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Spotlight on Research

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Editor's note: This periodic column keeps you abreast of the latest research documenting the benefits of massage and bodywork. Published research is summarized, with references to the full study text provided; abstracts of research projects planned or in progress are reproduced with minimal edits, whenever possible. The following abstract was presented at the 2002 AMTA National Convention; it appears in *Massage Today* with permission from the author.

Seniors in Touch at Weaver's Tale Retreat Center: A Two-Year AMTA Foundation-Funded Project

People entering their senior years face major life changes, including retirement, decreased community involvement and decreased parenting/family roles. These changes, naturally perceived as losses, are often accompanied by declining physical and mental health, as well as grief associated with the death of a spouse and close friends. Social isolation and depression are frequent outcomes. Research and life experiences indicate that the best treatment for depression is social, physical and mental stimulation through meaningful activities. It is the rare occasion when a resident has the opportunity to spend time outdoors communing with nature or the world outside his or her residence. This lack of stimulation often leads to sleep disorders; anxiety; decreased appetite; and a general decrease in physical and mental stamina.

Weaver's Tale Retreat Center (WTRC) is a 501(c)(3) organization that offers daylong nature retreats for elders who primarily reside in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and retirement and foster homes in the Portland metropolitan area. WTRC's mission is for elders and all people to connect to each other and nature. Using the natural resources Oregon has to offer, participants share in physically and mentally stimulating activities that improve their physical, mental, psychosocial and spiritual well-being. Program activities include Nature Group Experience: an outdoor walk on wheelchair-accessible trails, plant

identification and a nature craft; Self-Renewal: a quiet, nurturing massage by licensed massage therapists (LMT), and self-massage instruction; and Circle of Friends: a music circle that encourages reminiscing and socialization. WTRC provides a high quality program at minimal expense that enables most elders to attend. WTRC has grown dramatically from 50 seniors in 1997 to over 1,000 in 2002.

THE PROJECT

To study the effects of massage and self-massage instruction to seniors and caregivers in the Portland metropolitan area. The massage group activity provided a sensory and self-awareness aspect of the WTRC program. Massage offers not only tactile stimulation, but it evokes memories as a person moves into a relaxed state of awareness. Touch offers people an opportunity to be more aware of their bodies, note pain and stress points and experience a release and deeper sense of relation. Through self-massage instruction, WTRC empowers an individual to have more control of his or her health. General objectives of the massage group project were:

- Capacity-building - to increase number of senior participants and number of LMTs;
- Education - of caregiver, massage therapist, staff of residential facilities;
- Empower - seniors and caregivers in their health care;
- Promote - mental and physical health of seniors.

DATA-GATHERING

Objectives were measured through the pre- and post-tests completed by senior participants, caregivers, activity directors from the senior residences, and massage therapists. Data were collected by observation, as well as through a verbal questionnaire that LMTs administered to their massage clients before and after massage. A follow-up survey was sent to the activities directors three weeks after attending the program. The pre- and post-tests included measurements using a pain scale; emotional stress scale; flexibility; general effect; and comments made by the massage clients that related to body awareness and control regarding health care. The massage therapy coordinator surveyed the massage therapists regarding prior gerontological massage experiences and new insights regarding the senior population. Likewise, a survey for caregivers and staff regarding new insights and previous massage experience for seniors was administered by the massage therapy coordinator.

RESULTS

Senior participants and caregivers pre- and post-tests: Surveys showed a decreased breathing rate in 50% of participants. Other results showed intensified feelings of wellness; calm; relaxation; happiness; and a sense of belonging. Physically, the LMTs' measures of range of motion (ROM); body posture; skin color and tone; and body awareness all improved.

Massage therapists pre- and post-tests: The LMT [reported] perceptions of how seniors benefit from massage did not vary significantly from pre-to post-tests. The LMT [reported] benefits of giving seniors massage were a sense of calm; satisfaction; helpfulness; gratitude; the importance of listening; inter-connectedness; sharing; fun/laughter; appreciation; and "compassion keeps growing." LMTs were surprised by how open the seniors were to share, explore and express feelings. One hundred percent of the massage therapists stated that they plan to include geriatric massage in their practices.

Facilities staff pre- and post-tests: 100% of the staff thought seniors benefit from massage because of improved circulation; relaxation; emotional well-being; decreased pain and stress; and a sense of connectedness. The post-test also revealed that the seniors experienced a new and pleasant experience; helped them forget about their problems; helped them be in the moment; and gave them a sense of peace.

Surveys three weeks post-program: As of this paper, 91.7% of the facilities initiated a massage therapy program as a result of attending WTRC. The physical and occupational departments at one nursing home have contracted with a massage therapist to do a massage clinic every Friday. Another senior developmentally disabled group does massage and has it documented as part of the patient care plan. One activity director of a nursing home leads a group two to three times a week that she calls the "Scented Hand Massage" group; it provides sensory stimulation and relaxation, and, because it meets right before lunch, promotes good hygiene. Another activity director of a nursing home has a massage-relaxation group weekly. And the assisted living facility that was interviewed stated they have LMTs regularly - usually weekly - with residents paying for their private massages. These all are a result of the WTRC experience. Facilities who reported that they had not initiated massage stated they have been unable to find resources and/or the cost has been prohibitive. They both requested a list of resources and suggestions to create massage programs that work for them. WTRC compiled and sent a list of resources and creative solutions.

SUMMARY

All of the objectives of this project were met. The number of massage therapists actually decreased, but the results were an improvement (i.e., a consistent core massage therapy staff developed as a result of available salaries.). WTRC anticipated there would be an increased awareness of the benefits of massage for the senior population among massage therapists, caregivers, activity directors and senior groups. With increased awareness, we anticipated and experienced an increased number of participants and a more consistent staff of massage therapists at our programs, as well as an increased number of senior massages in the community-at-large. Results of our study demonstrated that seniors and caregivers have an increased sense of control and responsibility regarding their health care. The study also demonstrated that massage significantly promotes mental and physical health among seniors.

WTRC is designed to offer seniors the opportunity to spend time outdoors breathing fresh air and experiencing the sights and sounds of nature. Massage therapy at our retreat is intended to promote the health and well-being of seniors. After attending our day program, caregivers and staff report that seniors show an improvement in affect, an increased sense of well-being and increased involvement in their "home" environments. Staff and caregivers who come with their seniors for the day receive nurturing massages and leave the retreat with an added awareness of the importance of human touch. Staff often report that for the first time they are able to experience their seniors as people with distinct personalities and pasts, rather than as patients with physical or mental health needs.



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