

Massage Your Mood

A friendly touch eases depression and anxiety

by Sara Altshul

What it is:

Massage therapists use arm, hand, fingertip, and elbow pressure to treat physical and emotional problems. The word massage comes from the Arabic word *mass'h*, which means "press gently."

What traditional medicine says:

Therapeutic massage was first described in China about 2,500 years ago. Around 400 BC, the Greek healer Hippocrates used massage to treat sprains. Most of the world's medical systems, including Chinese medicine and India's Ayurveda, developed their own versions.

What we know:

Researchers at the University of Miami followed 37 breast cancer patients who received massage therapy or practiced progressive muscle relaxation for 5 weeks. Women in the massage group reported feeling less depressed and angry, and they had more energy. In a University of South Florida study of high blood pressure patients, those who got 10-minute massages three times a week for 3 weeks lowered their higher number by 11 points.

What new research shows:

A recent review of more than a dozen massage studies conducted by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine concludes that massage therapy relieves depression and anxiety by affecting the body's biochemistry. In a series of studies including about 500 men, women, and children with depression or stress problems, researchers measured the stress hormone cortisol in participants before and immediately after massage and found that the therapy lowered levels by up to 53%. (Cortisol can drive up blood pressure and blood sugar levels and suppress the immune system.)

Massage also increased serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters that help reduce depression.

To find a qualified massage therapist:

Visit [*The American Massage Therapy Association*](#). Cost: Roughly \$30 for a 30-minute massage, \$60 for an hour.

Former *Prevention* alternative medicine editor Sara Altshul is now a freelance writer based in Rome, Italy.