




*the  
healing  
power  
of touch*





*These four  
hands-on  
therapies can  
ease your  
stress, anxiety,  
pain, and  
more. Read  
on to find  
the best  
remedy  
for you.*

by Andrea Cooper  
photographed by  
Lisa Spindler

Several years ago, Mike, my psychologist, urged me to see someone else for help in dealing with my stress. But he wasn't referring me to another talk therapist. He thought I should try some sessions with Dana, a massage therapist specially trained to treat trauma victims. I had been abused as a child, and Mike thought that Dana might help me through the resulting physical and emotional challenges I was suffering in a way that talk alone couldn't. He was right: I ended up seeing Dana for several years, and our work—which involved what's known as body psychotherapy techniques—changed my life, giving me the ability to handle conflicts without dissolving in fear. Dana is part of a growing movement in which practitioners use the power of touch to diagnose, treat, and prevent both physical and emotional problems.

Emerging research suggests that touch therapy works: In one landmark study, 16 happily married women were subjected to the threat of a mild electric shock; touching their husbands' hands brought immediate relief from the resulting anxiety. Even a stranger's touch was somewhat calming. "We know that anxiety decreases immune function and makes you get sick more often," says study author Jim Coan, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia. "If touch can help you be less anxious, you're more likely to stay well." ►



And that's only the start—there are plenty of ways you can put touch to work for your good health. Massage therapy, for instance, may make you more alert and lessen symptoms of depression such as fatigue and irritability, according to the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine. “The healing power of touch extends across the life span,” says the Institute’s Tiffany Field, Ph.D., “from helping babies grow and children concentrate at school to decreasing chronic illnesses and disease.” Find out how these four popular hands-on therapies can help you feel better.

### *for emotional healing: body psychotherapy*

**What it is:** This form of therapy combines touch, movement, breathing techniques, and exercises to raise your awareness of sensations in your body, which can help you identify and resolve damaging emotional issues. Research by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., an expert in post-traumatic stress and trauma treatment, helped confirm that traumatic memories get stored in nonverbal parts of the brain as sensory, motor, and emotional fragments. “So no matter how much verbal therapy you do, you may never get to the core of it,” says psychologist Virginia Dennehy, Ph.D., president of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy.

There are more than 40 kinds of body psychotherapy ranging from bioenergetics, which focuses on muscle constrictions and their relationship to emotional expression, movement, breath, and posture; to core energetics, which uses specific movements to encourage the expression of difficult emotions; to the Rubenfeld Synergy Method,

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which relies on gentle touch and talk to release repressed tension and emotions. Body psychotherapy can be used alone or together with talk therapy.

**Why try it?** You might see a body psychotherapist if you’ve got a persistent case of the blues; to help you cope during a troubled time, such as a death in your family; or to deal with the effects of a past trauma, like being the victim of a crime.

To help me grapple with the darker parts of my childhood, my practitioner used sensorimotor psychotherapy, a combination of talk with body-centered therapy. In one session, I lay fully clothed on a massage table while my therapist, Dana Endsley-Denniston, touched different spots on my body. Her hand on the back of my neck triggered a terrifying memory. She showed me how I could cope with the feeling by not shutting down and instead staying in the present and paying close attention to my body sensations at that moment.

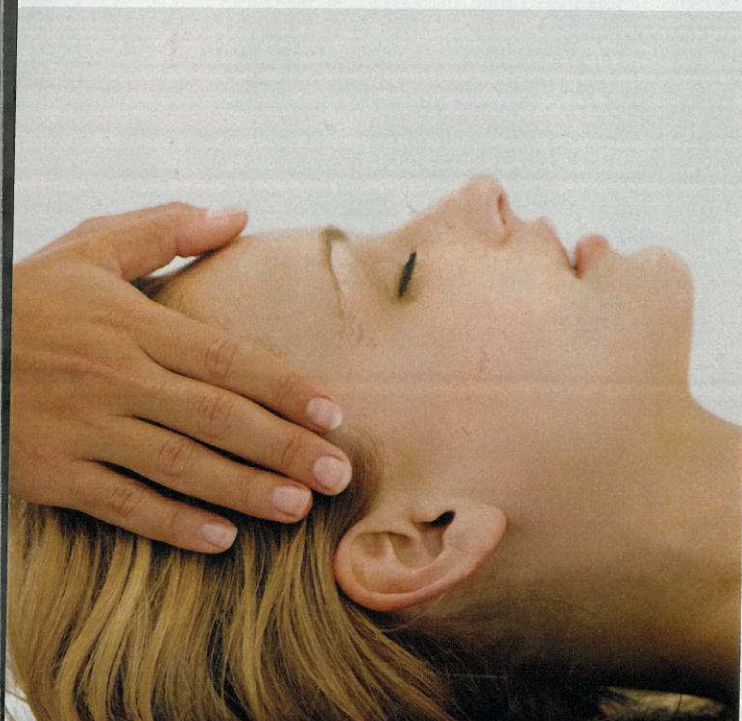
When recalling a trauma, “it’s important to understand the feelings that you’re experiencing are from the past,” Endsley-Denniston explains. “If you can have new experiences in the present when traumatic memories arise, the nervous system learns new ways of being, and healing occurs. Staying connected through your senses is the way to do that.” Other sessions included special exercises and movements to create a sense of safety in my body. I worked standing, sitting on a chair or gym ball, or lying down, depending on the activity.

