

MASSAGE HELPS ADDICTS REBUILD SHATTERED LIVES

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Michael Desrochers had it all—a wife, three children, a successful corporate job—until a \$6,000-a-month cocaine addiction shattered his life.

For 10 years, his costly habit held him captive and robbed him not only of his family and career, but also his health.

In 2000, at the age of 38, Desrochers' doctor informed him that he wouldn't live to see 40. A nervous breakdown and the concern of his parents and his then-girlfriend led him to the Bellwood Treatment Center in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, where he began to reclaim his life.

In addition to intensive psychotherapy and strict adherence to a 12-step program, Desrochers received nutrition counseling and massage therapy, which he credits for kick-starting the healing process.

He was so convinced that the massage component of his treatment was largely responsible for his recovery that upon discharge he became a certified massage therapist and founded the Coal Harbour Natural Health Clinic in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Desrochers is not alone. In the U.S. in 2017, [opioids](#), alcohol, methamphetamine, cocaine and fentanyl all wreck havoc in the human body. Among the 92 million Americans who used prescription opioids in 2015, 11.5 million misused them, according to the [National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Drug Abuse](#).

Massage therapy can help.

Massage for Recovery

Treatment trends for addiction have taken a decidedly holistic path in recent years, according to Daniel Gatlin, Ph.D., who as of this writing was clinical director of Renaissance Malibu Holistic Treatment Center in California, a substance-abuse treatment center.

He said that previous therapy included attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, lectures and group sessions.

“But addiction affects all aspects of a person—mind, body, spirit,” he said. “You need a program to deal with how the individual has been functioning. Many are disconnected from their bodies and in a toxic state, depending on the degree of deterioration.”

In the early stages of therapy, massage starts the detoxification process and allows an individual to be touched again.

“They have to reconnect with themselves before they can reach out to others,” Gatlin said, adding that this hands-on approach reaches deep core issues that sustain self-destruction.

At Renaissance, massage is integrated into every other treatment modality, which might include individual, group and experiential therapy, physical exercise, relationship-building workshops or spirituality exercises.

Gatlin said people suffering from addiction often follow a sedentary lifestyle with no physical activity in their daily routines.

“They live a kind of ritualized existence,” he said. “Massage makes them more flexible, decreases worries [and] racing thoughts, and increases their energy level.

Massage for recovery ... “becomes a tool for greater energy and self-awareness, both physical and emotional. Learning self-care is a big part of recovery,” he said.

Margaret Grace Stine, who as of this writing was a massage therapist and reiki practitioner at Renaissance, utilizes bodywork to balance the spirit.

“This helps people see that there are other solutions to problems in life,” she said. The initial response to massage involves relief from physical pain, which often unleashes a range of emotions. “Touch releases them and the things they’ve been holding onto,” Stine said.

[Once massage has cleared an internal space](#), treatment specialists say, the patient can then begin to accept and process new information.

Research Studies

Tiffany Field, Ph.D., founder and director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine, has been conducting studies on the benefits of massage for various medical issues since 1992.

In one study of massage for recovery, 27 percent of subjects stopped smoking after learning a self-massage technique they practiced each time a craving occurred.

Another study documented a reduction in symptoms of cocaine addiction in premature babies who were massaged; this therapy also fostered their growth. In a third study, women diagnosed with bulimia and anorexia experienced fewer symptoms following massage.

Field explained that massage stimulates the vagus, one of 12 cranial nerves, which slows heart rate, facilitates food absorption, and reduces cortisol (stress) and other neurotransmitters.

“Depressed people have little vagal activity,” she said. “Addictions are highly related to depression and lower dopamine and serotonin levels.”

The Butler Center for Research at Hazelden, in Minnesota, also conducts trials on effective alcohol-and-drug-addiction treatment methods.

Recent studies have found that the addition of massage to a standard treatment program reduces anxiety and promotes behavioral change. Patty Hall, who as of this writing was manager of Hazelden’s Wellness and Related Services department, emphasized the ability of massage to calm the body and help people “deal with life on life’s terms.”

A multidisciplinary team creates an individualized treatment plan that includes massage to help clients cope with the feelings that drove them to their particular addiction in the first place, according to Sue Hoisington, executive director of mental-health services at the Hazelden Foundation.

Restoring Balance

Desrochers’ clinic also bases its treatment techniques on scientific findings. “It’s not just feel-good therapy,” Desrochers said. “Massage is the preliminary modality to counseling. It elicits the parasympathetic system and breaks down barriers and your ego.”

Desrochers considers addiction a “dis-ease” with emotional underpinnings that correlate to problems in the body. He asserts that each individual possesses unique dynamics and perspectives, as well as different levels of anger. “The body of an addict is fighting to find balance. There is adrenal stress and thyroid imbalance, a whole raft of issues,” he said.

“Addicts are sensitive individuals. The emotional part of life is overwhelming and their addiction helps them cope. But this produces a self-defeating pattern.” He contends that massage can begin a process of understanding those destructive patterns and empower the individual to change them.

Through myofascial massage for recovery, Coal Harbour staff loosens tight connections between tissues to release emotions and detoxify the body. Adhering to the idea that emotions rest in certain organs, therapists utilize Swedish or deep-tissue massage for visceral manipulation.

