



RELIEF WITHIN REACH:

massage & stress

OVER THE YEARS, WE'VE LEARNED
A GREAT DEAL ABOUT HOW STRESS
AFFECTS A PERSON'S HEALTH. NOW,
WE'RE BEGINNING TO SEE HOW
MASSAGE THERAPY CAN HELP PEOPLE
BETTER DEAL. **BY HELEN TOSCH**

The reasons people get massage therapy are many and varied. In recent years, however, more and more people are beginning to understand just how beneficial massage therapy can be for a variety of health conditions.

From chronic pain to depression to post-op recovery, massage therapy is making inroads for an ever more diverse range of clients.

One reason for this upswing is that there is more definitive research being done about what massage therapy has to offer, and one place massage therapy seems to really shine is helping people better deal with stress—and its sometimes harmful effects.

In this continuing education course, you'll learn more about what stress is, how stress affects people both physically and emotionally, as well as how massage therapy can benefit this client demographic.

What is stress?

There are so many definitions of stress—and what causes stress—that coming to an all-encompassing, conclusive explanation of what stress is can be difficult. Additionally, stress is often subjective, meaning everyone defines stress by how they *personally* experience it, leaving the exact meaning of stress wide open to interpretation. Even Miriam Webster's website has multiple definitions of stress. Here are some of them:

- “a state of mental tension and worry caused by problems in your life, work, etc.
- something that causes strong feelings of worry or anxiety
- a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation
- a state resulting from a stress; especially one of bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium <job-related stress>”¹

Some definitions, too, are more gen-

eral: “Stress is simply a reaction to a stimulus that disturbs our physical or mental equilibrium. In other words, as we all probably know, it's just a part of life.”²

Stress and Stressors

TYPES OF STRESS. Generally speaking, there are two types of stress—acute and chronic. Acute stress is short-term stress that occurs when someone encounters a real or perceived physical threat. Chronic stress, or long-term stress, occurs when the body feels under attack from acute stress over a long period of time.

A stressful event, or acute stress, can trigger what is commonly known as the fight-or-flight response, which causes hormones to surge through the body, affecting many body systems. A stressor is something that causes the stress. Acute stressors can include loud or sudden noise, crowds, thrill rides or exciting moments, hunger, danger, isolation or memory of a past dangerous event, for example.

Chronic stressors can include long-term relationship issues, financial concerns, continuous work pressure and even loneliness. Acute stress can be exciting (think about going on a rollercoaster or finishing a race) and, in most cases, your body will also initiate the relaxation response, allowing your body to go back to its “pre-stress” state. But chronic stress can have serious, long-term detrimental effects on health.^{2,3}

TYPES OF STRESSORS. There are two basic types of stressors: internal and external. Internal stressors are physical or psychological. Physical stressors may include illness or infection, and psychological stressors may include intense fear or worry about the future or particular life events (like worrying about crashing when you take a cross-country flight).

External stressors include things like physical stimuli (extreme tem-

peratures or pain from an injury). Stressful environments are also external stressors, like working in a high-pressure job, being subjected to abuse from a loved one or being the victim of a physical crime.

WHAT IS THE PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTION TO STRESS? Our bodies are programmed to produce a physiological stress response to perceived threats. This response—fight-or-flight—was very useful when humans were spending their days hunting and gathering, and it can still be quite useful in situations that require quick thinking or reactions.

So how does the stress response work? What happens in the body when we encounter a situation that triggers a fight-or-flight response? When you encounter a threat (whether real or perceived), your body jumps into action. All of this happens before you even have time to think. First, your hypothalamus (a region of your brain near the base of your skull in the back of your head) basically sounds an alarm to the rest of your body, including nerve and hormonal signals that tell your adrenal glands (located on top of your kidneys) to release a surge of hormones. These hormones include cortisol and adrenaline.

Cortisol is your primary stress hormone. It increases your blood sugar, increases the amount of blood sugar your brain can use, and makes tissue repair substances more available. Cortisol also alters your immune system response and suppresses non-essential systems, such as the digestive system and reproductive system, among others.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate and blood pressure, and enhances your energy supplies. These hormones are necessary when you're threatened because they help you be more alert and put your body systems that aren't necessary to fight into reserve mode. They also provide extra energy to the areas of your brain and body that are nec-

essary to keep you safe. This alarm system triggered by the hypothalamus also sends signals to the areas of your brain that control fear, mood and motivation.

