

Hand and feet massages provide consolation for bereaved relatives

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Receiving soothing massages for eight weeks after the death of a loved one can provide much-needed consolation during an intense, stressful period of grieving, according to a study in the April issue of the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*.

Eighteen people who had lost a relative to cancer took part in the study. Participants ranged from 34 to 78 years of age and included widows, widowers, daughters and sisters. Nine chose foot massage, eight chose hand massage and one asked for both. Only three had previous experience of soft tissue massage.

"Details about the massage study were included in an information pack provided by the palliative care team when people's relatives died" says lead author Dr Berit S Cronfalk from the Stockholms Sjukhem Foundation, a Swedish palliative care provider.

Relatives were offered a 25-minute hand or foot massage once a week for eight weeks and could choose whether the sessions took place at home, work or at the hospital.

"Soft tissue massage is gentle, but firm" explains Dr Cronfalk, who carried out the research with colleagues from the Karolinska Institutet. "This activates touch receptors which then release [oxytocin](#), a hormone known for its positive effects on well-being and relaxation.

"In this study the hand or foot massage was done with slow strokes, light

pressure and circling movements using oil lightly scented with citrus or hawthorn.

"The relatives were then encouraged to relax for a further 30 minutes."

Baseline data was collected on the participants during a 60-minute interview before the programme started and a further 60-minute interview was conducted a week after the massage programme finished.

The interviews with the participants, which have been published in the Journal's annual complementary therapy issue, showed that they derived considerable benefits from the programme.

The relatives' comments could be divided into four key themes:

1) A helping hand at the right time

- "I was happy to find the leaflet about the study in the folder...Straight away I felt it was for me. And as I phoned it felt great just to speak with a professional."
- "Honestly, I didn't know what to expect. I just felt I needed to do something to get rid of that pain and it seemed like a good alternative."

2) Something to rely on

- "I almost longed for it. It started at the beginning of the week...the massage became something to look forward to."
- "She [the therapist] has cared for him and now she cared for

me."

3) Moments of rest

- "I could focus on my grief during the massage and that helped me handle the rest of the week."
- "I was just lying there... and no one expected me to talk about my feelings."

4) Moments of retaining energy

- "I gained strength... Through my weakness, strength emerged."
- "I suddenly realised that I could go through my thoughts in a much calmer way...I was more sensible in my thinking."

A follow-up six to eight months after the study showed that 17 of the relatives had moved forward with their lives, but one had suffered further emotional problems after the death of another close family member.

"All the people we spoke to used the word consolation" says Dr Cronfalk.

"The massages provide physical touch and closeness and helped to diminish the feelings of empty space and loneliness that people felt.

"Study participants also told us that the massages helped them to balance the need to grieve and the need to adapt to life after the loss of their relative."

More information: Soft tissue massage: early intervention for relatives whose family members died in palliative cancer care. Cronfalk et al. Journal of Clinical Nursing. 19, 1040-1048. (April 2010).

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