“The type of massage we do depends on the individual,” Desrochers said. “Working with addicts, we have found that anger is the most prevalent emotion, and [the liver is where it rests.](#)”

Root Causes of Addiction

According to psychologist Doris Jeanette, author of *A Natural Process for Opening the Heart*, “All addictive behavior, no matter what the symptom—eating too much, sex addiction, drinking too much, obsessive thinking, gambling—all have their source in anxiety.”

She promotes massage to foster body awareness and balance emotional health, noting that talk therapy produces limited response. “Massage helps return us to a relaxed, natural state where holistic health is automatically available,” she said.

Jeanette’s belief in the healing powers of massage runs so deep that when she took a two-month overseas trip, she left her patients in the capable hands of a massage therapist rather than another psychologist.

Brigitte Mars, who was an herbalist, massage therapist and herbology instructor at the Boulder College of Massage Therapy in Boulder, Colorado (which is no longer in business) and author of *Addiction Free Naturally*, believes that addicts use different substances as a way to ignore certain messages in the body. She cites two underlying reasons for addiction, both of which can be addressed through massage.

First, [low blood sugar often triggers an addiction.](#) “So many substances contain [the ability to elevate blood sugar]—alcohol, drugs and even tobacco,” she said. “People are looking to increase the sugar in their systems. Massage helps reduce these cravings by releasing pent-up emotions,”

Mars said. Secondly, she said, individuals with addictions frequently have a poor oxygenation metabolism. “They are often shallow breathers,” she said. “It’s important to breathe more deeply, [and] massage brings awareness to your body and to your breath.”

Mars theorizes that individuals justify their substance abuse as a means of burying pain. “Addicts avoid the emotional baggage that made them seek alcohol or drugs in the first place,” she said.

The use of massage and bodywork enables a person to deal with underlying feelings, she said. Mars believes that craniosacral therapy is particularly useful for people in recovery.

“People [in recovery] feel uneasy and disconnected,” she said. “Craniosacral therapy goes deep within and helps individuals align themselves.”

Mars recommends Swedish massage to increase lymphatic drainage, reduce tension and bring about a mind-body connection.

In addition to increasing circulation and elimination, massage helps to move stuck energy in the body, which, in turn, allows the addict to let go of his emotions, she said. “Often when you let go, you have a craving. The more you can move stuck energy, the quicker that craving will subside.”

Massage Mechanics

Renee Barasch, a massage therapist and digestive-health specialist, explained the mechanism of action behind massage: “Massage can physically relax tight muscles that harbor holding patterns due to structural, mechanical or emotional blocks or imbalances,” she said.

“When released through muscle manipulation, [massage] can allow nerve pathways to become open and work in harmony to create balance with the rest of the body, thus facilitating emotional release.”

Barasch agrees that different types of massage affect people in different ways due to varied reactions to stimuli.

“Swedish, soothing or hot-stone massage can help to slow down the nervous system, which will in turn help with becoming less impulsive,” she said.

“When a person is less impulsive, they also have a chance to slow down their thought process and perhaps make a healthful decision that may have, at one time, been a struggle for them as an addicted person.”

Luke Catton knows addiction well. Perpetually high on alcohol, with an occasional dose of ecstasy thrown in, from high school until he was 21, he rode an addictive merry-go-round that eventually led to suicidal thoughts.

In 1999, with the help of his parents, Catton entered Narconon Arrowhead, a residential treatment center for drug-and-alcohol addiction in Canadian, Oklahoma.

His therapy included: life-skills training, a regimen of vitamin-and-mineral supplements, outdoor exercise, [consciousness raising](#) and light massage.

In Catton’s sessions, a therapist drew his fingertips lightly over nerve endings in the neck, arms, legs and spine. “This technique helps connect the nerve endings with the brain. It is a regenerating process and opens up the channels in your body,” he said.

Those who respond to a lighter touch receive “feathering,” a two-finger technique that lightly brushes nerve endings from the base of the neck to the base of the spine and from the hips to the toes.

During his first 24 hours at Narconon, Catton received four 10- to 15-minute bodywork sessions. By beginning treatment with massage, Catton said, he was able to proceed with a successful recovery regimen.

“The [touch was] extremely relaxing and made me feel calmer [and] relieved my nervousness and anxiety,” Catton said. As he continued treatment, his case manager oversaw his progress and prescribed massage at regular intervals.

Reach out to Addicts

There are more than 13,000 drug-and-alcohol rehabilitation facilities in the U.S. according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, and there are about 1,000,000 Americans enrolled in a rehab facility—on either an outpatient or inpatient basis—at any given time.

Rehabilitation centers are increasingly incorporating massage and bodywork into treatment programs. Therapists who are interested in working at this type of facility should call the center's administrative office to inquire about it or set up an informational interview.

[Networking with counselors and psychologists](#) who specialize in addiction is another means of expanding a massage practice to recovering clients.

Massage therapists can be effective partners on a recovery health-care team, and healing touch is effective for people in recovery from any type of addiction.

About the Author

Phyllis Hanlon has written nonfiction articles and book reviews as well as human-interest stories, profiles and award-winning essays. Her specialty areas include health and medicine, religion, education and business. She regularly delights in the joys of massage. She has written many articles for *MASSAGE Magazine*.