

Get rubbed the right way

What if a relaxing back-rub doesn't ease your aches and pains? Time to step it up a notch, to remedial massage, says *Meena Azzollini*.

Remedial massage is not just therapeutic but also holistic, because it targets the cause of pain as well as the symptoms. At the core of remedial massage lies the principle that everything in the body is connected and will react in response to an affected part. Remedial massage can therefore treat specific musculoskeletal conditions and health issues by incorporating a variety of technique and styles that treat superficial muscles or deeper muscles.

Julie Holmes, a remedial massage therapist who practises at Jewel Therapy, Silver Sands, South Australia, explains: "Remedial massage addresses the relationship between each cell, tissue, organ and system in the body – a change to one part promotes change to every part. This means that the focus can be on preventing and treating injury, as well as recovery, postural distortion, enhancing performance, managing chronically tight painful muscles, and increasing flexibility."

Mechanical reflex

Massage works on the body in two ways: via a mechanical action and also a reflex action. A mechanical action is created when massage therapists work on shortened muscles and connective tissues by softening, stretching and lengthening contracted muscles through touch and manipulation to improve functionality; this also aids in removal of toxins and acids. A reflex action takes place when working on one set of muscles has an effect on another part of the body, thus improving functionality.

Theresa Stephens, a remedial massage therapist at the South Australian Remedial Therapy Clinic in Adelaide, explains further: "Massage therapy increases circulation and helps to relax muscles. When there is good blood flow through the muscles, oxygen and nutrients supply the muscle with energy and healing properties, and in turn carbon dioxide and other metabolic wastes are removed. Recovery time from muscle strain is also reduced by flushing the tissues of lactic acid, uric acid and other waste matter, and improving circulation through stretching ligaments and tendons.

The therapist will realign and probe deep into muscles and connective soft tissues to break up adhesions that restrict circulation and limit movement.

"When muscles are tight, the muscle fibres are locked in together; this is often felt as a knot, which restricts blood flow, while a build-up of lactic acid and other waste products causes pain. Increasing circulation facilitates removal of these waste products. Remedial massage uses a series of techniques which remedy soft tissue dysfunction, including deep tissue techniques, trigger points, sports massage techniques like stretches, and relaxation techniques. However, while strokes used in a relaxation massage are long, rhythmic, and flowing, they are done at a

slower pace than in remedial or deep tissue massage, and more of the body area is covered in a given time; by way of contrast, a deep tissue massage focuses on a specific body area where there is pain or dysfunction, such as the shoulders, lower back, or neck."

While remedial massage does use a combination of relaxation and deep tissue massage techniques, it also usually involves varied pressure applied to specific areas, rather than the soothing rhythm of a relaxation massage. "Some pain or discomfort during and after a remedial massage may occur," adds Holmes. "This is normal and can be due to a number of factors, including not being hydrated enough. Certain massage techniques may leave you feeling tender for a day or so afterwards – but no worse than how you'd feel after going back to the gym after a break. This is because muscles tighten up to protect themselves, which is counter-productive to the aim of remedial massage – to relax, lengthen, and soften the muscles. To work within an acceptable 'pain threshold', it is vital that there is clear communication between the therapist and client – the client needs to be an active participant in the process."

Can it help you?

Remedial massage is significantly beneficial to our wellbeing. One of the most obvious effects is the feeling of deep relaxation and calm, which is due to the release of endorphins as well as to increased levels of serotonin and dopamine which improve mood and reduce pain. Studies show that stress and pain hormones, especially cortisol, decrease following remedial massage and this has a significant and positive impact on the body's immune system.

Remedial massage also stimulates circulation of the blood and boosts lymphatic drainage and flow, which reduces pain and swelling. Stephens explains: "Some massage techniques elicit a stretch-relax reflex, which helps to return the muscle to its resting length and enables better

blood flow, while other techniques will break down scar tissue within a muscle which has been created by micro-tears. Some techniques also target the nervous system, and so trigger the muscle to relax." By improving muscle function, massage will facilitate overall joint strength and stabilisation.

Remedial massage is safe for all ages, from babies through to the elderly. However, it is important to communicate thoroughly with your therapist about your condition and health history beforehand, as some medical conditions may mean particular treatments are inappropriate or non-supportive. "Remedial massage does not heal or cure in itself – but it definitely assists the body in the healing process", says Stephens.

