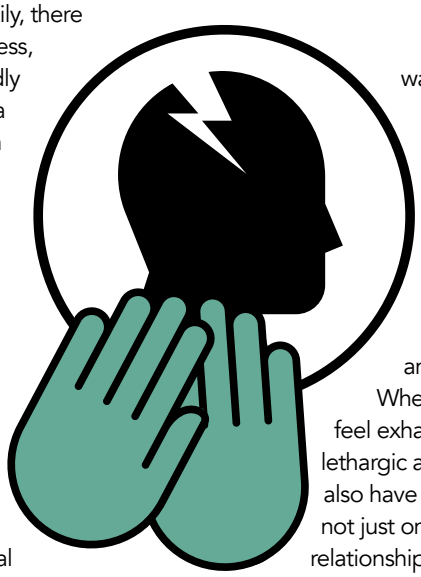
Massage for Stress Relief

"Relax". You hear it all the time, but for many, it's a daily struggle to achieve, and really when someone says that to you, you just want to punch them. While therapists and life coaches will tell you the best way to reduce stress is to work fewer hours or avoid tense situations, in your fast-paced modern world this can seem impossible. Luckily, there is a powerful way to reduce stress, without giving away your worldly possessions and relocating to a Tibetan village, and that is with massage therapy.

Making the time to get a massage and the cost may even seem to add to your stress. Excuses like "It's too expensive", "I don't have the time", "It seems selfish or self-centred" are often barriers to getting the help you Prioritising your mental and health, making 'me' time is actually a selfless act. It is critical for your wellbeing and may save you in more ways than one, or at least save you money from exorbitant medical bills for additional health issues.



One of the reasons why massage is so effective in stress management is it enables you to achieve a high level of relaxation. And for good reason: it then leads to a healthier and more energetic lifestyle. Regular massage is a great and effective way of taking care of yourself and should never be seen as simply 'pampering'. You will often find more energy and time to tackle everyday chores and work, which may reduce your stress if those are contributing factors.

Stress may present itself in different ways with different people. Some have a racing heart, elevated breathing rate, develop the shakes, struggle to focus, feel overwhelmed, angry and anxious. Whereas others may feel exhausted, depressed, lethargic and tearful. Stress also have many origins, not just one. Work, school, relationships, family conflict, social struggles and economic worries are all great generators of stress. People can also be stressed about their health, concerned about a chronic illness or diagnosis, pain or an injury that may be preventing them from participating in things they really enjoy.

Stress is fuelled by a hormone called cortisol which can also increase anxiety and depression. Research has found that stress affects every part of your body – when you carry too much tension, it seems natural that it can lead to muscle stiffness and pain. Stress is also linked to headaches, fatigue, stomach problems and difficulty sleeping. High levels of stress make it hard for people to control their behaviour. Stress is also linked to overeating, drug and alcohol abuse, tobacco use and social withdrawal – it's even a major reason people tend to slack on their exercise plan and often not achieve their work and personal goals. Keeping your stress in check is one of the best ways to stay on track to meet your goals.



WHAT ARE THE PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF MASSAGE THAT HELP TO REDUCE STRESS?

Physiology is the biology of what happens inside your body dealing with all the multiple functions and organs and how they interact and affect each other. A number of things happen within your body during a massage. The most common physiological effects that may cause stress reduction include:

- increased endorphin, serotonin and dopamine release; and
- decreased cortisol production.

An increase in endorphins, serotonin and dopamine occurs during a massage to reduce stress. These chemicals are neurotransmitters that help send messages around your body along your nervous system. Endorphins are responsible for relieving anxiety, serotonin is a happy hormone and prevents depression and gives a sense of wellbeing and dopamine increases motivation and prevents self-doubt. These positive hormones are often lacking in people who become stressed, anxious and feel lonely. Massage stimulates the release of these positive hormones thereby reducing stress and anxiety and can improve your overall mood.

Cortisol is a hormone responsible for the 'fight or flight' response. As a primitive survival reaction, our bodies secrete this hormone in stressful situations to enable us to live – for example, in caveman times fighting off a lion or sabre-toothed tiger. These days, however, our stress levels are continuously high and chronic secretion of cortisol is actually detrimental to our health.

