

Healthy Aging

By Karrie Osborn



“The aging of the U.S. population is one of the major public health challenges of the 21st century. With more than 70 million baby boomers in the United States poised to join the ranks of those aged 65 or older, preventing disease and injury is one of the few tools available to reduce the expected growth of healthcare and long-term care costs.”

Julie Louise Gerberding, MD, Director,
U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

As the result of baby boomers crossing the 60-year-old threshold, more Americans are gingerly tiptoeing into their golden years than ever before. At the same time, modern healthcare is helping ward off life-shortening disease at a tremendous rate. The result is a growing population that is expected to live longer than any generation before; how they live those years is dependent on how they live their lives today, and massage and bodywork can be instrumental in helping the process be a graceful one.

A CHANGE OF MIND-SET

There was a time not so long ago that growing old in America meant mildewing away in a sterile, lifeless nursing home room. Thankfully, that reality and its mind-set have changed for the better. One way to address the needs of today's newly aging population has been the introduction of holistic health centers built right into the retirement or assisted living communities they are meant to serve. A successful example comes from Minnesota's Parnly LifePointes, an independent and dependent-care resident facility that's also home to the recently opened Vitalize

wellness center. Approaching health from a multi-dimensional aspect, this wellness center offers yoga, access to personal trainers, massage, a chi (energy) machine, watsu therapy (a water-based massage tradition), and a saltwater swimming pool. These amenities, and a whole new culture change at LifePointes, make this a unique, proactive approach to elder care.

“There aren’t any crabby people here,” jokes Patricia Montgomery, director of Vitalize. Not only are LifePointes’ residents and other visitors to the wellness center feeling better spiritually and psychologically, they also keep coming back for one very important reason. “They see results,” she says. Whether it is decreased pain, reduced edema or swelling, improved weight loss, a diminished need for insulin, or simply an opportunity to meet with others and feel a sense of community, Montgomery says people are having “huge” results utilizing this newfound mind, body, spirit connection.

“People asked us to keep them out of a nursing home, so we came up with this wellness concept,” Montgomery explains. Utilizing the results of the MacArthur Study of Successful Aging, LifePointes decided to implement a culture change initiative from the top down—from senior staff to kitchen help—before it was implemented with residents themselves. “We’re trying to change the paradigm from ‘I’m old now, I need the doctor to take care of me’ to one of you can improve your life, no matter how old you are. You’re never too old to grow.”

Montgomery says a good example of this philosophy came from some of LifePointes’ male population who got up the courage to try an automated massage bed housed at the wellness center. The men were astounded, she says. If you don’t realize how much pain you’re in or how tight you are, then waking up with massage can be an eye-opener. Now, Montgomery says, these same elderly gentlemen have tossed away their misconceptions about massage and are getting hands-on treatments. “The fact that they even have more body awareness is huge.” Montgomery says this is the kind of message 40–60 year olds need to hear; if they take care of their bodies now, they’ll be active seniors, not those debilitated by the effects of old age.

EXERCISE FOR BODY AND MIND

John Roseby, executive spa director at Canyon Ranch, says a new mind-set can lay the foundation for a healthier life. He says a key principle at the famous Arizona-based spa is health and vitality at any age. “This is one of our core messages here at Canyon Ranch and one we believe in passionately.” Part of that philosophy is the use of massage and bodywork therapies. “Looking good and feeling good are some of the many benefits of a therapeutic body massage and skin care regime. Regular body services and skin care programs allow your vibrant health to shine from deep within.”

Anne Williams, education program director at Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals,

Benefits of Massage

- Improves range of motion and decreases low-back pain.
- Increases circulation, allowing the body to pump more oxygen and nutrients into tissues and vital organs.
- Provides exercise and stretching for atrophied muscles.
- Reduces swelling and scar tissue.
- Reduces recovery time from injury/surgery.
- Reduces stress, the cause of nearly 90 percent of diseases we face.
- Releases endorphins, the body’s natural painkiller, thereby reducing need for medications.
- Stimulates lymph flow and supports the body’s natural process of detoxification.



