

# Older Adults and Thai Massage

By Susan Grossman

Population projections of the United States indicate an enormous increase in the number of elders over the next twenty years. By 2020, 33% of the U.S. population will be 55 years or older, with the fastest growing age group being over 85 years (Administration on Aging, 2002). Perhaps not surprisingly, the use of complementary and alternative medical approaches (CAM)<sup>1</sup> has paralleled this growth, particularly among those 40 and over (Mackenzie & Rakel, 2006).

The appeal of complementary and alternative approaches, including Thai massage, for older adults may rest in their holistic approach, which does not "...categorically distinguish between the mind and body, the physical and mental" (Mackenzie & Rakel, 2006, p. 2). Such approaches tend to be non-invasive and are perceived as being free of adverse reactions (Furnham, 2003). They also appear to focus on prevention and health promotion (Mackenzie & Rakel, 2006), which may make them especially attractive to "young" elderly who want to maintain and "optimize" their health (Furnham, 2003). In addition, CAM modalities may be particularly well suited for the chronic conditions that characterize older adulthood, particularly because they focus on treating the whole person (Mackenzie & Rakel, 2006). Other benefits include the more egalitarian relationship between practitioner and client that characterizes CAM, allowing older adults to feel that they are more involved in decisions about their health care (Astin, 2003; Cartwright, 2007).

At the same time, some of the limitations of CAM are the lack of insurance coverage for many interventions, restricting access to those with higher incomes (Cartwright, 2007). Further, some of the chronic problems associated with aging, such as hypertension, vascular problems and some spinal conditions, including disc degeneration may restrict the use of massage interventions, especially some of the techniques used in Thai massage.

## **Massage and Older Adults**

In addition to changes in muscle mass and bone density, as individuals age, the circulatory system slows down, the heart works harder, waste products and toxins are not processed and removed as efficiently and the lymphatic/immune system slows down,

---

<sup>1</sup> CAM is defined by the National Institute of Health as "those treatments and health care practices not taught widely in medical schools, not generally used in hospitals, and not usually reimbursed by medical insurance companies" (p. 2, cited by Mackenzie and Rakel). See also the website for the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine maintained by NIH at <http://nccam.nih.gov/> for further definition and discussion of what constitutes CAM.

leaving the older adult more susceptible to infection (Kennedy & Chapman, 2007, p. 136). Beyond these physiological changes, depression is especially problematic as individuals' age (Behrman & Tebb, 2008; Kennedy & Chapman, 2007). Further, many older adults, particularly the older elderly (those 75 and older), live alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). As a consequence, they may be touch deprived.

Thai massage can help to address these imbalances; like other massage techniques, it is intended to improve circulation and reduce stress hormones (Olmstead, 2009). Janet Jordan, a Thai massage practitioner notes, among older adults, "gravity, old injuries and repetitive motions can cause imbalances in muscles that are meant to work together" (Olmstead, 2009, p.4). Thai massage can help to address these imbalances. It can also help older individuals who have perhaps been flexible throughout their lives to stretch more deeply again in areas that have become tight (Olmstead, 2009).

Stovall (2004, citing Chow, 2002) argues that Thai massage helps to alleviate the stress on the skeletal system resulting from inefficient postures. Compressions and stretches help to increase the space between the vertebrae and facilitate freer movement of cerebrospinal fluid. "Synovial fluid is increased by the joint mobilizations, giving the joints better lubrication and decreasing wear at the joints." Compressions allow for fresh blood to enter the muscles, "...decreasing soreness. Fresh blood, rich with nutrients can then enter the muscles, helping them rejuvenate and retain/regain their tone and health. Lymph is also moved, stimulating the immune system" (Stovall, 2004, citing Chow, 2002, np). While all these processes are helpful for adults at any age, in light of the effects of aging, they may be particularly important.

### **My Personal Experience**

Because of my own age, much of my direct experience practicing massage has involved family members and friends who are 55 and older. I would agree that bodily habits are more pronounced among older adults. Difficulties in range of motion were more noticeable, although age was not necessarily a clear deterrent to flexibility; one 18 client was less flexible overall than another who was 83. However, I had to be much more careful about the pressure I applied when working with the older versus younger person. I have also had to limit my use of arterial compressions because several of the older individuals I worked with have high blood pressure. I am curious if that might change over time with ongoing work. In addition, my 83 year-old client had more noticeable limitations in her range of motion. This was related to old injuries that had set up patterns of movement over time.

Of interest to me is that several older clients reported feeling greater relaxation and more comfortable sleep after the massage. Indeed, my own experience (as someone who is almost 55) is that the release I experience after receiving a Thai massage helps with sleep problems tremendously. I did not, however, see anything in the literature about this issue. Given the issues related to hormonal changes and sleep patterns, especially among women in their early to late 50s, it might be very interesting to track the ways in which

Thai massage work effects well-being in this area. Until this research is done, we can be confident that Thai massage is associated with positive outcomes for many age related issues.

## References

- Administration on Aging, (2002). *A profile of older Americans: 2002*. Retrieved on November 10, 2003, from Administration on Aging Website: [www.aoa.gov/prof/statistics/profile/2.asp](http://www.aoa.gov/prof/statistics/profile/2.asp).
- Astin, J.A. (2003). Patterns and predictors of CAM use among older adults. In Cherniack, P. & Cherniack, N. (Eds.), *Alternative medicine for the elderly* (pp. 3-8). New York, NY: Springer.
- Behrman, G. & Tebb, S. (2009). The use of complementary and alternative interventions as a holistic approach with older adults. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 28, 127-140.
- Cartwright, T. (2007). 'Getting on with life': The experiences of older people using complementary health care. *Social Science & Medicine*, 64(8), 1692-1703.
- Chow, K.T.. (2002). *Thai yoga massage: A dynamic therapy for physical well-being and spiritual energy*. Rochester, Vermont:: Healing Arts Press.
- Furnham, A. (2003). Why do the elderly use complementary and alternative medicine? In Cherniack, P. & Cherniack, N. (Eds.), *Alternative medicine for the elderly* (pp. 9-25). New York, NY: Springer.
- Kennedy, E. & Chapman, C. (2006). Massage therapy and older adults. . In Mackenzie , E.R. & Rakel, B. (Eds.), *Complementary and alternative medicine for older adults* ( pp. 135-148). New York, N.Y.: Springer.
- Mackenzie, E.R. & Rakel, B. (2006). Holistic approaches to healthy aging. In Mackenzie , E.R. & Rakel, B. (Eds.), *Complementary and alternative medicine for older adults* (pp. 1-9). New York, N.Y.: Springer.
- Olmstead, D. (2009, March 22). Stretch and zone. *The Albuquerque Journal*, Boomer special section, 4-5. Available online at [http://www.ithaimassage.com/images/Stretch\\_and\\_Zone-Web.doc..](http://www.ithaimassage.com/images/Stretch_and_Zone-Web.doc..)
- Stovall, D. (2004, April). *Ancient traditions, modern expressions*. Retrieved from <http://www.thaimassageclasses.com/Thai%20Massage%20articles.htm>
- U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, Special Populations. (2008). *Table 1 population by age and sex: 2008* Retrieved from [http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/age/older\\_2008.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/age/older_2008.html)