

Therapeutic Massage Therapy

Massage Therapy is Non-invasive and Effective

By Lisa K. Harris

Relief from tight muscles, recovery from sports-related injuries, and a remedy for chronic pain may be hands away — two hands that is, of a licensed massage therapist.

By using pressure, tension, motion, and vibration, a massage therapist manipulates muscles. The manipulation releases tension, increases circulation, and aids the process of injury healing.

"I could see a difference right away," said Mark Flint, cyclist and editor of Tail Winds, after receiving a massage from May Hnin, LMT, for shoulder pain. Flint suffered from soreness and had trouble fully extending his arm after taking a spill on his mountain bike three weeks previously. His doctor thought he had a rotator cuff problem and suggested surgery. Flint turned to therapeutic massage therapy instead.

Therapeutic massage therapy, sometimes called sports orthopedic-style massage therapy, or medical

massage therapy, "focuses on the injury or the pain caused by the injury," said Katharine Reed, LMT and certified Shiatsu practitioner.

"All massages are therapeutic," she added, "but a medical or therapeutic massage benefits the body physiologically and anatomically. It's very focused."

The massage strokes are shorter than with a spa massage. "There isn't the goal of relaxation associated with an all over massage you'd receive at a spa. But you may leave feeling relaxed because the pain is less and the tight muscles might have relaxed."

During one treatment session, Reed typically spends upwards of two hours working on the injury and the areas associated with the injury. Reed combines jojoba oil with essential oils, usually juniper berry and birch bark, "for relaxation and muscle relief."

Athletes "are very aware of their bodies," Hnin said. "Their bodies



The soothing hands of a massage therapist help with sore muscles. Lyda Harris Photo

respond quickly to treatment because their muscle tissues are smarter. They (the muscles) know what to do." Hnin has a private practice and works at a Tucson area spa.

Flint said Hnin undertook a very thorough evaluation of his shoulder. Hnin, "went through my range of motion and asked me what hurt."

Another difference between a spa massage and a therapeutic massage is the level of participation between the therapist and the patient. With a therapeutic massage, "there is more communication," Hnin said. Patients participate by contracting and relaxing their muscles in response to the therapists' commands. Also, "medical massages use deeper pressure." Hnin talks to her patients while she works on their muscles and asks them if it hurts. "I want to keep the client within their comfort zone."

Hnin expects athletes to feel

muscle release and progress with range of motion within one to two sessions. For homework, she recommends that her patients perform strengthening and stretching exercises. She also may suggest heat or ice treatments.

Reed has treated injuries from car accidents and on-the-job accidents, nerve disease, back pain, sports-related injuries, and chronic pain. She also helps patients heal from the side effects of surgery. Often her patients are referred to her by medical doctors.

"The result of combined care is exponential for my patients," she said. "Using a medical doctor for medication, a physical therapist for strengthening and range of motion, a chiropractor for bone alignment, and a massage therapist for muscle relaxation," helps her patients heal faster.

Massage therapy can treat chronic injuries that have been incurred years,

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or even decades previously. Reed has treated patients in their 70s for injuries received during high school, helping them recover their range of motion.

"We believe that pain comes with age," Reed said. "This is a cultural myth. Massage therapy can help people have a functioning body at any age. My job is to show my clients the way" to a pain-free existence.

Hnin knew she wanted to be a massage therapist at age 6. "My grandmother suffered from arthritis. We lived in Burma, and she would lie on a futon on the floor. She taught me how to walk on her back," to release the pain. "Afterwards she would give me a handful of coins and a kiss on the forehead. I thought, 'What more can there be?' I had my grandmother's full attention and I got thanked for helping her."

Hnin immigrated to the States at age 9 and later earned a college degree. "I was going to get a master's degree in urban planning. But I thought I'd learn massage therapy first." She graduated from the Swedish Institute in Manhattan and has been in practice since 1985. She specializes in Thai stretching massage and barefoot walking massage, which, Hnin said, "is great for cyclists and runners. It gets the kinks out of their hamstrings and quads."

Reed discovered therapeutic massage therapy as a patient. She had been in a severe car accident and her physician recommended massage therapy to relieve the pain. With a BS in biology and an MBA, she worked as a development consultant, helping non-profit institutions

raise funds. After seeing the benefits from massage therapy first hand, she switched careers.

Working as a massage therapist "allowed me the freedom to raise my children and to help people improve their health," Reed said. She studied massage therapy for two years at Tucson's Cortiva Institute, formerly known as the Desert Institute of Healing Arts, and has been practicing

since 1996.

Jacqueline Coury suffered back injuries in an auto accident, and was in pain much of the time.

"My C5 and C6 disks protruded to the right and gave me muscle spasms and a lot of pain," she said. "The pain was chronic. No matter what I did, it was always in the back of my mind. I was in so much pain I couldn't lift a stack of dishes from the dishwasher to the counter. I couldn't vacuum or even tilt my head back in the shower to rinse the shampoo from my hair. The pain affected my entire life."

Her doctor suggested massage therapy and referred her to Reed. "It's been an amazing help," she said of the effects of Reed's treatment.

After several months of treatment, Coury said she "feels great. I got so much out of it. Katharine really knew I was hurting and really wanted to release the pain."

Once free of pain, she said, Reed "taught me what do if a spasm started. She suggested yoga and Pilates. Now I have a really strong core, which supports my back." Coury continues her treatment with Reed because massage therapy has become part of her life. "It's not a luxury that only rich people do. I make time for it and create a budget for it." Receiving the benefits of massage therapy taught Coury "to take care of

myself. If I take care of my body, my body will take of me."

Coury, like Flint, turned to massage therapy instead of surgery. "I was desperate," Coury said. "Massage therapy was my saving grace. I'd taken muscle relaxants, seen a chiropractor, and a physical therapist. It had been a year since the accident and I was depressed."

Flint believes that people tend to "turn to drugs and surgery too quickly." He prefers a massage therapist and a chiropractor for musculo-skeletal problems. With massage therapy "there are no side effects." He attributes his successful healing from his bike accident to his therapist, Hnin. Flint was able to return to riding a bike shortly after his treatment.

Massage therapists are licensed at the state level and not nationally. The City of Tucson also requires a separate license which includes both practical and written tests.

"Because of the City's higher level of requirements local massage therapists offer a better level of treatment than in other places," Reed said. There is no licensing distinction between therapeutic massage therapy and spa therapy. Reed and Hnin are licensed by both the State and the City. Katharine Reed may be reached at (520) 219-4569 and May Hnin at (520) 275-4758.

Therapeutic massage therapy made a difference in both Flint's and Coury's recovery, and their eventual return to normal activities. The manipulation of soft body tissue by massage helps athletes with sore and stiff muscles, as well as others who have lost range of motion or suffer from chronic pain.

Lisa K. Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.



Katharine Reed, LMT, loosening stiff muscles with a therapeutic massage. Lyda Harris Photo