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Connections/Body & Mind

It's a Stretch!

Thai massage is getting more patients off the table

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Ananda Apfelbaum is giving a massage, but there's no table in sight. Her client, fully clothed, lies on a mat on the floor as Apfelbaum pulls, prods and stretches using not only her hands but also her elbows, forearms, knees and feet. Instead of coming out of the treatment as limp as a dishrag, the recipient feels invigorated as well as relaxed. It's a combination many first-timers find irresistible. "What people have said is, once they've had a Thai massage, they can't go back to traditional table massage," says Apfelbaum, 48, author of *Thai Massage: Sacred Bodywork* (Avery/Penguin).

Among her converts is Kip Kaplan, owner of Audioworks Producers Group, a recording and remixing studio in New York City. Kaplan had broken a clavicle and wrist in a motorcycle accident in 1997, and the stress of subsequently hunching over a console only made the aftereffects of his injury worse. After his first Thai massage last year, "I had more freedom of movement in my shoulders and back and neck than I'd had in years," Kaplan recalls. "The pace and tempo were brighter and quicker than in table massage. There was a quicker sensation of relief and release."

Interest in Thai massage has grown dramatically since 1992, when Apfelbaum, already a licensed massage therapist, first boarded a plane to study the art at its source. Then for several years, she spent two to three months annually in Thailand, traveling around the country to learn a variety of methods. Other American massage therapists have made similar pilgrimages. Thai massage has taken off across the U.S. over the past four years, says Mary Beth Braun, president-elect of the American Massage Therapy Association. "In our surveys, we've seen our members increasingly list it as one of their techniques."

Thai massage works on muscles, connective tissue and joints at the same time, says Minerva Noltee, of Mandala Med-Spa in Sarasota, Fla. "We pull and stretch the ligaments, muscles and the joints to their tolerance, never past their tolerance," she explains. Clients who suffer from mild muscular dystrophy and rheumatoid arthritis seem to benefit from the treatments, according to Noltee. There are other responses as well, she says. "The big one is 'I feel taller.'" Some fans are partial to the passive, assisted stretching, which makes it easier for them to attain certain yoga positions. "It gives you more flexibility," says Dr. Martha Barnette, a plastic surgeon and founder-owner of Mandala Med-Spa. "It is often very hard for people to loosen stiffened joints on their own."

San Francisco orthopedic surgeon Kevin Stone has referred patients for Thai massage to improve their flexibility. But Stone does not recommend the treatment for people with weak or unstable joints as there is a risk of dislocation. "The skills of the practitioner," he adds, "really determine the safety of the practice." And those skills depend largely on training. "Many practitioners claim to be certified, although there is no standard of certification in this country for Thai massage," says Bob Haddad, who practices the discipline in Chapel Hill, N.C. Haddad is organizing an alliance that would recognize practitioners and instructors who have had completed documented training and additional hands-on practice by approved schools and instructors.

Before making an appointment with a Thai-massage therapist, it's a good idea to ask how long the individual has studied the craft. "You can't learn Thai massage in a week," cautions Apfelbaum, "even if you learn techniques." Another bit of preparatory advice: Don't wear a skirt. "I've started to keep a supply of pants with me," says Apfelbaum. "You simply cannot have a Thai massage in a skirt."

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