

Hand It to Yourself Self-Care For and Through the Hands

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One of the things I really like about giving myself a hand reflexology session is that I get to enjoy self-care on two different levels.

Obviously, there are the full-body benefits of deep relaxation, increased circulation, and functional support of the body's organs and glands that reflexology is known for. The added bonus though is the direct and precise therapy that can be offered to these beloved instruments that bear the brunt of a career as a somatic practitioner. Additionally, today hand reflexology is especially practical in helping to alleviate the affects that computers, tablets and smart phones have placed on our hands.

It's easy to overlook the level of tension we bodyworkers hold in our hands, until we take a few minutes to give them some love! The easy accessibility to the hands, in comparison to the feet, makes a mini hand reflexology session a natural when sitting back relaxing in the evening.

I'll share what I like to do to take care of my hands, but first let's begin with reviewing the US national definition for reflexology as revised jointly in 2019 by the American Reflexology Certification Board, the Reflexology Association of America and the National Council for Reflexology Educators.

Defining Reflexology

Reflexology, an integrative health practice, maps a reflection of the body predominately on the feet, hands and outer ears. It uses unique manual techniques to deliver pressure to neural pathways assisting the body to function optimally.

The effectiveness of reflexology is recognized worldwide by various national health institutions and the public at large as a distinct complementary practice within the holistic health field.

The Grid

Like the feet, the hand is divided into five vertical or longitudinal zones and four horizontal ones. The vertical zones are numbered one to five from the pollex to the fifth phalange, extending from the tips of the digits through the wrist. The horizontal zones are the Head, Thorax, Abdomen and Pelvis.

The Head zone covers the phalanges from the distal tips to the metacarpophalangeal joints. The Thoracic zone basically covers the heads of the metacarpals. The Abdomen zone extends from under the metacarpal heads to the pisiform bone; the Pelvis zone, from the pisiform to the processes of the radius and ulna.

With that handy grid in mind, together with our knowledge of the body's anatomy, we can get a general picture of the location of organ reflexes. Applying simple techniques can relax and support all the organs and glands of the body to function optimally as well as pinpoint specific joints and tissues needing attention.

A Simple Self-Care Routine

If you have a paraffin unit at home, a hot wax dip is a wonderful way to begin or end your mini-reflexology session. Please note that inflamed joints may benefit more from cryotherapy.

Begin with some stretching. Raise your left arm straight out in front of you with palm facing the floor. Keeping the arm straight, extend the hand back as far as you are able (as if raising your hand to signal 'Stop'), and then using your right hand pull the hand further back into extension as far as you can within your comfort zone. Hold for a slow count of three. You want to feel a stretch beyond your usual range-of-motion, without causing pain or injury. This movement will give you a much-needed stretch of the forearm flexors. Repeat a couple of more times.

Same hand and arm position, but this time, drop your fingers so that they point downwards towards the floor (the palm now facing your body), stretching the extensor muscles of the forearm. Using your right hand pull the hand into a deeper stretch of the extensors and hold to a slow count of three. Repeat twice and then perform the two stretches on the right hand and arm.

Next, a stretch of the fingers. Place your left hand on your thigh, palmar side down. One by one, gently extend each digit back as far as you can, while maintaining contact with your leg with all of the other digits. Move slowly so that you do not forcibly take any of the digits past a point of comfort. You may be surprised at the amount of hypertonicity and tightness you experience here. Repeat with the other hand.

Did you notice more sensation in one hand than the other? If yes, go back and repeat one more sequence on that hand.

Move on now to massage a favorite lotion into both your hands. Taking the time to be thorough with each of the phalanges and joints of the hands will inform you of places deserving of a little more attention.

I like to start with the phalanges, the fifth to be exact. Moving incrementally, use the thumb and index finger of your right hand to simultaneously thumb and finger-walk (like a little inch worm) both the palmar and dorsal sides of the digit, working distally to proximal. Use your thumb on the palmar side and index finger on the dorsal.

After repeating this on all five digits, move to the sides of each digit and thumb and finger-walk, distal to proximal.

If any particular joint or tendon in your phalanges cries out for more, go back and slowly apply very tiny micro-friction movements specifically to said area. I like to close my eyes when working on points, so all of my attention is devoted to the sensation I am feeling. It's pretty amazing what we can feel if we just slow down! Work points gently and firmly until you feel a shift in sensation and then move on.

I suggest paying particular attention to the thumbs and the first carpometacarpal (CMC) joints. The thumb and CMC joint are known to be the body parts where most injuries are incurred by reflexologists and massage therapists. The high degree of dexterity in the first zone leaves us vulnerable to injuries from repetitive motions and poor body mechanics.

The last segments to work are the palm and dorsal aspects of the hand. Use the pollex to thumb-walk the palmar side and the index or third finger to finger-walk the dorsal aspect. Walk either vertically or horizontally, or both. Working slowly and in tiny increments will reveal the stunning intricacy of the hands, and, I suspect, elevate your appreciation for these marvelous appendages.

The human hand is an amazing feat of nature and one we tend to pay little attention to unless a problem develops. The arrangement of the hand's bones, muscle, nerves and fascia is a marvel of engineering. One quarter of our body's bones, 123 named ligaments, 34 muscles, 48 nerves and 30 arteries interact cooperatively below our awareness to perform all that we desire.

About one third of the brain's sensory and motor cortexes are devoted to the operation of the hands. That is an *enormous* investment of neural resources for such a small area of the body. By offering hand reflexology to yourself regularly you will be communicating directly to a large part of your central nervous system through the rich supply of nerves in the hands.

Relaxed, flexible and strong hands make it easier to reach out and grasp what life has to offer (or put a stop to unwanted situations). A few minutes of self-care each evening is a small price to pay to live and work pain-free. A surprise bonus may be improved digestion of that evening's dinner and a good night's sleep.

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