

Integrating bodywork into wellness

Learn about therapeutic bodywork and its benefits, plus guide participants on how to find the right fit

by Shalene Zarate, LMT, NMT, CST

Linda is an active 61-year-old who has been experiencing persistent aches and pains in her joints. She works part-time and enjoys more than one mountain sport as a hobby. Lately, she goes to bed at night and wakes up sore and stiff in the morning. Initially Linda was not worried, thinking the symptoms would heal; however, after a few weeks, she made an appointment with her healthcare provider to see if he could figure out why her pain persisted. Her provider offered her only a referral to a medical specialist, and in the meantime, prescriptions for pain relief, a muscle relaxant, or an injection to treat her low-level arthritic pain. Unfortunately, treatment by a bodyworker was never suggested to address her symptoms.

This article delves into therapeutic bodywork and its role by focusing on advanced massage therapy as part of a wellness approach for older adults. In 2004, Elaine Jones, RMT, MBA, published an article in the *Journal on Active Aging*[®] with information about how active-aging organizations could provide these services to residents/members safely and effectively.¹ Among other things, she shared guidelines for

working with individuals and advice for selecting massage therapists. [Ed. While Jones's overview contains evergreen content, readers will find current information about state laws and regulations on the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) website. See the sidebar on page 37 for details of where to access both resources.]

The following pages will focus on tips readers can share with individuals like Linda, to help them find the care they need—whether it's on a senior living campus, at a health/wellness center or in the greater community. Let's begin by exploring bodywork and what it encompasses.

What is therapeutic bodywork?

Therapeutic bodywork includes common therapies, such as massage, physical therapy, occupational therapy and chiropractic treatments. Massage therapy has a dozen or more styles within the discipline that systematically irons out muscles and fascia (the connective tissue that surrounds and supports muscles and organs). Bodywork also includes chiropractic care, or a less invasive osteopathic approach known as craniosacral therapy (CST).

Upledger Institute International, established by the founder of CST, describes this

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approach as “a gentle, hands-on method of evaluating and enhancing the functioning of...the membranes and cerebrospinal fluid that surround and protect the brain and spinal cord.”² This style of therapy has profound effects on all the fluids of the body (blood, lymph, cerebrospinal fluid), skeletal, nervous, and soft tissue systems, resulting in pain relief by decreasing tension. Other forms of bodywork include:

- acupuncture, which involves inserting thin needles into specific points to regulate energy flow and to promote healing
- Rolfing (or Structural Integration), which employs a 10-series protocol of treatments that works its way through each region of the body

As I have witnessed in my own clinical practice, skillfully performed bodywork can be effective in helping people recover from injuries more efficiently, decreasing pain, restoring function and movement, and increasing ranges of motion. In addition, treatments may result in the release of tension and stress, as well as improved athletic stamina and enhanced overall physical performance.

Besides helping individuals heal normal wear and tear in their bodies, bodywork can

be an indispensable tool for maintaining a healthy body that ages more gracefully. So, are older adults embracing these therapies?

Analyzing data from the United States’ 2012 National Health Interview Survey, a 2018 study identified the following 7 complementary health approaches (CHA) that community-dwelling adults aged 65 or older commonly receive:

- acupuncture
- herbal therapies
- chiropractic
- massage
- meditation
- tai chi
- yoga

Results of the self-reported survey indicated that nearly 3 in 10 participants (29.2%) engaged in any of these CHA in the preceding year. Chiropractic (8.4%) and massage (5.7%) were among the 3 top-reported approaches. Further, more than 6 in 10 participants found CHA treatments to be important for maintaining health and well-being.^{3,4}

For this article, we will focus on massage and other soft tissue manipulation or manual therapies.