Unfortunately, our bodies are easily tricked into the fight-or-flight response, releasing cortisol and adrenaline we don't need when there really isn't an imminent threat. When people are under constant stress and their bodies react as though they are always in danger, the fight-or-flight response doesn't shut off, and the relaxation response isn't fully activated, leading to an overabundance of cortisol and other stress hormones in the body that can knock all systems off balance.

This constant barrage of hormones can lead to other health conditions, as well, including anxiety, depression, sleep problems, neck, shoulder and low back pain, and immune deficiencies, to name a few^{4,5}.

What are the Symptoms of Stress?

Stress affects everyone differently, so predicting how stress will affect individual people is nearly impossible. Sometimes, the same person may experience symptoms of stress differently from day to day.

The American Institute of Stress, for example, lists 50 symptoms of stress on their website. Additionally, the Mayo Clinic lists many effects of stress, categorizing them by effects on your body, your mood and your behavior.

Some of the effects of stress identified by these two institutions include:

EFFECTS ON THE BODY:

- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Musculoskeletal pain, including neck and back pain
- Chest pain
- Fatigue
- Stomach and intestinal problems (nausea, heartburn, pain, cramping, constipation, diarrhea and increased gas)

- Sleep problems, such as insomnia, hypersomnia and nightmares
- Lack of or decreased sex drive
- Tremors or shaking
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Frequent colds or infections
- Unexplained allergy attacks
- Difficulty breathing or feeling like it's hard to take a deep breath
- Frequent urination
- Weight changes without diet changes

EFFECTS ON MOOD:

- Anxiety
- Lack of focus or difficulty concentrating
- Lack of motivation
- Irritability, edginess or frustration
- Anger
- Feelings of sadness or depression
- Panic attacks
- Feeling overly guilty or nervous

EFFECTS ON BEHAVIOR:

- Angry outbursts
- Mood swings
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Gambling
- Overeating
- Undereating
- Tobacco use
- Social withdrawal
- Frequent crying spells
- Overreacting to minor annoyances or occurrences
- Obsessive-compulsive behavior
- Frequent use of over-the-counter medications
- Impulse buying^{6,7}

Although this list is not all-inclusive, what all these symptoms suggest is that stress has wide-ranging and potentially serious effects.

What Causes Stress?

Almost any event can cause stress. In fact, even happy, positive events can be stressful. Remember—stress isn't always bad. Acute stress can be caused by anything that startles you or quickly takes you out of your routine or comfort zone, and

chronic stress can be brought on by a variety of different problems. Health issues or major life changes, for example, may cause you to feel chronic rather than acute stress. Unemployment, too, or family or relationship concerns, might also lead to chronic stress.

Knowing how varying life events are going to affect different people is extremely difficult, as we all establish different coping skills throughout our lives. The same goes for what triggers stress, as what one person might find extremely stressful another would be able to handle with little or no stress.

So, as you work with clients who are seeing you primarily for stress relief, you need to understand how stress is affecting them individually. What physical symptoms are they experiencing? How is their mood affected? What outcome are they looking for from each massage therapy session?

How Does Stress Affect the Body?

What's tricky and insidious about stress is the fact that every system in the body can potentially be affected, and these effects range from minor to severe.

For years, researchers have been working to identify stressors and to measure the effects stress has on the body. What they've learned is that stress can have wide-reaching effects. Brent A. Bauer, MD, FACP, director of the Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, says stress can have serious effects on the body.

IMMUNITY AND HEALING PROBLEMS. According to Bauer, stress can decrease immune function and wound healing while increasing the chance for colds and infection.⁸ So, if you have clients you know are under a great deal of stress and are looking for massage therapy to help them manage this, pay particularly close attention to the basic hygiene you practice before every massage

therapy session, like washing your hands, for example. You might also want to make antibacterial sanitizer available in the treatment room for these clients to ensure both your health and theirs.

CARDIOVASCULAR RISK. For stressed patients, prognosis after a heart attack can be worse, says Bauer, and the risk for heart failure goes up because of increased left ventricular dysfunction. Cardiac arrhythmias, heart rate and blood pressure can also increase under stress, while increased clotting can potentially lead to pulmonary embolism and stroke.⁸

PULMONARY AND ENDOCRINE CHANGES. For asthma sufferers, stress can cause flares in this condition, making managing stress particularly important for people with severe asthma. Additionally, insulin production can increase while sensitivity to insulin decreases, putting some stressed individuals at a risk for developing diabetes.⁸

Remember, stress isn't going to physically manifest in the same way for every individual, and so you shouldn't read these potential risks as an all-inclusive list. What is important to note, however, is that stress is *capable* of significantly impacting a person's health and well-being across a large number of systems in the body.