Aging Gracefully with Skin Care

Just as massage and bodywork can keep the body feeling young and energized, proper skin care is the avenue used to ward off the signs of aging. Here are some healthful aging tips from Anne Williams, education program director at Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals and author of *Spa Bodywork: A Guide for Massage Therapists* (Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, 2006).

- **Protect Your Skin.** The most important thing you can do for your skin, Williams says, is consistently use sunblock. Whether skiing the Colorado Rockies, swimming the Pacific ocean, or just walking to your car for a lunch break, sunscreen should be a part of your daily routine, as sun damage is the number one cause of prematurely aged skin. Consider buying makeup or moisturizer that has an SPF of 15 or higher to ensure constant protection.
- **Keep it Moist.** Depending on where you live, you may not give much credence to moisturizer, but experts say it is a critical piece of the

puzzle. And don't buy the cheapest products to put on your face. If you can, avoid traditional grocery store finds in favor of a more targeted moisturizing product. If you spend money on anything, Williams says, put it toward a good moisturizer. A gentle cleanser (no bar soap on the face, ever, she says) and an alcohol-free toner will round out a simple, yet effective skin care plan.

- **Don't Overdo It.** In our zeal to clean our skin, we often overdo various regimens. Just as you shouldn't exfoliate too often (no more than once a week), you should also avoid over-scrubbing your face, even with just water and a washcloth. Your skin is a fragile—treat it as such.
- **Talk to the Experts.** Williams says talking to a skin care professional will help establish a good base of knowledge about how to care for your face. If you change climates, your skin will change as well. The same is true with the seasons. Talking to an expert will help guide you through those changes and give you proactive self-care steps.

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Sharon Puszko, Director Day-Break Geriatric Massage Institute

agrees. “Massage increases local circulation, improves the appearance and condition of skin, and tones muscle tissue.” She says massage not only promotes muscular health, but also corrects postural holding patterns. As a result, massage improves posture, which typically enhances our ability to breathe more freely and fully.

Pain is the constant demon of an aging body, especially when that body has been abused over time through excess and neglect. Yet, it’s never too late to make amends with your physical self. “There is tons of evidence that massage decreases pain,” Williams says, “even if that pain is the symptom of a broader problem.” So, while massage doesn’t treat osteoarthritis, for example, it can decrease the symptoms of osteoarthritis and significantly reduce pain. Williams explains the process: “That passive movement in massage can keep joints more mobile. It stimulates the synovial fluid, which lubricates the joint and nourishes the articular cartilage.”

According to Sharon Puszko, director of Day-Break Geriatric Massage Institute, the stimulation and circulation massage provides has direct benefit to the skin. With age and inactivity, circulation slows and skin becomes pale and cold. “Massage has a stimulating cellular function in the hypodermis, dermis, and epidermis,” she says. “Touch nurtures, relaxes, and heals, as well as stimulates and activates. This is a special gift of massage for the aging population/client.”

Along with enhanced tissue elasticity, improved circulation and joint flexibility, and decreased aches and pains, massage can boost immune function, alleviate life-shortening stress, and create a greater sense of self. “What I like to look at are the proven psychological changes that occur when people receive massage,” Williams says. “One of the reasons massage feels so relaxing is that there is a literal psychological benefit as dopamine and serotonin become balanced in the system.” When massage produces

oxytocin in the body, then there is a sense of being nurtured, she says. “In our society, being able to turn over that sense of responsibility, for even five minutes, is incredibly healing.”

Ultimately, Williams says, one of the greatest benefits of any type of bodywork is the ability it gives you to reconnect. “The thing that good massage gives you is it asks you to move your body sometimes in directions you’re not used to moving. You reconnect with the pleasure of movement. That’s what I think is amazing about massage. You reexperience your body. When you’re in your body, you own it in a different way. You care about it in a different way.”

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