More about soft tissue

Most people have heard the term *soft tissue*, which refers to the body’s connective tissues—muscles, fascia, tendons, ligaments, fat, blood vessels and skin. Its function includes support, structure, space, stabilization and scar formation.⁵

Deane Juhan, bodyworker and author of *Job’s Body: A Handbook for Bodywork*, describes soft tissue as the component that “binds specific cells into tissues, and tissues into organs, organs into systems, cements bones, ties bones into joint, wraps every nerve and every vessel, laces all internal structures firmly into place, and envelops the body as a whole.”⁶ Weaving these elements together with our bones, creates a movable frame from which everything is suspended, so our posture is supported. All the connective tissues combine with the fluids they contain, which assists with weight-bearing capabilities of a skeleton.⁶

When soft tissue is impaired or injured, it can result in conditions such as:

- muscle pain
- sprains
- strains
- cramps

- spasms
- entrapped or compressed nerves
- scar tissue
- vertebral subluxations (misalignment of the vertebrae)

Changes in an individual's muscular function, pain, and range of motion are due primarily to changes in the fascia. These changes alter the normal movements of soft tissues, including their ability to contract, relax and lengthen.⁶ This can lead to pain and age-related reductions in strength and mobility, resulting in decreased physical performance.⁷

One example of impairment occurs when a condition known as active myofascial trigger points (TrPts) creates a painful, tender area that can feel like a knot in the muscles. This condition is extremely common and an underlying cause of pain and/or dysfunction. Onset is often associated with physical overuse or overload, which may be acute, sustained and/or repetitive. TrPts can also be latent. Although not painful, latent TrPts contribute instead to stiffness and restricted ranges of motion.⁸

Whether there is an awareness of these soft tissue issues or not, trigger points can lead to a lack of blood supply in a region. The outcome can be muscle spasms, neuropathy (nerve damage) and muscle weakness, which plays a critical role in a person's overall posture and ability to move.⁸

Therapeutic bodywork can help in alleviating the effects of these impairments and injuries.

Benefits of soft tissue treatments

One of the most sought-after forms of CHA has been massage therapy^{3,4} and related soft tissue (bodywork) modalities that work with fascia and the neuromuscular framework. Some benefits of massage therapy include:

Physical performance and recovery. Massage promotes faster, more efficient recovery from most injuries (including



surgery); increased strength and flexibility, leading to improved posture and reduced risk of injury; post-activity reduction in muscle soreness, spasms, cramps, stiffness and inflammation; and enhanced peak physical performance and body awareness, with improved stamina and endurance. Individuals recovering from a torn rotator cuff, dislocation or frozen shoulder (pain, extreme stiffness in the shoulder joint) can expect improved range of motion.⁵

Physiological benefits. Massage improves immune function, digestion, and detoxification of metabolic waste. It also increases restorative sleep, enhancing the body's ability to repair itself more effectively.⁵

Psychological benefits. Stress reduction and tension relief are among the psychological benefits of massage. An additional benefit includes elevated mood due to the increase in serotonin and dopamine production. Serotonin and dopamine are feel-good hormones/neurotransmitters, so these chemicals may be beneficial for improving other health outcomes.⁵

Pain and pain management. People who take an active role in their health often find benefit from participating in complementa-

ry and integrative medicine (CIM) to address pain, either because of unsatisfactory experiences with conventional medicine, or because they desire to address the problem in a more holistic, natural and less invasive way. Though there are some contraindications for the use of bodywork for pain treatment, it is generally regarded as safe, with few low-risk adverse effects.⁹

Bodywork may provide relief for pain caused by repetitive motion injuries such as tendonitis, while neuromuscular massage or CST performed on a temporomandibular (jaw) joint may reduce some after-effects of extensive dental work.⁵ Individuals who suffer from nerve compression syndromes also may find relief for their shooting pain, numbness or tingling in the extremities.⁵ Examples of these syndromes include:

- carpal tunnel (neural wrist compression)
- thoracic outlet (compression of the nerves or blood vessels in the space between the collarbone and first rib)
- piriformis syndromes (neural compression of the buttocks)

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Research also shows that massage therapy, when compared to no treatment, is more effective for reducing pain intensity, which helps with long-term pain management.⁹

Headaches. Individuals who struggle with headaches, including migraines, may experience a decrease in the duration and/or incidence of painful episodes.⁵

Orthopedic issues. People with conditions such as neck whiplash, knee pain, sprained ankle or plantar fasciitis may experience decreased pain. Even individuals with chronic low-back pain may find long-term relief.⁶

Massage as medicine

Additional studies are being conducted to investigate the benefits and outcomes of massage therapy in order to support its role as part of healthcare treatments. The study of human development has demonstrated the importance of touch in healing injuries and reducing pain. Until clinical guidelines are established, however, medical professionals may be reluctant to refer patients to a massage therapist.