Who Suffers From Stress?

Everyone suffers from stress at one time or another—from infants to elderly adults. Even for those who are excellent at managing stress, going through life entirely carefree isn't possible. Why? Because just as negative events can trigger stress, good, happy times can induce stress, too. There are some people, however, who may be more at risk for stress to negatively impact their health.

CAREGIVERS. Many studies have shown that caregivers tend to experience high levels of stress. According to the Mayo Clinic, a caregiver is anyone who provides help to an

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other person in need. That person may be a spouse or partner, an ill or disabled child, or an aging parent, grandparent or other relative.

Baby boomers—America's largest generation—are starting to age and, because of this, more and more people will be faced with the responsibility of caregiving. Right now, approximately 65 million people in the United States provide care for a family member or friend.⁹

There is actually a name for the stress caregivers experience: caregiver distress. Caregiver distress can lead to a person becoming more susceptible to health risks—such as hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

HEALTH CARE WORKERS. Similar to caregivers, health care workers—especially those who deal directly with patients—tend to experience increased levels of stress. According to an article published by *Cardiovascular Business*, employer assistance provider ComPsych analyzed their requests for employee assistance and said that health care workers utilized their services most often out of the nine industries they analyzed.

Stress and anxiety were two of the leading reasons for seeking help, and health care employees made the highest percentage of calls.

Whether that's because there is more stress in the health care environment or because there are more health care employees was not entirely clear. What is clear, however, is that health care workers experience on-the-job stress that can affect their personal and work lives.¹⁰

PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM CHRONIC HEALTH PROBLEMS. Chronic illness can affect every aspect of a person's life. In addition to the pain, fatigue, depression and feelings of helplessness that often accompany chronic illness, people also have to balance the practical aspects of disease. The financial stress, sometimes frequent medical appointments, and trying to juggle the responsibilities of home, family and work—along with caring for their own health—can lead to significant stress.¹¹

IN THE WORKPLACE. According to the American Institute of Stress, job stress is a leading cause of stress in America. They cite two studies that provide statistics about the stress of working Americans—one by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and one study called the Attitudes in the American Work place VII. Those studies provided some interesting statistics. For example:

- 40 percent of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful
- 25 percent of those surveyed consider their job to be the No. 1 stressor in their lives
- 80 percent of workers feel stress on the job, and nearly half say they need help learning how to manage stress^{12,13}

If you want to focus your practice helping people manage stress and you're not sure where to start, consider working with caregivers, health care workers and people suffering from chronic health problems, for example. Not only will you find a huge population in need of your services, you'll also be offering a valuable service that can truly

benefit your clients—and their families and employers.

The Role of Massage

Bauer says that massage can be an important part of a wellness program. When patients come to him with stress-related concerns, he recommends a four-part approach to overall health and wellness that includes:

DIET. Eating a whole-food, plant-based diet (lots of veggies, whole grains, nuts and legumes, and fruits, while limiting processed and high-sugar foods).

EXERCISE. 45 to 60 minutes a day of brisk activity (any physical activity that gets you moving and gets your heart rate up is great; the more his patients enjoy the activity, the more likely they are to continue doing it).

STRESS REDUCTION AND MANAGEMENT. 30 to 60 minutes per day of formal stress management (massage, yoga, tai chi or meditation, for example).

CONNECTEDNESS. Building and maintaining connectedness and community through whatever means makes sense to you, whether that's family, church, volunteering or, more than likely, a combination of several things.

Bauer says that people who make a point of caring for all four parts of their lives are healthier—even their chromosomes are healthier. And although Bauer doesn't recommend massage for every client (some clients have medical conditions that contraindicate massage, for example), he does believe massage can be part of stress reduction and overall health improvement.^{8,14}

The University of Maryland Medical Center agrees that massage therapy can decrease cortisol levels, noting that research suggests that the physical touch of massage can help manage stress.^{15,3} According to the Mayo Clinic, too, studies have shown massage to be effective for reducing stress, pain and muscle tension.

MASSAGE FOR PAIN RELIEF. Particularly if you have clients who may be feeling stress because they're dealing with a health condition or disease that fairly consistently involves pain, massage therapy can be a very helpful tool in helping them find relief on two fronts: pain and stress.

