage can lower your heart rate and blood pressure, relax your muscles and increase the production of endorphins, your body's natural 'feel good' chemical. Serotonin and dopamine are also released through massage, and the result is a feeling

of calm relaxation that makes chronic or habitual, as well as acute or short-term stress, much easier to overcome.

When responding to stress, the body conserves energy by suppressing the digestive and immune systems and circulation is increased to the heart, muscles and lungs. With chronic stress, this reaction may lead to decreased immune system activity, which increases the risk of infections and immune system diseases. Problems with digestion and elimination may also accompany chronic stress. Massage may help restore normal circulation, improve immune system activity and play a role in restoring normal digestive system function.

Taking care of your body should be at the top of your priorities. By adding therapeutic massage to your routine, you'll feel, look and simply be healthier. In fact, stress relief alone can improve your vitality and state of mind.

TYPES OF MASSAGE FOR STRESS RELIEF

The massage techniques most commonly used to reduce stress include deep tissue massage, Swedish massage and therapeutic massage.

1. A deep tissue massage focuses on the deeper layers within soft tissues. Stress can quite often cause a build-up

of tension within muscles that restricts movement and increases pain. This, in turn, causes more stress. A deep tissue massage aims to relieve tension by stretching and spreading muscle fibres and tissues in order for muscles to relax and loosen. The loosening muscles increases movement, decreases pain and reduces stress.

2. The main aim of a Swedish massage is to relax a person both physically and mentally through the manipulation of muscles. Manipulation of the muscles encourages them to relax and stretch to relieve any tightness or tension, reducing the physical effects of stress. Tightness and tension causes pain, increasing anxiety. The relief of tightness and tension through Swedish massage, therefore, also decreases anxiety and stress.
3. A therapeutic massage uses a gentle pressure throughout, on areas containing soft tissues. The main aim of a therapeutic massage is relaxation. When relaxation is poor, stress levels increase, causing the build-up of anxiety and muscular knots. A therapeutic massage increases localised blood flow and within the blood flow are positive hormones endorphins, serotonin and dopamine. The positive hormones give a sense of wellbeing, increase relaxation and reduce stress. Increasing blood flow can also help to increase tissue elasticity by raising muscle temperature. Increased tissue elasticity also reduces tension and prevents muscular knots from forming. Reduction in tension and prevention of muscular knots reduces stress.

TECHNIQUES USED TO REDUCE STRESS

Deep massage strokes use a firm pressure to get deep within muscle tissues. A lot of muscle tension can be stored in deeper tissues as well as superficial ones. Deep strokes increase muscle temperature to increase tissue elasticity. Increasing tissue elasticity loosens muscles and reduces tension. Reduction of tension within muscles also decreases pain and increases movement.

Trigger point therapy is an effective technique used to reduce stress. A trigger point is an irritable point formed from a knot or tightness in a muscle and/or the

associated connective tissue (myofascia). These knots prevent the smooth and proper functioning of that muscle and also, because of the interconnectedness of the structures through the body, can cause 'referred' pain in different areas, such as headaches. Fingers and thumbs are used during trigger point therapy to apply a firm pressure to cause ischemic compression. Ischemic compression causes a temporary restriction to the blood flow to an area, which then increases when the pressure is released. This causes a softening of the trigger point, which reduces pain and relieves stress.

Tension in muscles can also be reduced through lymphatic drainage. Lymphatic drainage involves the stimulation of the lymphatic system to remove metabolic waste products more efficiently. Excess metabolic waste products can occur after an injury, surgery or overuse of a muscle. This increases muscular fatigue and weakness and can result in swelling and pain, which in turn can restrict movement and prevent injuries from healing.

Stress or anxiety can develop from this as a person becomes frustrated at not being able to use the area of the body properly or is prevented from participating in their exercise or sport. A variety of long, deep strokes are used to flush out the metabolic waste products from the body and replace them with healthy oxygen and nutrients. Flushing metabolic waste from the body more efficiently through lymphatic drainage reduces swelling, pain and restriction, and so reduces frustration and stress.

WHEN CAN A MASSAGE HELP TO REDUCE STRESS?

The most common situations where massage can reduce stress is following acute pain, after injury and when there is a desire for relaxation.

Pain can be decreased when stress is reduced. Because of its physical effect on muscle tightness, stress can increase pain. Then, a vicious cycle can develop where the more the pain increases, the greater the stress levels, which will in turn keep increasing the pain. A massage aims to increase both muscle relaxation and mental relaxation.

Reduced stress can help following an injury. After an injury, conditions such as swelling, muscle fatigue and muscle weakness can arise. Stress can increase owing to the inability to return to exercise and sport or because of the pain. A massage helps to encourage relaxation psychologically. Relaxation increases as the level of positive hormones (including endorphins, serotonin and dopamine) increase. This can give you a sense of wellbeing, as well as a positive frame of mind and 'happy mood'. Reducing stress increases healing, allowing a person to return to sport more quickly.

Generalised relaxation through massage helps reduce stress and anxiety by increasing blood flow in the body and reducing cortisol levels and blood pressure. Yes, there is absolutely a physiological response to massage that reduces stress, but we should also never underestimate the psychological effects of massage on our physical and mental wellbeing.

One of the most important aspects of massage is that it forces you to set aside some 'me time', the quiet and calm, the shut-eye, relaxing aromatic smells, tranquil music, time to think and reflect or simply sleep all play an equally important part on both our physiology, as well as our psychology.



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