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LIFESTYLES

# 5 things everyone needs to know about massage

**It's not just athletes and celebs who appreciate the stress-relieving benefits.**

*By Natalie Ermann*

**If you think massage** is only for the indulgent and wealthy, think again. The biggest relief is felt by the stressed-out and tense, and that's something all of us -- from movie star to stay-at-home mom to doctor -- have been at one time or another.

Mike Babel, a licensed massage therapist based in New York, has seen massage help every type of person, including actors Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz and Olympian discus thrower Nick Sweeney. "For some people, massage is necessary to get through the day," Babel says. "People hold stress and deal with it differently, so their needs vary."

**Massage is intimate, so it's important that you feel comfortable.**

Massage feels good, to be sure, but it also can aid in circulation, enhance immune functioning and treat injuries. "One of the biggest misconceptions," Babel says, "is that massage is a sex industry. It's so not -- it's a medical industry."

Whether you get a massage every week or have never even tried it, read on for key information. Your tense neck and sore shoulders will thank you tomorrow.

**In good hands**
How can you tell whether your massage therapist is qualified? (It's a no-no to call a massage therapist a "masseuse.") "Make sure he or she graduated from an accredited school, is a member of some professional organization and is licensed," says Mary Beth Braun, president of the American Massage Therapy Association. Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia give licenses; elsewhere, ask the therapist whether he or she is certified nationally. To find a professional in your area, go to amtamassage.org/findamassage/locator.htm. Even with a licensed therapist, heed your instincts. "If he or she doesn't leave the room when you're changing or doesn't cover you with a towel, those should be red flags," Babel says. "The therapist should tell you to take off as much clothing as you feel OK with."

**You rub my back, I'll rub yours**
Despite all the licensing required, it is OK to give your loved ones the occasional back rub. "Generally, you're not going to hurt someone if you're giving them a massage at home. But don't do so for the elderly or a person with a systemic condition [prone to blood clots, impaired lymphatic system, high blood pressure]," Braun says. "Also, don't give a massage to anyone with a fever or any severe cardiovascular condition."

**Preparation equals relaxation**
When you walk in for your massage, you should be ready to relax. "Coming on a full stomach isn't a good idea," Babel says. "Neither is drinking alcohol before or after." He also warns against showering just before a massage; the natural oils on your body will have been washed off, making the skin tighter. After your massage, Babel says, be sure to drink lots of water.

A few things to keep in mind: "The first mistake many people make is to dig into the shoulders. Start off light," Babel says. "Let the muscle melt under your hands, and work your way in slowly, then get deeper." Otherwise, there can be bruising and soreness the next day. He also recommends first warming your hands by running them under hot water.

**Schools rule**
If you'd like to get a massage but find the typical hourly cost of $50 and up prohibitive, try a massage school. Most offer services by their students for a nominal fee. According to Braun, some of the nation's most prestigious massage schools include the Utah College of Massage Therapy, the Western Institute of Neuromuscular Therapy in California, the Chicago School of Massage Therapy and the Atlanta School of Massage.

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**Different strokes for different folks**
A massage menu at a spa can be hard to interpret. Here's the 411 from the AMTA to help you choose:

**Lomi lomi** is an ancient Hawaiian healing art often referred to by devotees as a spiritual massage. The therapist uses knuckle, thumb and forearm strokes to realign the body, mind and spirit.
**Rosen Method** involves gentle touch and verbal communication that should release suppressed emotions, and thus muscular tension. "I've had people cry, scream and freak out on the table," Babel says, "because we hold emotions and memories in our muscles. One guy I massaged was shot in his leg, and he would cry every time I worked his calf. When he finally explained he'd been shot there, it all made sense."
**Shiatsu** and **acupressure** are systems of finger pressure that treat special points along the invisible energy channels of the body.

n Swedish massage involves long strokes, kneading and friction techniques on the superficial layers of muscles, plus active and passive movements of the joints.
**Trigger point therapy** involves concentrated finger pressure applied to "trigger points," which are painful, inflamed areas of the muscles, in an effort to break the cycle of spasms and pain.

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