A 2012 study published in *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, for example, showed that adults with rheumatoid arthritis reported a decrease in pain, as well as greater grip strength and range of motion in wrists in large upper joints, after receiving regular moderate-pressure massages during a four-week period.¹⁶

Additionally, a 2011 study comparing the effects of two types of massage and usual care on chronic low back pain found that patients receiving massage were twice as likely as those receiving usual care to report significant improvement in both their pain and function.¹⁷

Not every one of the clients who come to you for help relieving stress are going to be dealing with a chronic illness or pain that is specific to their low back, but studies addressing how massage can help reduce pain—which can be a more general symptom of stress—are useful when explaining to clients how massage therapy can help them better manage their stress.

MASSAGE FOR BETTER SLEEP. For some people, too, stress is going to be a contributing factor in sleep problems, and research has shown that massage can help. In a 2013 study published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, researchers found that therapeutic at-home massage for patients suffering from metastatic cancer helped improve their overall quality of life by reducing pain and improving sleep quality.¹⁸

Furthermore, a 2010 study investigating the effects of massage therapy for sleep quality in patients who had coronary artery bypass graft surgery showed participants in the

massage therapy group had fewer complaints of fatigue after receiving massage for three nights following discharge from the intensive care unit. Those who received massage therapy also reported a more effective sleep during all three days.¹⁹

So, when talking to clients who mention that stress is causing them to lose sleep, let them know how massage therapy can help them get some deeper, more satisfying rest.

MASSAGE FOR DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY. Again, though clients who come to you for help managing stress might not suffer specifically from depression or anxiety, both of these conditions are known to be associated with stress—and massage therapy has been shown to help.

Research published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* indicates that massage therapy can reduce symptoms of depression for individuals with HIV disease. Lasting eight weeks, results showed the severity of depression was significantly reduced by the beginning of week four, and improvement continued into weeks six and eight.²⁰

Also, a recent study in *Applied Nursing Research* showed that back massage given during chemotherapy can significantly reduce anxiety and acute fatigue in cancer patients.²¹

Though stress may not be the root cause of a person's pain, depression, anxiety or sleep problems—or any other health condition—the chances that stress is going to play a role are fairly good. No matter if stress is causing the condition or a specific condition is causing a client stress, the stable factor in either scenario is that massage therapy can be an important part of maintaining a person's health and well-being.

The Role of the Massage Therapist

The key to integrating massage into a client's wellness regimen is to remember that every client will respond to massage differently. For

most clients suffering from stress, there is no one modality or technique that will consistently be what they need, and so you have to be prepared to customize these sessions to the individual needs of the client, as you do with everyone who comes to see you.

Bauer suggests that massage therapists working with people who are looking for stress relief use the same practices they would with any clients—let the clients guide you, and be sure to have an ongoing conversation with them. What works and feels good on one visit may not be as effective or desirable during the next visit. If you engage your clients in a dialogue and also read their non-verbal signals and body language, you will be more likely to know the best modalities to help reduce stress.⁸

Just as physical manifestations of stress are unique to an individual, the best massage modalities to treat stress may be too. Your knowledge of stress and how massage can be an important part of an overall wellness plan, along with your skills and experience in massage therapy, can help you develop individual treatment plans that help your clients effectively address their stress.

When Massage is Contraindicated

When considering stress specifically, it's easy to think that the chances massage therapy would be contraindicated are small. And, for the most part, that may be so. Still, the big-picture perspective of stress shows that it has the ability to affect multiple areas and body systems, from mood to physical health to mental well-being, and so paying close attention to possible contraindications is important.

For example, if you have a client that has a **burn or wound**, think about how a massage session may affect the healing process. As Bauer indicated, stress can impact immunity and cause healing problems, so if you notice the client has a wound or may be suffering from an infection, erring on the side of caution and requesting a doctor's release may be a good idea. This caution is particularly important if the client also has an underlying medical condition, such as diabetes.

Some of the cardiovascular risks associated with stress, including arrhythmias and increases in both heart rate and blood pressure, may mean massage is contraindicated for some clients. If you have a client who might be at risk for **deep vein thrombosis and clotting dis-**

Some Common Ways to Manage Stress

There are many effective ways to manage stress. Even for your loyal clients who regularly use massage therapy to relieve stress, chances are they're combining the benefits massage therapy offers with other stress management techniques. Having an understanding of the different ways your clients are managing their stress may provide you additional information that can better help you design massage sessions that achieve maximum results.

FOLLOWING ARE A FEW STRESS BUSTING TECHNIQUES CLIENTS MAY BE USING :

- > Eating a healthy diet
- > Exercising
- > Finding a community of like-minded people
- > Practicing meditation
- > Trying relaxation techniques
- > Doing tai chi
- > Practicing yoga

orders, for example, both of which can potentially lead to pulmonary embolism and stroke, postponing a massage session until you can get clearance from their physician is a good idea.

