

Touching the Mind—Exploring the Intersection of Massage and Mental Health

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Cynthia Price and Sarah Fogarty are guest editors for the Massage and Mental Health Special Edition of *IJTMB*.

In recent years, the dialogue around mental health has shifted—moving from the margins of health care toward the center of a truly holistic approach. Research and clinical practice have deepened our understanding of the nervous system, and the mind is no longer seen as separate from the body. Mental health is now acknowledged as inherently embodied—and this has profound implications for health-care providers and the individuals who receive health care.

Massage therapy, traditionally associated with musculoskeletal pain relief, is emerging as an effective modality to support psychological well-being. Growing evidence suggests that massage and bodywork approaches can help alleviate symptoms of psychological distress, regulate the autonomic nervous system, reduce stress hormones, and boost the production of mood-enhancing neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine.^(1–3) In other words, massage does not just feel good—it changes the way the brain and body communicate.

Research studies have demonstrated that massage can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression in both clinical and non-clinical populations.^(4,5) This special edition of the *IJTMB* is dedicated to the convergence of massage and mental health. In this edition, articles explore how massage therapy can support individuals experiencing anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma, stress, and individuals living with serious and potentially life-limiting illnesses. In these articles the therapeutic skills that enhance the delivery of massage therapy

and are particularly key within the realm of mental health are identified or described, highlighting the importance of collecting a client's history, establishing a therapeutic alliance to enhance trust and safety, and delivering massage using the tenets of a trauma-informed approach (e.g. asking client questions to inform how massage is delivered, and what to be sensitive to). Using trauma-informed frameworks when delivering massage therapy is increasingly valued for its ability to offer safety, experiences of connection, grounding, and re-inhabiting the body.^(6,7) The core principles of a trauma-informed approach are as follows: (i) safety, (ii) trustworthiness and transparency, (iii) peer support, (iv) collaboration and mutuality, (v) empowerment, voice and choice, and (vi) cultural, historical, and gender awareness.⁽⁸⁾

We are pleased to include work that includes the lived experience from qualitative data—reminding us that in addition to measurable outcomes, the power of massage therapy is often best communicated through story and the critical themes that can emerge, such as the importance of the therapeutic alliance, collaborative presence, and transformative experiences. For example, this edition includes a review based on case studies and qualitative research that demonstrates the impactful ways that massage therapy supports emotional regulation and body-mind awareness, and contributes to the mental health and well-being of individuals living with a serious and potentially life-limiting physical illness.

Understanding massage and mental health frameworks and challenges for specific groups is important for mas-

sage therapists as we aim to increase our knowledge to better serve our clients. This edition includes a commentary on mental health and massage therapy for refugees/asylum seekers, a scoping review specific to massage for those in recovery from sexual abuse or domestic violence that highlights the need for larger and more rigorous studies as well as specific training for massage therapists who might work with these populations, and a conceptual article that describes the key components of somato-emotional work for massage therapists interested in mental health and healing.

As we move toward more integrated models of health care, let us not overlook what has always been with us: the healing power of touch. May this edition inspire continued research, motivate individuals to undertake continuing education to support massage therapist skills including a focus on mental health and well-being, encourage deeper collaboration with mental health professionals, and renew recognition of the body as a vital gateway to emotional and psychological healing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST NOTIFICATION

CP is the center director of Center for Mindful Body Awareness which as part of its mission provides educational training. SF is a practicing massage therapist.

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