

Beyond Relaxation with Reflexology

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Most massage therapists are familiar with reflexology's ability to relax the body and mind by shifting the autonomic nervous system into a parasympathetic state. However, its effects go way beyond the experience of deep relaxation.

I have been practicing reflexology professionally since 1983 and began my practice in Toronto seeing people who were complaining of being highly stressed. Later, as I began to realize the additional benefits that were taking place beneath the notable response of relaxation, I expanded my market to include people suffering from organ and system imbalances that were contributing to unwanted symptoms and conditions that prevented people from experiencing a high level of health.

I'd like to share a couple of stories that exemplify how limiting the idea of reflexology as simply a great way to relax is.

Sleep

Sandra, a 76-year-old female initially sought out reflexology because of her stress levels and bouts of depression. She also reported a history of insomnia.

Weekly foot reflexology sessions became a much-looked-forward-to event in Sandra's life. She was always amazed at how relaxed she felt afterward and how that sense of peace bled over into other periods of her day. However, the surprise healing occurred a number of months into our relationship, after she spoke of something she had not revealed in her health history or our subsequent conversations.

She had sleep apnea and admitted she was rarely using the CPAP machine prescribed by her physician. Naturally, I recommended that she discuss this with her doctor. At the same time, I was puzzled by her need. She was an ideal weight, did not smoke or drink alcohol, practiced Tai chi a number of times a week and regularly attended a fitness class. She did not fit the profile of someone with OSA (obstructive sleep apnea), for whom a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) device would be necessary.

Further inquiry revealed that Sandra had not been diagnosed with OSA, but with Central Sleep Apnea, a less common form of the condition. Similar to people living with OSA, her breathing would stop and start repeatedly when she was asleep. However, the condition was not caused by an upper airway obstruction, but due to her brain's communication signals to the respiratory muscles being erratic.

Her comments reminded me of the youngest client in my 37 years of practice – a four-day old infant, who had been rushed back to the hospital the day before after he had stopped breathing. His father, a fellow massage therapist and friend, called and asked me to come to the hospital to see if reflexology could help Scott breathe without the aid of machines.

The doctors had informed the parents that the baby's brain signals to the diaphragm were 'immature' and had yet to fully undertake the responsibility of moving air in and out of his lungs. They believed the assistance of medical devices would cement the neural instructions and warned that the baby might have to remain attached to the breathing apparatus for up to a month. That was unacceptable to the parents.

I spent a little time performing a few specific relaxation techniques and making contact with Scott's brain and vagus nerve reflexes on his sweet little feet, and linking them to his diaphragm reflexes. The technique was simple, extremely light (I used my pinkie finger!) and lasted for only a few minutes. I was able to view on the monitor how his breathing improved as did his oxygen intake.

I left his parents with directions to offer five-minutes of reflexology repeatedly throughout the day. The next morning, his doctor removed all breathing apparatus and released the family from the hospital at the end of that day.

Back to Sandra, I wondered if the same approach might help with someone who had lived with a similar life-threatening situation for years.

I took the same focus as with the baby and added in other specific reflexes to the central nervous system, such as the spinal nerves and the medulla.

After a number of months, Sandra informed me that she had discussed her condition with her doctor and confessed to him that she had not been using her sleep device. She told him that she was no longer waking during the night and he requested she submit to a polysomnography sleep study that monitors heart, lung and brain activity, breathing patterns and blood oxygen levels. She did. The results indicated she no longer had sleep apnea.

Learning to Walk Again

Another client, Margaret, presented in a wheelchair three and a half years ago, unable to walk as the result of an incident that occurred during a procedure to insert a stent in the artery feeding her left kidney. It's believed that plaque dislodged during the angioplasty; the result being that bodily function inferior to the lower spine was disrupted.

It has been my honor to be an important player in her continuing recovery. She and I are both convinced that reflexology has played a big part in her efforts to regain mobility.

Progress has been slow – very slow - but steady. She has graduated from the wheelchair to a walker to a rollator to now two walking poles. She recently 'showed off' and walked unassisted for me, a vision that brought tears to my eyes and uncontrolled exclamations of glee from my mouth!

The focus of sessions for this 74-year-old woman has been on the brain, spinal cord and sciatic nerve reflexes, even though the occurrence on the surgical table did not mimic a stroke. The plaque did not move superiorly; no function above the low back was affected. I relied on the brain to right the wrong though, to heal whatever damage had occurred with the lower spinal nerves.

Over time, Margaret has regained the ability to control movement of both her feet, and full sensation in her right foot; some feeling in her left. Now that she is back receiving weekly reflexology and physical therapy sessions, I hold the vision of her walking either unassisted or with just one cane within another year, something she was told would never happen. Never underestimate the power of determination and proven interventions!

Next time you book a session with a certified reflexologist for some restorative relaxation, consider sharing a little more of your current health history. By receiving support for specific systems of your body, you may leave feeling relaxed and balanced, and noticing less of what normally ails you.

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