People on certain medications, too, may need massage modifications or to have a doctor's referral before a massage session, and some people may not be able to have massage at all while they are taking the medication. Although most medications will not require you to alter your massage therapy treatment plan, there are some medications that can affect your clients in ways you might not expect. For example, some drugs may alter blood clotting, neurosensory feedback, tissue integrity and pain perception. So, be sure you're aware of any side effects of medication that might contraindicate massage for clients who are managing stress.

As always, you should have every new client fill out a health history that includes any medical

conditions they have, as well as all medications they are on. Even clients who you've seen for some time should update their information on a regular basis. For example, you might ask if there have been any changes in the medication they're taking, or if something in their health history has changed. Particularly if their stress is tied to an underlying medical condition, having the most recent and accurate health information is imperative.

Marketing Massage for Stress Relief

Because stress is so widespread and we know there are ways massage therapy can help people find relief, targeting some of your marketing efforts to clients who may need help managing stress seems natural. But how do you do that?

To start, think about specific locations or businesses where the need for stress relief may be in more demand. For example, are there local businesses you can reach out

to that might have employees that would benefit from massage therapy? Here, think of companies that might be high pressure, like investment or accounting firms. During tax season might be the perfect time to approach the human resources manager at a tax or accounting company, as employees are likely to be under stress and working long hours. Or, perhaps ask if you could set up a massage chair and offer massage to clients coming in to have their taxes prepared.

Now is the time, too, to remember some of the people who are more likely to suffer from stress. Consider visiting a nursing facility in your local area and seeing if there's any opportunity to offer massage therapy to the nursing staff or to the adult children who most often are in charge of caring for the residents. In this way, you're reaching a client demographic—**caregivers**—you know often suffers from stress.

Don't forget to build relationships with other **local health care providers**, as well. Again, this demographic is one we know suffers from stress, and so reaching out and educating them on the benefits of massage therapy may provide you a great opportunity to expand your business. Think, for example, how you can help relieve the stress of nursing staff. Or, talk to physicians about the benefits massage therapy can offer some of their patients. Here, arm yourself with the research that indicates massage is beneficial, both for stress as well as other health conditions

NETWORK. Networking is a great way to get your name out there and start educating people on the value of massage therapy. Because many people incorporate a variety of strategies into their stress management regimen, think about any complementary businesses you might approach to trade referrals. For example, many people use yoga to help minimize the negative effects of stress, so consider networking with

Additional Benefits of Massage

When thinking of how massage therapy can benefit clients who need help managing stress, there are a variety of other advantages to massage therapy that you might note to clients who are interested in incorporating massage therapy into their health and wellness program.

It's a nonpharmacologic intervention. Medications can be lifesaving, and some doctors prescribe certain medications for stress relief and anxiety. But most experts agree that a stress-reduction plan should include nonpharmacologic treatment, like lifestyle changes and massage.⁸

It can offer both long-term benefits and quick-relief, short-term benefits. Massage can decrease anxiety, heart rate and cortisol levels, all of which are beneficial to overall feelings of health and well-being. So, for example, if you have a client who works in a stressful position, talk to them about how regular massage can help them manage stress in the long term. Alternatively, if stress and tension have someone's shoulders or neck hurting, you're also able to bring relief fairly quickly—and that's a very real benefit for clients who are going to need help managing stress in the long term as well as the effects of stress in the shorter term.

It just feels good. The feel-good, relaxation benefits of massage should not be dismissed as unimportant. When people feel relaxed, their outlook on life tends to improve, which can lead to improved perceptions of happiness and contentment, and decreased levels of stress.

a yoga studio in your area to open up more opportunities for you both to reach more potential clients.

Exercising is another common way people relieve stress. Do you have a local gym you can contact that might consider allowing you to introduce the benefits of massage therapy to its members? Concentrate on how massage therapy, when combined with other stress-fighting activities like exercise, can increase the benefit members will see in their effort to manage stress.

Eating a **healthy diet** is also part of maintaining health and combatting stress, so you might also want to think about teaming up with a nutritionist in your area. Be sure you do your homework and really trust who you choose to network with, as client referrals are going to be a two-way street and you don't want your own clients to have a bad experience.

