

Therapeutic Massage For Anxiety: How Touch Therapy Improves Mental Health

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A massage is often a luxury, but new research into its health benefits suggests it's a luxury that's certainly worth the cost and time. A new [study](#) finds that massages may actually help treat anxiety and other mental health disorders, like depression, due to their ability to reduce cortisol and anxiety symptoms.

The researchers conducted a randomized study that focused on patients who had [generalized anxiety disorder](#) (GAD). People with GAD experience constant anxiety, with fearful and worrisome thoughts clouding their mind at all hours of the day — often for weeks or months on end. Unable to escape these worrying thoughts, GAD sufferers will often feel drained, fatigued, or develop long-term stomach pain or muscle tension.

While GAD is typically treated with antidepressants or other meds, as well as cognitive behavioral therapy, the researchers wanted to see if touch could have an impact on the disorder. In the study, the participants were divided into two groups. One was given Swedish massage therapy twice a week, and the other was given light touch therapy twice a week, all over the course of six weeks. Each therapy session was 45 minutes long, and were carried out in the same room conditions. Before and after the session, the participants self-reported on how they felt.

Swedish massage therapy — which involves the more traditional, deep-tissue massaging you're used to — appeared to be the most effective in reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms, the researchers found.

[Light touch therapy](#) — the practice of gently placing hands on different parts of someone's body to "release energy" — meanwhile, didn't show as much of an effect on the participants' anxiety levels.

"These findings are significant and if replicated in a larger study will have important ramifications for patients and providers," said Dr. Mark Hyman Rapaport, chair of Emory University's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, in a [press release](#).

Why do [massages work so well](#) in helping manage stress, anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues? Past research has come to similar conclusions: For example, a 2010 [study](#) found that massages could boost the immune system, and other [studies](#) found that massages improve sleep quality. We know that both sleep and immune function play a role in mental health.

But perhaps it all comes down to the importance of touch and intimacy in human emotional, physical, and mental well-being. [Research](#) has shown the frequent touches — like hugs, caresses, massages, or kisses — can help foster bonds between people, improve immune system function, decrease heart rate and blood pressure, and overall improve emotional well-being. In addition to the purely physical benefits of massages (lowering cortisol and relaxing muscle tension), they can also provide similar results as exercise or meditation: A release of endorphins that create a happy “buzz,” improved sleep, and sharper mind.

Source: Rapaport M, Schettler P, Larson E, Edwards S, Dunlop B, Rakofsky J, Kinkead B. Acute Swedish Massage Monotherapy Successfully Remediate Symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder: A Proof-of-Concept, Randomized Controlled Study. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 2016.

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