



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Taking Care of You, Part I: Treat Yourself to a Massage

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Feeling exhausted, stressed, sore, worried, and too busy to care for you? Barely making it through each day? Sound familiar?

Many parents of children with complex needs experience these feelings on a daily basis. Women especially will put their families' needs before their own. It is common, but dangerous to your health and marriage, and it sends a poor message to your children.

As parents, the best thing we can do for our families is to be happy, healthy and ready to face any new challenges that come our way. It sounds easy, but it is very difficult and takes strategic planning. It won't just happen on its own.

One simple way to combat stress is through massage. The majority of this article will address using massage to help reduce stress and take care of you. A second part of this series, on keeping yourself healthy physically and emotionally, will appear next month.

Stress Can Hurt

I have always had benign heart palpitations and irritating stomach problems. A few months ago, my body decided to go through a time when my stomach problems and heart palpitations increased so much that my doctors put me through invasive testing to determine the cause. To top it all off, I was having problems falling asleep at night and staying asleep.

During a vacation off from work, I happened to notice that my heart palpitations were almost non-existent. My husband wanted to know what had changed, because he had noticed that my stomach problems had diminished significantly and I was falling asleep more easily. It took me some time to figure it out, because I hadn't changed anything at all, except being off from work for a while.

Stress! I couldn't believe that stress could do this much to my body's functions. There isn't an option for me to stay home full time, so I will be going back to work. However, I am going back to work knowing that I need to focus more of my energy on not letting my job add to the many stresses of life.

Take Time For You

Find a way each and every day, week, and month, to put aside time to do stress reducing activities. There are so many books and articles out there on how to relieve stress. If you enjoy reading, find a book and start there!

Starting small, I began by planning to shower without the children in the bathroom, even if it meant driving them to school without my shower. I started spending time just talking to God, instead of stressing over the lack of devotional time in the day. I started spending a few minutes each night in bed reading pleasure books.

Time for you can be simple. It doesn't have to cost money or be away from your home. If you have to do yours at home, schedule it in and stick to it. Consider that time for you as important as a doctor's appointment or therapy for your child. It is *your* therapy.

Think about these as possible ideas (there are many, many more):

- Take a bath
- Find a quiet place to read a book
- Nap with the kids when they are napping
- Go for coffee with friends
- Schedule in dates with your significant other or friends. This can be done at home. My husband and I are starting to schedule in movie nights where we snuggle and have fun snacks while the kids are sleeping.
- Schedule in a massage night with your husband
- Exercise
- Load the kids up and go for a walk together or go alone if you can
- Practice safe sex (yes, it's proven to reduce stress)
- Engage in physical contact (hugs, massage, snuggles, etc...) with someone you care about.

Now, I have added in a professional massage once a month. Many insurance companies even cover this and other natural medicine practices. Check your insurance plan to see if coverage is available.

Massage was an hour each month away from everyday stresses with benefits to my body and mind as well. I have known my therapist long enough that she has become a friend who I could talk to if I needed it. When I miss an appointment, my body really starts to ache, but I also noticed that I was more feeling more stressed as well.

Using Massage to Help Reduce Stress Levels

In today's stressful world, massage is one of the best ways to achieve a relaxed state of mind and body. Massage releases tight muscles where tension is held and improves circulation throughout the body. Lying down in a warm place, listening to calming music

and having a caring, skilled therapist massage your sore muscles, provides a uniquely wonderful way to reduce stress.

If you remember Physiology class, the two basic states of the autonomic nervous system are the Sympathetic (blood flows to limbs, heart and breathing rates speed up, blood pressure increases, digestion shuts down, all of which prepare you for action: fight or flight), and Parasympathetic (blood flows to the core, heart and breathing rates slow, blood pressure decreases and digestion kicks in). It is in the Parasympathetic state that relaxation and healing occur. Getting back to the relaxed, Parasympathetic state is essential for living a healthy, balanced life. As a side benefit, you may experience clearer thinking, improved mood, better digestion, and increased energy and vitality.

Massage has been studied for its use with premature infants, adults who have recently experienced a heart attack or stroke, athletes who desire to increase their performance and shorten recuperation time, victims of sexual abuse, grieving patients and for common soft-tissue conditions like low back pain and neck pain. At my clinic in Seattle, we are studying the efficacy of massage to treat low back pain with very positive results.

Clinical research has shown massage therapy:

- Is more effective for treating chronic back pain than other standard treatments
- Promotes relaxation and alleviates the perception of pain and anxiety in cancer patients
- Reduces post-traumatic headaches better than cold pack treatments
- Lessens pain and muscle spasms in patients who have undergone heart bypass surgery when part of hospital-based surgery treatment
- Stimulates the brain to produce endorphins
- Is very beneficial for normal growth in premature babies

Health Benefits of Massage

Massage affects the nervous system by relaxing the entire body. Blood circulation is enhanced throughout and the muscles are stretched and relaxed. Knots and sore areas can get worked out and muscle holding patterns released. Relief of physical pain and stress improves not only your physical wellbeing, but your mental state as well.

Increasing the blood flow through massage nourishes all the cells of your body with fresh oxygen and nutrients, and in turn helps to flush out waste generated by your muscles and body. Specific techniques may be employed to target the lymphatic system, the digestive tract or other body systems.

Most types of massage affect the body in a similar way. When muscles are overworked, body waste products accumulate, causing soreness, stiffness, and even muscle spasms. Massage in general--and Swedish massage in particular--improves blood and lymph circulation and brings fresh oxygen and other nutrients to the affected tissues.

Tense muscles may also compress blood vessels and stretch nerves, restricting blood flow and causing pain. As the affected area is massaged, the muscles gradually release their stranglehold on the irritated nerves, and the pain eases. The same mechanisms also make massage helpful in the recovery process for an injured muscle.

In addition, massage has been shown to increase the body's production of pain-killing endorphins and the mood-altering hormone serotonin. It can also slow the release of the stress hormone cortisol. For this reason, massage is often prescribed as an adjunctive therapy for people whose immune systems are compromised by stress.

Massage enhances medical treatments and may shorten the time it takes for the body to recover from injury and illness. Massage can help release chronic muscular tension and pain, increase joint flexibility, reduce mental and physical fatigue, promote better digestion, improve posture and reduce blood pressure.

Massage also can result in:

- Relief from headache, neck ache and eyestrain
- Deep relaxation of body and mind
- Freeing of muscle adhesions and softening scar tissue caused by injury
- Aid in healing of scar tissue due to injury
- Relief from muscle spasm or cramping
- Enhanced body awareness
- Nourishment of the skin and improved skin tone
- Improved sleep quality

Your Family Needs You!

If you've ever flown, you'll know that the flight attendants go over all the what-if procedures. One of their lessons sums up the ideas in this article very well. If oxygen masks come down, you must put yours on first before trying to assist your children.

You need to care for you before you can be an effective parent to your children, and massage is one way to make this happen. Create time for yourself, because it won't just happen on its own.

Resources

American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)

www.amtamassage.org

The AMTA is the oldest and largest institution representing the massage therapy profession. Their website is a great reference for industry related information and current events.

Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP)

www.abmp.com

The ABMP is another organization representing massage and other forms of bodywork.

National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB)

www.ncbtmb.com

The NCBTMB aims to foster higher standards of ethical and professional practice through a credentialing program that assures the competency of practitioners of massage therapy and bodywork. This is a professional credential, but will not substitute for a license to practice massage therapy.