

REFLEXOLOGY AND MASSAGE AROUND THE WORLD

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As a reflexology instructor of many years, I constantly witness the confusion that exists in people's minds as to what reflexology is. Since most massage schools on this continent do not teach reflexology in-depth (or at all), it's not surprising that most practitioners are left thinking that reflexology is simply the inclusion of applied static pressure during a massage on points of the feet or hands as indicated on a reflexology chart.

In this short article I will describe the similarities and differences between reflexology (as we know it in North America) and massage therapy. I will also briefly describe how reflexology in the western world compares to the modality as it is practiced in other countries.

The licensing laws defining massage therapy differ state-to-state, province-to-province. *In general* though, they all, in some way convey the systematic manipulation of the soft tissue of the human body as the basis of therapeutic massage. Reflexology also manipulates the soft tissue – of *certain* parts of the human body (feet, hands, ears, face). Both modalities, therefore, qualify as a “manual therapy”, and I would say that both aim to enhance the quality of the recipient's experience of her/himself.

Where reflexology and massage differ is in their intent, not something readily discernable if you were observing a practitioner in action. Kind of like a family medical doctor and a cardiovascular surgeon. They're both physicians, licensed under the same health department, but their work and the intent of their work is very distinct from each other.

The primary intent of classic western massage techniques is to relax the tension held within the soft tissue of the body. The reason for this may be to diminish pain, increase circulation, improve posture and/or structural function and/or produce physical, emotional and mental relaxation.

Reflexology provides deep relaxation and like massage, reflexology increases circulation of the blood and lymph. And although the effects of conventional reflexology may include relaxation of the musculature, the intent is quite different. Western reflexology's primary intent is to improve physiology, the functioning of the body's systems. The focus of the session is on the points related to the various organs and glands of the body's systems, not the connective tissue elements of the foot or hand.

The mechanism by which reflexology affects the internal structures of the body is through the systematic application of *alternating* pressure to the tissue of both feet (or hands) in entirety. Reflexology takes a constitutional approach - treating the entire body – as opposed to the allopathic model of addressing only the area of complaint. The stimulation of the sensory nerve pathways provided by very specific techniques sends messages to the brain, which in turn instructs the various organs and glands to alter the release of chemicals that control the balance and functioning of the systems.

When I see therapists massaging the feet and occasionally pushing their thumbs into certain areas, it is clear to me that they have not been trained in reflexology. The absence of alternating pressure, which is the technique that “talks” to the brain, guarantees that, although the recipient will likely feel relaxed and “great” afterwards, their bodies will not have been provided the neurological environment that allows for the many recognized internal benefits of reflexology to occur. (That neurological environment, by the way, is not attained by applying pressure so deep as to cause pain in either the recipient and/or practitioner. The corresponding effect on the related body part is determined by the size of the nerve endings, not the “weight” put on the reflex point.)

Many people *love* to receive reflexology, and regularly schedule expensive sessions at world-class spas and resorts. When a foot massage is passed off as reflexology they are quite vocal with their discontent! I know that for a fact, because spa directors often contact me, after one or more of these unpleasant incidences, to come and instruct their staff in giving a “true” reflexology session. If you’re not trained in reflexology, better to give a top-notch foot massage and call it just that, rather than discredit yourself, your employer and the profession.

Just as the field of massage therapy has many methods and styles of application, based on differing theories and desired outcomes, so does reflexology.

I was first certified as a reflexologist in 1983 in my country of birth (Canada) and for many years assumed that the thumb and finger-walking procedures that I had so diligently practiced were what reflexologists worldwide were doing. As I exposed myself to foot reflexology practiced in other countries, I was soon forced to re-define my concept of reflexology. I discovered a huge collection of techniques quite different from what I had learned. I now acknowledge that, worldwide, reflexology

is a science and artful manual therapy applied to a specific body part with the desired goal of positively affecting the entire organism.

Stay tuned next month when I will debut my reflexology blog on MASSAGEmag.com! See you then!

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