

the gentle art

WORKING WITH
THE FRAIL ELDERLY
BRINGS A FEW
CHALLENGES AND A
LOT OF REWARDS.
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ging varies from person to person. Biological changes, however, are inevitable and bring about physical changes that affect functionality, mobility, strength, flexibility and energy. The aging process is full of challenging changes that can lead to depression, a common problem among elderly adults. Neurological specialist Lorne S. Label, MD, and other researchers now estimate that half of those over the age of 85 have or will develop Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. According to www.alz.org, Alzheimer's disease accounts for 60 to 80 percent of cases.

The health and relaxation benefits of therapeutic massage are becoming better known as massage therapy becomes increasingly accessible to the general population. We know that massage therapy offers a welcome release of tension from muscular aches and pains, as well as numerous long-term health benefits for clients of any age. The elderly don't always have easy access to massage

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Age-appropriate massage offers specific benefits for the less mobile, elderly client. Touch sessions provide tactile, sensory and mental stimulation, as well as an opportunity for social interaction.

therapy, though they certainly have much to gain from therapeutic massage.

Age-appropriate massage offers specific benefits for the less mobile, elderly client. Lotioning and gentle stroke massage, for instance, provides nourishment to aging skin that is losing moisture, elasticity and tone. Light pressure massage stimulates circulation, which can promote greater ease in movement, better digestion, elimination, more restful sleep and even mental alertness. Touch sessions provide tactile, sensory and mental stimulation, as well as an opportunity for social interaction. In-home massage provides one-on-one attention and caring physical contact to less active elders who may be feeling isolated or lonely, thereby providing reassurance, comfort and nurturing.

When working with elderly clients, however, there are some things you need to keep in mind. Following are a few ideas that can help you better understand this population.

MODIFYING MASSAGE THERAPY

Some massage therapists are willing to travel with their tables. If an elderly person prefers a table massage and is physically able to lie comfortably on one, this option has some advantages in certain situations. Often, though, table massage is not the most efficient or effective way to work with elderly clients. Physically frail elders with limited mobility may have difficulty positioning themselves and getting onto a table, and the setup may seem awkward and unfamiliar. Giving your elderly clients the option to remain partially or fully clothed and situated wherever they feel most comfortable during a session gives those experiencing diminishing control over their lives more decisional power.

There are many ways of conducting a modified massage or skilled touch session to accommodate less mobile clients in their homes. If your client does not have his or her own ideas, you can assess the situation and make suggestions. The length of each session will depend on a client's preferences, the reason for massage, financial circumstances, a client's tolerance for physical contact and how much of the client's body you are able to access.

ACCESS AND POSITIONING

Your ability to think creatively, act intuitively and adapt to unusual or changing circumstances are skills that will

ARE YOU READY?

If you are thinking of building a massage practice specific to the less mobile or frail elderly, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do I feel comfortable around people of an advanced age who are experiencing a range of physical and mental challenges?
- Am I willing to give up control over the environment in which my massage sessions will take place?
- Am I willing to modify my bodywork skills or learn specialized approaches for relating to the frail elderly?
- Am I able to keep my attention on an elderly person as an individual rather than on her aging process, limitations or frailties?
- Am I good at adapting to changing circumstances?
- Am I a good listener?
- Am I comfortable sitting in silence with a client?
- Am I willing to access and process my responses to aging, death and dying?

Direct experience will be the best teacher in helping you decide if the rewards of working with the frail elderly outweigh the challenges you will encounter.

business tip GASOLINE, MILEAGE, TOLLS AND A PERCENTAGE OF YOUR CAR MAINTENANCE WILL BE TAX DEDUCTIBLE FOR IN-HOME VISITS.



Consider your own capabilities and comfort, as well as your client's, when deciding what positioning to use. Some clients may be able to lie on their beds, while others will prefer a hand or foot massage.

business tip SOME INSURANCE COMPANIES WILL REIMBURSE FOR THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE IF THE THERAPY IS PRESCRIBED BY A PHYSICIAN.

serve you well when relating to the frail elderly. When working without a massage table or massage chair, you need to think “outside the box.”

Consider your own capabilities and comfort, as well as your client's, when deciding what positioning to use. Some clients may be able to lie on their beds, while others will prefer a hand and/or foot massage, or a neck, shoulder and back massage over clothing while sitting. Your client may be most comfortable lying on her bed for the session one day, yet find it easier to sit upright in a straight-back chair on another day. Recliners, when available, offer comfort and increased positioning options.

Whenever possible, adjust your position instead of asking clients to reposition themselves. You may need to sit instead of stand, kneel instead of sit, or change the angle of your chair, for example. If, at any time, you sense your client is not comfortable and able to relax, or you are uncomfortable, stop and try something different. If standing behind or to the side of the client's chair isn't working, try sitting in a stool or kneeling in front of your client. Lunging beside a client's chair or bed might need to be adjusted to kneeling beside them.



The elderly often yearn to be touched in sensitive, caring ways, and are usually deeply appreciative when receiving such touch.