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Cortisol is released into the blood flow and is transported around the body. Cortisol increases stress, anxiety and depression, it can exacerbate weight gain and pain. Too mush cortisol for too long can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, immune system suppression, lack of energy and poor sleep. Massage reduces cortisol levels and replaces it with positive hormones, such as endorphins, serotonin and dopamine, which in turn decrease stress and increase relaxation.

WHEN CAN A MASSAGE HELP TO REDUCE STRESS?

Reducing stress through massage can help in a variety of situations.

1. **General relaxation.** Relaxation can be increased when stress is reduced. When stress levels are high both physically and mentally, relaxation is prevented. Muscles become tense and painful, and headaches compound your stress and frustration. A massage aims to relieve muscle tension. Friction is created between the skin and fingers during a massage, encouraging blood flow to increase. Increasing blood flow results in muscle temperature rising. Tissue elasticity increases releasing tension in the muscles. Relaxation of muscles allows increase in movement and a decrease in pain. Massage is also proven to reduce blood pressure, and heart rate which will allow your body de-stress and reduce the symptoms you may be feeling of stress and anxiety.
2. **Pain.** Stress is associated with pain, anxiety about an illness or injury, or concern about how it may be affecting you personally, professionally and financially. Cortisol, a stress hormone, is released in response to pain, further increasing your stressful experience of pain. The more pain increases, the more stress increases, which will in turn keeps increasing the pain levels. Massage increases muscle flexibility and reduces tension. A massage will also increase serotonin production (happy hormones) thereby reducing stress levels and decreasing pain. Massage triggers the release of natural pain killers, such as dopamine. The physical touch and pressure of massage also interferes with pain signal transmission, and reduces its ability to reach the brain. Once pain is reduced the feeling of stress may be eased.
3. **After an injury.** Following an injury, conditions such as swelling, muscle fatigue and muscle weakness can arise. Stress can increase because of the inability to return to exercise and sport, the pain or the impact the injury may have on your work and family. Massage promotes healing by increasing blood flow to the area bringing with it oxygen and nutrients. Muscle spasm, pain and swelling can be reduced through massage improving the symptoms you may be experiencing that are adding to your stress.

WHAT TYPE OF MASSAGE WILL RELIEVE STRESS?

Many, many types of massage and alternative therapies are available nowadays. The most common massages that help to reduce stress are:

1. **Deep tissue massage.** This focuses on the deeper layers within soft tissues. A deep tissue massage aims to relieve tension by stretching and spreading muscle fibres and tissues in order for muscles to relax and loosen. Deep strokes and a firm pressure are regularly used to reduce stress.
2. **Swedish massage.** This is a traditional form of massage used for relaxation. Manipulation of the muscles encourages them to relax and stretch to relieve any tightness or tension, reducing stress.
3. **Aromatherapy massage.** This massage has a smooth and flowing style. It focuses on overall relaxation, improving blood circulation and range of motion at your joints, as well as relieving muscle tension. Different oils can be used that may promote relaxation.
4. **Trigger point therapy.** This can be incorporated within a general massage. A trigger point is a tight 'knot' within the muscle where congestion has created a hypersensitive area that can refer pain to neighbouring areas, and create headaches. A therapist can use their fingers or thumbs with firm pressure creating an ischaemic reaction. Pain may be felt during this time but eases over a few seconds. When the pressure is released blood rushed to the area, causing muscle relaxation.
5. **Lymph massage.** A build-up of metabolic waste products can occur after an injury, surgery or over use of a muscle. Metabolic waste products increase muscle fatigue and can result in swelling and pain, which can contribute to your stress. The massage involves a variety of gentle, long strokes that flush out the metabolic waste products from your body.



The best parents, partners and workers are usually those who can look after themselves, find a stress relief through massage and other holistic therapies and create a healthy work–life balance. Alongside massage treatments, there are also other complementary therapies that can help, such as counselling, yoga, meditation, exercises and good nutrition.

The information contained in this article is intended as general guidance and information only and should not be relied upon as a basis for planning individual medical care or as a substitute for specialist medical advice in each individual case. ©Co-Kinetic 2021

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