Body psychotherapy can even help with something as basic as poor posture. For example, if a woman is depressed from the breakup of her marriage, she may not have enough energy to even sit up straight—and that in itself can put stress on the body and contribute to her depression, says Nicole Dockter, a San Diego bioenergetic therapist. Through bioenergetics, she can unblock tension and learn a new way of sitting, walking, and carrying herself to feel more centered and secure, which may also help her begin to heal emotionally.

**To find a body psychotherapy practitioner,** log on to the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy website at [usabp.org](http://usabp.org). Ask for an initial meeting to talk through the practitioner’s approach and make sure you’re comfortable and feel a rapport. A session can range from \$85 to \$250; insurance may cover part of the cost if your practitioner is licensed. If you’re already seeing a psychologist or other talk therapist, be sure to discuss your plans to add body psychotherapy to your care.

### *for easing your pain: physical therapy*

**What it is:** After an injury or illness, physical therapy (PT) can help you learn better ways to stand, walk, and





move. Sessions may include loosening specific joints, working the soft tissue around joints, and offering guidance about proper movement patterns.

**Why try it?** Physical therapy treats and prevents a wide variety of conditions, including lower-back pain and problems resulting from accidents, surgery, or sports injuries. One recent study found that those who did PT following breast cancer surgery had significantly less pain, improved shoulder function, and better quality of life than those who only received a leaflet with exercises to do at home. You could also see a physical therapist if you haven't exercised regularly—or not for a long time—and are considering a fitness program and want to ward off injuries.

A physical therapist plays detective to figure out what about your body or movement pattern is causing the pain. Let's say your shoulder aches after a car accident. Your physical therapist will consider what happened during the accident, but will also look at your joint mobility, posture, body strength, flexibility, and soft tissue tone and texture to develop the right plan for you.

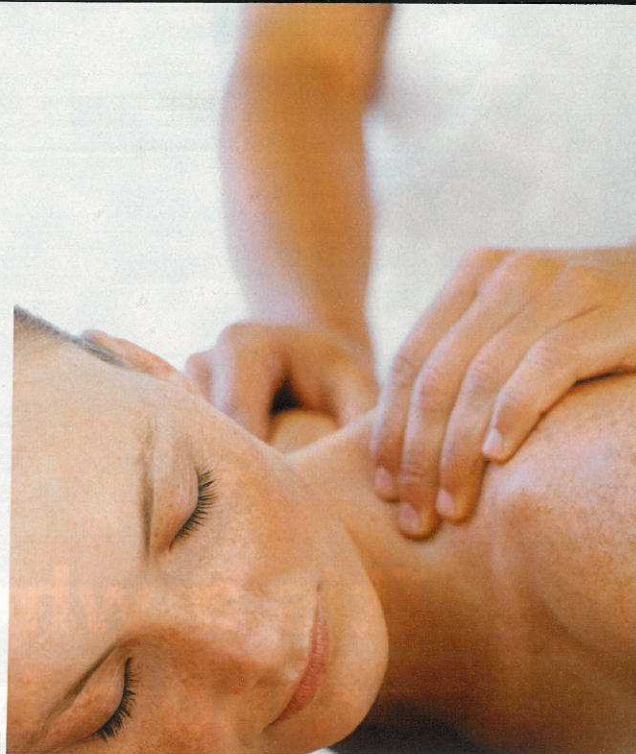
Six months after her daughter was born, 37-year-old marathon-runner Sarah Lee of Arlington, VA, started to feel pain in her hip, which then migrated to her shoulder. "I thought, *I'm too young for this to become a chronic problem—this has got to stop*," recalls Lee. So Lee went to see Jennifer Gamboa, a doctor of physical therapy in Arlington. Gamboa determined that Lee's ribs expanded when she was pregnant and hadn't returned to their normal position after the baby was born, which contributed to pain elsewhere.

So Gamboa gradually worked the ribs back into place by stretching the tissue between them as well as the area where they connect to the spine; this technique helped improve the ribs' mobility so that they could fully descend during exhalation.

When all goes well, patients see improvements within several sessions. When treatment is completed, not only should you have decreased pain but you should also understand the conditions that contributed to your

pain, as well as how to prevent it in the future—often by doing exercises on your own, prescribed by your physical therapist. Lee felt better by her fourth visit. "I always assumed physical therapy was just supervised stretching. I was skeptical about what it could do for me," she says. "But I've gone from shuffling out of bed to walking like a normal person." And she's preparing for her next marathon.

**To find a physical therapist,** try the American Physical Therapy Association site at [apta.org](http://apta.org). The cost of treatment can range from \$100 to \$180 per appointment, and most PT sessions are covered by insurance.