Thanks to organizations like the Massage Therapy Foundation and the Fascia Re-

search Society, industry leaders and practitioners are taking steps toward developing common language, protocols, establishment of state requirements for licensure, and professional standards that will allow therapists to be integrated more fully into healthcare. Standards and guidelines are being developed based on studies leading to evidence-based practices, some of which have been demonstrated anecdotally.

For now, it's up to individuals to explore the options and evaluate professionals who might be a good fit for them.

Coaching participants to find a bodyworker

Many times, I have been asked by clients who live out of town, "How do I find a massage therapist like you where I live?" I wish I could say that finding a gifted bodyworker was as simple as a quick internet search.

One pathway is to seek a personal or healthcare professional's referral for a highly recommended therapist. Health/wellness professionals can help their members and residents—I'll call them participants—to understand the basics of bodywork and guide them to the best professional by considering some questions.

Even people who regularly participate in manual therapies may need to consider an alternative professional to address specific symptoms. Individualized treatments should include documentation of progress and/or changes in health status, to be discussed at each session. Modified techniques and adapted methods should address any setbacks that occur between sessions because life happens, and it can bring about new challenges.

Participants may need to experience a few therapists before finding one that feels like a good fit. Yet, having a devoted bodyworker who can help them mend and care for their body can be a true saving grace.

Let's examine some questions that can help guide your participants to discover the notable benefits of therapeutic bodywork.

Guiding questions to help participants find a 'good fit'

When individuals, especially those who have never experienced treatment, are looking for a therapist, they may be tempted to choose the most convenient one. In some locations, such as rural areas, there aren't as many therapists or therapies to choose from, so participants will need to investigate professionals outside the area to find the best options available.

These 7 guiding questions below will help participants focus their search, evaluate resources, consider references and types of therapy, and choose their preferred environment, helping to narrow the choices.

1. What are the participant's ultimate goals?

Help individuals identify the goals they would like to achieve—relaxation, pain relief, better physical function, or stress reduction, for example. Suggest that they consider what they expect will change after their treatments by keeping the end in mind. Identifying their needs, goals and preferences will help them focus on the type of provider and bodywork that may meet those needs.

2. What modalities are appropriate for the type of bodywork they will need?

Is there a specific type of bodywork that addresses a participant's condition or issue? For example, therapies on individuals with temporomandibular (TMJ) pain are best performed by a practitioner trained in TMJ dysfunction. Other participants should seek professionals with specialized training for conditions such as lymphatic drainage, injury rehabilitation, or other conditions that require advanced training or unique skills.

3. What qualifications, education, certifications or licenses should be considered?

Participants should review which schools therapists attended, and the number of training hours required in their program. For example, in Colorado, the number of credit hours required to become a licensed massage therapist is 650. Someone with advanced training will have more.

Review a therapist's specialized training and hands-on experience in the field. Evaluate the person's level of expertise or mastery. Competent therapists will have been in the field for 6 or more years. The competency level goes up if therapists have continued their education since completing certification, or they have worked in a clinical setting that permits work on a wide variety of cases.

A master bodyworker will have more than 10,000 hours of hands-on experience. At that point, practitioners likely will have integrated more than one modality into their practice. For example, I integrate neuromuscular massage (a precision-focused style of massage technique targeting neural issues) with craniosacral therapy. Combined, these modalities can create long-lasting results.

