

MESSAGE

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MASSAGE

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM), Physiotherapy, Rehabilitation Sciences, Sports Medicine.

1. Core Definition

Massage, professionally recognized as **massage therapy**, is defined as the intentional and systematic manipulation of the soft tissues of the body--including muscles, connective tissues (fascia), tendons, ligaments, and skin--primarily through manual techniques. These techniques involve a structured process of applying various forms of force, such as fixed or moving pressure, stroking, friction, kneading, and vibration. The core therapeutic goal is to affect the muscular and nervous systems, thereby promoting health, reducing stress, relieving physical pain, and improving overall function and well-being.

The structured nature of massage distinguishes it from casual rubbing. It is often goal-oriented, tailored to specific clinical outcomes such as managing chronic pain or facilitating recovery from specific injuries. When offered in environments like **spas**, the focus is often on systemic relaxation and the relief of generalized tension; however, in medical and rehabilitative contexts, the systematic application of pressure is precision-based, targeting specific anatomical points or dysfunctional tissue areas to elicit defined physiological responses.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The practice of therapeutic massage is one of the oldest forms of medical intervention known to humanity, with documented traditions extending back millennia across various global cultures. The earliest records of its systematic use are found in ancient China, dating to approximately 2700 BCE, detailed within *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* (Nei Ching). This text outlines specific techniques for the treatment of various ailments, emphasizing the importance of touch for balancing the body's vital energies.

In the West, both the ancient Greeks and Romans highly valued massage (known to the Greeks as *anatripsis*, or "rubbing up"). Hippocrates, the widely recognized Father of Medicine, strongly advocated for the therapeutic use of friction, noting that specialized rubbing techniques were essential knowledge for any competent physician. The modern formalization of massage therapy occurred in the 19th century through the work of Per Henrik Ling of Sweden. Ling systematized the manual manipulation techniques, integrating them with physiological movements and gymnastics, creating the foundation for what is now known internationally as **Swedish Massage**--the cornerstone of modern professional massage practice.

3. Key Characteristics and Techniques

Professional massage therapy relies on a specialized vocabulary, primarily derived from French terminology, to define the mechanical actions applied to the soft tissues. These techniques are selected and combined based on the client's condition and the desired clinical outcome, such as the alleviation of pain or the relief of deep-seated muscle spasm. The appropriate application of **structured pressure** is the fundamental characteristic linking all modalities.

The primary categories of massage strokes, essential to techniques ranging from relaxation to deep rehabilitation work, include:

Effleurage: Consists of long, gliding, sweeping strokes performed with varying degrees of pressure. Its purpose is typically to warm the tissues, introduce the client to the touch, and promote the circulation of venous blood and lymph fluid.

Pétrissage (Kneading): Involves lifting, squeezing, rolling, and compressing the muscles. This technique is specifically designed to deeply penetrate muscle tissue, release tension, increase local circulation, and assist in the elimination of metabolic waste products.

Friction: Applied as deep, concentrated, localized pressure, often circular or cross-fiber, directly over specific points of muscle attachment or areas of adhesion. This technique is used to break down scar tissue and release chronic tension in deeper layers of muscle.

Tapotement (Percussion): Rhythmic striking or hacking motions using the hands. This technique is typically used for general stimulation or to loosen respiratory congestion in clinical settings.

4. Therapeutic Applications and Benefits

The clinical utility of massage therapy is extensive, focusing particularly on musculoskeletal health and the management of stress. The foundational benefit, as identified in the core definition, is the alleviation of pain, especially that stemming from localized tissue damage, postural stress, and compromised circulation. Massage is a critical component in the recovery process from **sports injuries**, helping to manage acute inflammation and ensure tissue repair occurs with minimal adhesion formation.

Key therapeutic outcomes include:

Mitigation of Muscle Spasm: Through targeted pressure and manipulation, massage helps interrupt the pain-spasm-pain cycle, particularly effective in treating conditions resulting in rigid or hypertonic muscles.

Enhanced Circulation: The mechanical action of massage physically assists venous return and lymphatic drainage, thereby counteracting the effects of a **lack of circulation** which can lead to pooling, discomfort, and **aching muscles**. Improved circulation also speeds the delivery of oxygen and nutrients necessary for repair.

Tension Relief and Mobility Improvement: By releasing myofascial restrictions and improving the elasticity of muscle fibers, massage increases the body's range of motion and overall flexibility. The reduction of tissue tension is a primary immediate goal, whether the tension is muscular or psychological in origin.

Management of Chronic Pain: Consistent massage therapy provides non-pharmacological relief for chronic conditions such as osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia by modulating pain signals and reducing tissue irritability.

5. Psychological and Physiological Mechanisms

The efficacy of massage therapy is rooted in both direct biomechanical effects and profound neurochemical changes. On a physiological level, manual pressure stretches muscle fibers and fascia, potentially leading to localized fluid exchange and decreased muscle stiffness. This localized pressure stimulates mechanoreceptors, which are sensory nerves that transmit signals to the brain, effectively overriding or modulating the transmission of pain signals (nociception) through a mechanism akin to the Gate Control Theory of Pain.

Psychologically, the systematic and intentional use of touch exerts a powerful influence on the autonomic nervous system. Massage promotes a shift toward **parasympathetic dominance**--the system responsible for "rest and digest"--and away from the sympathetic "fight-or-flight" response. This shift is mediated by changes in neuroendocrine activity. Studies indicate that massage can significantly decrease levels of the stress hormone **cortisol** while simultaneously increasing levels of beneficial neurotransmitters, including **serotonin** and **dopamine**. This dual action explains the profound feelings of relaxation, anxiety reduction, and mood improvement commonly reported following treatment.

6. Debates and Professional Context

The professional context of massage therapy continues to evolve, often intersecting with mainstream medicine, yet facing challenges common to manual therapies regarding rigorous clinical standardization. While the benefits for musculoskeletal pain and stress are clinically recognized, debates persist over the exact dosage and mechanisms required to treat complex, systemic diseases. The inherent variability in technique and outcome measurement makes the execution of high-quality, large-scale, placebo-controlled trials difficult.

Nonetheless, massage therapy has firmly established itself as a credible component of integrated and multidisciplinary healthcare, particularly within rehabilitation, palliative care, and preventative wellness. The field is increasingly regulated, with many jurisdictions requiring practitioners to meet stringent licensing criteria, maintain continuing education, and adhere to strict professional and ethical guidelines regarding sanitation, draping, and professional scope of practice. This emphasis

on professional standards ensures that the delivery of systematic pressure remains a safe, effective, and ethical therapeutic intervention.

7. Further Reading

[Massage \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Mayo Clinic: Massage: Get in touch with its many benefits](#)

[National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health \(NCCIH\): Massage Therapy](#)

[Per Henrik Ling](#)

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