



Dementia and Massage Therapy

Dementia refers to a cluster of symptoms resulting from brain disorders that greatly impair cognitive skills, without causing a loss of consciousness. Although the onset of dementia can occur in mid-life, it's most commonly found in the elderly.

Many elderly patients become sensory deprived as their faculties fade but the basic need for touch remains constant. As patients lose sensory and cognitive skills, they become unable to interact socially which leads to feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety and agitation. Touch often remains the last form of communication when all other avenues have surrendered to the disease. When massage therapy is administered to patients in the end stages of dementia it fosters feelings of intimacy and emotional connectedness for the patient.

Dementia is a slow progression of symptoms, sometimes lasting decades. At the onset, patients experience memory loss, confusion, language problems, changes in mood and difficulty performing daily tasks. This leads to an increase in anxiety and agitation, sometimes causing the patient to act out in ways often considered socially unacceptable or improper. Sleep patterns become disrupted during progression of dementia, and massage has been useful in treating insomnia. Additionally, many patients suffer from loss of appetite as Alzheimer's progresses, causing significant weight loss, resulting in physical frailty. A gentle hand massage given during light conversation has shown to improve appetite within an hour of the patient receiving it.

Massage can also stimulate the nervous system of Alzheimer's patients, helping to maintain nerve passageways that are in a state of decline due to the disease. A gentle massage provides relief and also aids drug therapies, possibly as a result of increased circulation. A neck and shoulder massage helps to maintain upper body strength and muscle tone, reducing the need for restraints, which is common for those in the advanced stage of dementia.

Patients whose disease has rendered them unable to communicate verbally are still able to produce a physical response to therapeutic touch. This response can be used to measure the stability or deterioration of daily function over time, acting as a gauge of a patient's physical health. In all, the benefits of therapeutic massage for those with dementia provide relief from many aspects of the disease, such as anxiety, agitation, depression, pain and loss of appetite. Massage also serves as a way to remain connected and encourages feelings of tenderness and closeness for those who may not otherwise be able to communicate.