A participant may be curious about what settings the therapist has worked in and where this person works now. Is the therapist currently working in a medical office or private practice, or is the person mobile? (Refer also to question 6).

4. Does the therapist work with older adults?

If the participant has a more complicated health issue, is the therapist qualified to address those specific needs? For example,

has the participant requested references or referrals from healthcare providers?

Instead of continuing sessions with health/fitness bodyworkers, an individual may benefit more from a professional therapist who will assess specific needs, apply advanced knowledge of anatomy and physiology to treatments, and possess valuable experience that effectively addresses a wider variety of conditions and body types (constitutions). Seek a professional who is both skilled and has more hands-on experience.

5. What other considerations will help participants connect well with practitioners?

The ideal situation is to find a professional who establishes relationships with individuals, understands their bodies, and knows their cases by addressing acute needs. The professional should also be trained to track their changes and able to help them maintain their physical health.

Choosing a therapist is not as simple as locating a business that is close to home or work. Participants can consider these guiding questions and then ask for references from other individuals to evaluate a therapist's reliability and effectiveness, and the environment in which the person provides services. [Ed. Also see the client handout on page 39.]

Suggest that participants check that each visit will be with a therapeutic practitioner who takes notes and maintains charts, tracking changes such as progress made, setbacks, or shifts in lifestyle. The therapist should respond to individual needs by customizing treatment plans and implementing whichever techniques will meet a person's needs. Participants should avoid a therapist who follows routines or takes a one-size-fits-all approach.

Once a therapeutic partnership is established, participants should expect therapists to allow time for them to get to know each other. This may involve sharing personal stories related to general health and health histories and offering feedback on which treatments provide the best results. Advanced therapeutic training equips a practitioner with various techniques

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Resources

Internet

Academy of Clinical Massage

<https://www.academyofclinicalmassage.com>

American Massage Therapy Association

<https://www.amtamassage.org>

American Massage Therapy Association: State Regulations

<https://www.amtamassage.org/state-regulations/>

Canadian Massage & Manual Osteopathic Therapists Association

<https://cmmota.com>

Fascia Research Society

<https://fasciaresearchsociety.org>

Massage Therapy Foundation

<https://massagetherapyfoundation.org>

Upledger Institute

<https://www.upledger.com>

Print

Jones, E. (2004). Massage therapy for older adults. *Journal on Active Aging*, 3(4), 46–51. Available to International Council on Active Aging® members in the “Articles” archives [search keyword *massage*] at www.icaa.cc

Shockett, S., & Findley, T. (2019). Findings from the frontiers of fascia research: Insights into “inner space” and implications for health. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, 23(1), 103–107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbmt.2018.12.001>

to integrate into a session for optimized improvement.

The relationship between a bodywork practitioner and a participant should feel safe and supportive. This collaboration should allow for open communication so the professional can tailor techniques for the greatest effectiveness and enjoyment.

If a bodyworker promises to “fix you,” keep searching. Wise therapists know their role in the process. Finding one who is a good match is priceless.

6. What kind of environment is the participant looking for?

Once the participant has determined the kind of therapy needed, the next step is to consider which environments would work well and provide comfort. A good first choice would be a therapist who works in private practice or who practices within a wellness or medical clinic.

Therapeutic bodywork doesn't lend itself as well to a spa environment. Participants should save “feel-good” luxury techniques for special occasions. Energy work modalities such as Reiki or sound healing are best used in conjunction with therapeutic work, not as a replacement.

Suggest that participants consider a place where they feel safe and comfortable enough to relax. An office environment that evokes relaxation and rejuvenation includes soft lighting, appealing colors, soothing sounds, and pleasant or no scents as tolerated. Even having a decluttered space that is clean and organized will affect the treatment outcome.

7. How often should a participant receive bodywork?

Suggest that once a participant is established with a therapist, the individual should plan to book sessions regularly and well ahead of time. The frequency and duration depend on the individual's condition, goals and financial resources. To optimize results and receive benefits, it

is best to receive frequent treatments that are consistent, especially in the beginning. For example, in the earlier stages of healing, the therapist and the participant will gauge how often they will meet—usually biweekly or weekly. The aim is for the participant to achieve a healthy state that targets maintenance sessions, which are usually monthly.