## for taming stress: massage therapy

**What it is:** You already know that it's the perfect way to pamper your stressed-out self. But massage can be much more than an indulgence. Neuromuscular massage, for instance—the most common type of therapeutic deep-tissue massage—uses pressure on particular points in the fascia (the fibrous connective tissue that surrounds the muscles) to treat specific injuries or chronic pain. Ordinary massage therapy ultimately works by stimulating pressure receptors under the skin, which increases the vagal nerve activity in the brain, thereby boosting serotonin (the feel-good, anti-pain neurotransmitter) and lowering cortisol, the stress hormone that takes a heavy toll on your defenses against disease.

**Why try it?** In more than 100 studies over the last 15 years on the effects of massage, the Touch Research Institute found that it can ease pain, improve function of the immune system, decrease autoimmune problems such as lupus and arthritis, enhance alertness, and possibly even lessen your risk for heart disease. One study found that receiving regular massages can help lower blood pressure, anxiety, and stress hormones in those with hypertension. Massage therapy can even curb migraine headaches. Adults with migraines who received twice-weekly, 30-minute massages for five consecutive weeks reported more headache-free days and fewer problems

sleeping than a control group that didn't receive massages, according to a study. Massage also reduced the number of weekly headaches in chronic-headache sufferers, according to a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

For 27-year-old Gena Gilas of Denver, massage put an end to migraines. Her job as a trainer for an insurance company

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requires hours at a computer or on her feet, sometimes dealing with upset customers. She would get daily headaches so piercing, "they made it hard to see," Gilas says. Prescription medicines didn't help. Then one day her company brought in a massage therapist who offered chair massages. The therapist "worked on relaxing the tense muscles in my neck and shoulders, which relieved the pressure that caused the headaches," Gilas says. Her headache stopped that night, and she didn't get another one for many days. Now she gets a chair massage at work every two weeks and a full body massage every month or so as a preventive measure.

**To find a massage therapist,** log on to the websites of the American Massage Therapy Association ([amta.org](http://amta.org)) or the Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals ([massagebodywork.com](http://massagebodywork.com)). "More and more doctors are prescribing therapeutic massage as part of their medical treatment, as research shows it has positive health benefits," says Marilyn Kier, a Northfield, IL, specialist in orthopedic massage. The cost is anywhere from \$60 to \$150 or more per session, and fortunately "some insurance companies are starting to cover it if it's prescribed by a doctor for a medical reason," adds Kier. If it's not and you can't afford the hefty price tag, massage-therapy schools may offer discounted prices. Find one at [naturalhealers.com](http://naturalhealers.com).

## for treating your illness or injury: osteopathic manipulative treatment

**What it is:** An osteopathic physician (also known as a doctor of osteopathic medicine, or D.O.) relies on her hands to diagnose, treat, and prevent illness and injury. The D.O. moves muscles and joints with stretching, gentle pressure, and resistance (where the doctor applies pressure to a joint or tissue, then asks the patient to press that part of the body against his hand). Unlike other forms of bodywork, such as chiropractic therapy, which focuses on the relationship between the musculoskeletal and nervous systems, osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT) treats the whole body by stimulating nerve centers to improve health and blood circulation.

**Why try it?** OMT can be used for routine health care (such as the type you'd receive from a primary care physician), but is also practiced in specialties ranging from obstetrics and gynecology to cardiology. If you see a D.O. for a possible sinus infection, for example, he'll not only examine your eyes, ears, nose, and throat and possibly prescribe an antibiotic for infection, but he'll also ask you to lie down while he presses spots on your upper back, neck, and head. He'll look for areas of tenderness, muscle knots, and motion restriction, and treat any issues he finds using his hands. This technique can help give a boost to your

*Massage can ease your pain, help your immune system function better, and may even decrease your risk for heart disease.*

lymphatic system (tissues and organs that produce, store, and carry cells to fight infection). How so: Gentle pressure to certain points improves circulation in the mucous membranes involved, which causes draining and decongestion, just like taking a decongestant pill, says Kurt Heinking, D.O., chairman of the department of osteopathic manipulative medicine at the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine. By encouraging the sinuses to drain, OMT helps the antibiotic beat back infection.



Kate Gilhooly, 30, of Chicago, sought Heinking's help for a herniated disc after an accident, when other treatments didn't relieve her pain. Heinking examined her joints, muscles, tendons, and ligaments. He also evaluated her as she walked, stood on tiptoe, and rocked back on her heels, looking for muscle weaknesses from the pinched nerve. Her first OMT session brought relief that same night. "I felt a release of pain the next day, and in the weeks after, it kept getting better," Gilhooly says. "It was a major turning point in my injury." Heinking coordinated the care with Gilhooly's physical therapist to make sure she was doing the correct exercises for her condition.

**To find a D.O.,** visit the American Osteopathic Association's database at [osteopathic.org/directory.cfm](http://osteopathic.org/directory.cfm). D.O.'s receive training similar to medical doctors, with a special focus on nerves, muscles, and bones; they can prescribe drugs and perform surgery. A D.O. visit is typically covered by insurance; if not, it will cost you anywhere from \$50 to \$250. 