VOLUNTEER YOUR SERVICES. It's widely accepted that chronic health problems or disease can be big factors in a person's stress level. Although you don't want to give your services away, you might also find real value in volunteering for causes that both mean something to you and will benefit participants. For example, volunteering time at your hospital's breast center where you help women dealing with a cancer diagnosis relax may be a good fit for you. Or is there an event, like a charity run or walk, that you can volunteer your time and services to?

Many times, organizers of events will allow you to pass out business cards, so though gaining new clients shouldn't be your first priority in this situation, educating people and showing them how you can help them better manage their stress may bring some new clients through your door.

LEARN NEW MASSAGE SKILLS. There is no one-size-fits-all massage therapy modality for stress relief. You will likely find that your clients' preferences are as unique

Additional Research on the Health Benefits of Massage Therapy

Because increased cortisol is known to cause stress, decreasing cortisol can help reduce stress and provide some symptom relief. There are myriad studies that show decreased cortisol in patients following massage therapy.

One such study performed by Tiffany Field, Maria Hernandez-Reif, and Miguel Diego of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine and Saul Schanberg and Cynthia Kuhn of the Department of Pharmacology at Duke University Medical School discusses how "massage therapy has been noted to significantly alter biochemistry of humans both immediately following massage sessions and over the course of massage therapy treatment periods."

These researchers analyzed groups of people by their primary diagnoses (depression related disorders, pain syndromes, immune conditions and normal stress conditions) and found there were unique ways each group responded to massage therapy. All the groups, however, reduced their cortisol and increased serotonin and dopamine while undergoing massage therapy sessions.²²

In 2009, The Institute of Neuroscience and Physiology/Physiotherapy at The Sahlgrenska Academy at Göteborg University, Göteborg, Sweden, studied the effect of massage on immune function and stress in women with breast cancer.

Study authors A. Billhult, C. Lindholm, R. Gunnarsson, and E. Stener-Victorin concluded that light pressure effleurage massage lowered heart rate and systolic blood pressure.²³

A 2012 study published in *Evidence Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* showed decreased levels of salivary cortisol in 18 cancer patients after receiving Swedish massage.²⁴

In 2008, a study published in *Psycho-Oncology* titled "Massage in Patients Undergoing Intensive Chemotherapy Reduces Serum Cortisol and Prolactin", looked at 39 hematologic oncology patients. The study participants were provided aromatherapy, massage therapy and rest (the control). Serum cortisol and prolactin levels were measured, and authors also analyzed data from semi-structured interviews. The results of the study demonstrated that massage resulted in a significant reduction in cortisol and an associated improvement in psychological well-being.²⁵

The journal *Complementary Therapies of Clinical Practice* published the results of a pilot study in July 2012 that looked at the potential stress reducing effect of chair massage offered to nurses during work hours. The study included 38 nurses who were given 15-minute chair massages during work hours for 10 weeks. The results indicated that massage during work hours helped reduce stress-related symptoms for these nurses.²⁶

There are also studies that show that cancer patients feel less distressed after massage therapy. In a pilot study of the impact of massage therapy on sources and levels of distress in brain tumor patients, researchers found that levels of distress dropped significantly during the trial. Study authors reported that between the baseline tests and week three there was a significant drop in distress levels in the study participants with brain tumors, with a further significant reduction in distress between week three and week four.²⁷

When considering how you might approach potential clients and focus your marketing efforts on helping people deal with stress, think about how you might talk to people about some of the research that suggests massage is beneficial for stress relief.

> Visit amtamassage.org/research for further reading and client handouts.

as they are. Because not every type of massage will work well for all of your clients, consider continuing education opportunities that will allow you to add something different to your massage therapy toolbox. For example, AMTA has several general massage therapy courses that can help you deepen your skill set and knowledge, opening up different ways you might think about and work with clients who are dealing with stress.

BECOME AN EXPERT. If you really want people to begin thinking of you as an expert in massage therapy for stress relief, you will need to become an expert. Read all of the studies you can get your hands on. Talk to other massage therapists. Take as many continuing education classes as you can—especially those that focus on massage for stress relief or that will help you boost your business with a specific client demographic.

There's no doubt that everyone deals with stress, though some on a more consistent basis than others. Schedules that leave little time for leisure, financial strains as the economy continues to recover or the stress of planning a happy event—there are countless ways people are affected.

What's also true, though, is that people are very interested in learning how to better manage stress—and the sometimes very negative effects of stress—well before their health and well-being take a major hit. For many, this includes incorporating massage therapy into their wellness program, giving you the perfect opportunity to start talking with clients and potential clients about how you can help. ■

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