A healing journey

Linda was blessed to find a healthcare provider who recommended that she try some bodywork to address her persistent pain. After completing 6 therapeutic massage therapy sessions, if her soreness and stiffness hadn't improved, it was recommended that she return to her provider for a medical evaluation. With the help of her health/wellness coach, she was able to find a qualified massage therapist to address the causes of her pain holistically.

In this case, Linda's pain resolved without medical intervention. By maintaining her physical health with regular massage treatments and other self-care techniques that her therapists shared, she reduces the risk for additional health issues. Along the way, Linda has learned that healing is a journey, not a destination. 

Shalene Zarate, LMT, NMT, CST, has been helping her bodywork clients alleviate headaches naturally and rehabilitate injuries more efficiently, with less pain, for 24 years. Though Zarate treats all muscular conditions, her unique ability is in conditions associated with the neck, head and jaw (TMJ). Her work is a fusion of neuromuscular techniques, craniosacral therapies, reflexology and aromatherapy. To learn more, visit <https://www.embodiworkmassage.com>

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NINE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH A POTENTIAL NEW THERAPIST

by Shalene Zarate, LMT, NMT, CST

When you're looking for a massage therapist, it's wise to build a fuller picture of what to expect before you become a client. You can gather key details to consider by interviewing practitioners using the questions below. It's also important to pay attention to each person's attributes. For example, does the therapist seem knowledgeable? Is the individual a good listener? What you observe can add to the accuracy of your picture and help you decide if someone is a good fit for you and your needs.

Interview questions

1. What therapies do you provide?
2. How long have you been practicing? Full-time? Part-time?
3. What certifications and/or licenses do you possess?
4. Do you have any advanced or specialized training? In what areas?
5. How will you design treatment plans, assess my condition, and evaluate progress to ensure my needs are met?
6. What is your approach, style, philosophy on healing, or mission in your work?
7. Typically, how long are sessions, how frequently do you suggest meeting, and how long do you predict we'll work together to address my needs?
8. What should I expect to feel after my treatment? Are there any potential side effects? (e.g., muscle soreness, fatigue)
9. What about confidentiality and HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act]? Do you protect confidentiality and adhere to HIPAA regulations?

Shalene Zarate, LMT, NMT, CST, has been helping her bodywork clients alleviate headaches naturally and rehabilitate injuries more efficiently, with less pain, for 24 years. Though she treats all muscular conditions, her unique ability is in conditions associated with the neck, head and jaw (TMJ). To learn more, visit <https://www.embodiworkmassage.com>

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Practical tips for participation

Before you embark on therapeutic massage/bodywork rehabilitation

Discuss the program with your healthcare provider if you have a medical condition. Therapists may need to consult with your provider and request medical clearance for the type of bodywork planned. Some therapies are not recommended for certain health conditions. It's best to rule out any therapies or techniques that should be avoided.

Once you start therapeutic massage/bodywork rehabilitation

- Stay hydrated by drinking fluids before and after a session.
- Apply heat or cold packs to the affected area to help with post-treatment muscle soreness, which usually goes away within 24–48 hours.
- Apply analgesic creams and muscle rubs to sore muscles to lessen the pain without blocking it out entirely. The pain does serve one purpose, and that's preventing you from reinjuring the tissue. [Ed. If you take medication, talk to a healthcare provider or pharmacist first about the safety of using these creams and rubs. Some medications interact with these topical treatments.]
- Avoid making plans for after sessions. You may feel invigorated by therapeutic massage/bodywork. Or, if your body is overtired and running on reserves, you may become aware of how exhausted you are and feel fatigued post-treatment. This experience is a healthy indicator that you may need to take some time to rest and recover. Because it's hard to predict which direction you will go, especially at the beginning of therapy, it's better not to have any big plans for directly after treatment.