There are a variety of positions you can try, so don't give up if you have to readjust.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Your elderly clients may not use the same vocabulary or communicate in quite the same way as you. They may use different words and have different points of reference. In conversational interactions, be conscious of how you use language.

If your client is verbal and not cognitively impaired, ask for clarification when necessary.

Additionally, place yourself at your client's eye level and maintain visual contact as much as possible. As a courtesy, address clients by their last names until you are asked to do otherwise. Remember, too, that pitching your voice lower instead of speaking louder will be more useful for clients who have a hard time hearing.

Keep your attention on your client during conversations. Focus any feedback on the strengths and positive attributes rather than on limitations. "I'm sorry" is a good response to complaints, and try to refrain from "fixing" things or giving advice unless asked directly for an opinion.

DEALING WITH DEMENTIA

Anyone with clients in their 80s is almost sure to encounter dementia-related challenges. When relating to clients experiencing any level of cognitive impairment, there are a few things you need to keep in mind. Before you begin talking, try to eliminate any distractions and make sure you have your client's attention. Keep the communication simple and avoid giving clients multiple choices. Give necessary instructions one at a time, using gentle physical contact to reinforce verbal communications.

Avoid asking clients if they remember something from a previous visit, and listen attentively. You should try not to correct communications, even if you know the facts are inaccurate. As with every client, treat the frail elderly with respect, and don't infantilize or talk down to clients living with dementia.

TOOLS & TIPS

The items you need when working with elderly clients differ slightly from those you may find in a studio or spa setting. Using lotion instead of oil is recommended because aging skin often absorbs lotion better. Also, elderly clients often respond more positively to lotion, and you won't need both hands to apply and replenish. A pump-type container is best, and make sure you place it within your reach.

You will find multiple uses for a few soft, clean hand towels and a small pillow. Other useful items: non-greasy creams or gels formulated to help arthritis, bruising and sore muscles; antimicrobial hand sanitizer; some vinyl gloves and disposable face masks in case either should ever be needed. Two other indispensable items are a knee pad and some kind of portable chair or stool. All of these items, with the exception of the stool, will fit easily into a lightweight tote bag.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. Arrive a few minutes early. Take time to ground and center yourself, allowing your heart to open to your client. Remember that the moment you enter a room, you are touching anyone in that space with your mental and emotional energy, and with the quality of your presence.
2. Use sanitizer on your hands before entering your client's home or wash your hands thoroughly before making skin-to-skin contact.
3. Be sensitive when asking questions of a family member, care assistant or your client regarding any contagious conditions, recent alterations in medication or other changes. Remain alert and observant.
4. Avoid touching undiagnosed rashes, open sores, burns, cuts or bruises. Focus on such areas by sending warmth and energy, holding your hands slightly above the skin.
5. Stay attentive to your client as much as possible while dealing appropriately with any distractions that arise.
6. Practice patience! Never rush your touch or your communication. Proceed at your client's pace.
7. If your client cannot answer direct questions, watch and listen for positive or negative indicators and proceed accordingly.
8. Ask permission, or tell your client, when moving belongings. Return all objects to their original position before leaving.
9. Beware of overwhelming the person with too much contact, too much technique or your own agenda.
10. Treat your clients the way you would want to be treated in a similar situation.

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

Relating to aging clients in their own living spaces differs dramatically from working with younger, more agile clients in your studio, business or spa setting where you control everything from the height of the massage table to the music and lighting. When leaving your massage studio and table behind, you are also leaving behind your ability to control both the environment and the ways you access your client's body.

The elderly often yearn to be touched in sensitive, caring ways, and are usually deeply appreciative when receiving such touch. Your clients may become attached to you, want you to prolong your visits or ask for more frequent visits than you can provide. They may want to give you expensive gifts, or request personal favors beyond the scope of your services or expertise. Such requests will require authentic, thoughtful and sensitive responses from you that respect your clients' as well as your own personal boundaries.

There is almost always a level of uncertainty when working with the frail elderly. You have to account for travel time to the client's home and be able to deal with a variety of distractions that might occur, such as a blaring television or radio, neighbors dropping by or a distraught family member. You also have to prepare for your client's physical, emotional and mental well-being, as well as your own fluctuating emotions.

During your sessions with an elderly client, you may be witnessing his physical or mental decline, or perhaps even a dying process. Such experiences add an emotional dimension to your work that can prove challenging, yet they also open doors to deeper awareness and personal growth. You might find you're better able to surrender some control.

The relaxed and radiant faces, heartfelt hugs and sometimes even tears of gratitude you receive from elderly clients are priceless. At some point, you may find traditional roles like client and practitioner, aged and young, giver and receiver or healthy and ill disappearing entirely. Experiencing deep and intimate contact with another individual can be a precious and timeless moment of grace. ■

For more information on how massage therapy can benefit Alzheimer's patients, as well as what you can expect from working with elderly clients, read "Forget-Me-Not," by Clare La Plante, in the Winter 2007 issue of *mtj*.