

Massage eases anxiety, but no better than simple relaxation does

March 9 2010

A new randomized trial shows that on average, three months after receiving a series of 10 massage sessions, patients had half the symptoms of anxiety. This improvement resembles that previously reported with psychotherapy, medications, or both. But the trial, published in the journal *Depression and Anxiety*, also found massage to be no more effective than simple relaxation in a room alone with soft, soothing music.

"We were surprised to find that the benefits of [massage](#) were no greater than those of the same number of sessions of 'thermotherapy' or listening to relaxing music," said Karen J. Sherman, PhD, MPH, a senior investigator at Group Health Research Institute. "This suggests that the benefits of massage may be due to a generalized relaxation response."

Massage therapy is among the most popular complementary and alternative medical (CAM) treatments for [anxiety](#), she added. But this is the first rigorous trial to assess how effective massage is for patients with [generalized anxiety disorder](#).

The trial randomly assigned 68 Group Health patients with generalized anxiety disorder to 10 one-hour sessions in pleasant, relaxing environments, each presided over by a licensed massage therapists who delivered either massage or one of two control treatments:

- Relaxation therapy: breathing deeply while lying down

- Thermotherapy: having arms and legs wrapped intermittently with heating pads and warm towels

All three treatments were provided while lying down on a massage table in a softly lighted room with quiet music. All participants received a handout on practicing deep breathing daily at home. Unlike the two control treatments, massage was specifically designed to enhance the function of the parasympathetic nervous system and relieve symptoms of anxiety including muscle tension.

Using a standard rating scale in interviews, the researchers asked the patients about the psychological and physical effects of their anxiety right after the 12-week treatment period ended and three months later, Dr. Sherman said.

All three of the groups reported that their symptoms of anxiety had decreased by about 40 percent by the end of treatment—and by about 50 percent three months later. In addition to the decline in anxiety, the patients also reported fewer symptoms of [depression](#) and less worry and disability. The research team detected no differences among the three groups; but the trial did not include a control group that got no treatment at all.

"Treatment in a relaxing room is much less expensive than the other treatments (massage or thermotherapy), so it might be the most cost-effective option for people with generalized anxiety disorder who want to try a relaxation-oriented complementary medicine therapy," Dr. Sherman said.

Provided by Group Health Cooperative Center for Health Studies

Citation: Massage eases anxiety, but no better than simple relaxation does (2010, March 9)

retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-03-massage-eases-anxiety-simple.html>

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