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Thesis Paper

Massage as a Component of a Healthy Lifestyle

As I write this thesis paper, I am in the midst of the Quarantine brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic. As a Licensed Massage Therapist, I am home for the duration on furlough and grateful to have this task to focus on and keep my mind actively engaged. I, like many people now, am facing many challenges, not the least of which is keeping up with my own mental and physical health amidst the questions and uncertainty that seem to have become the everyday norm. It is not clear all the ways this Pandemic will influence all our lives and careers in the future. Until the stay in order I was working in a local hotel at the Spa, as well as proprietor of my own small business and personal massage studio. It is currently unclear when we will really feel safe enough to reopen here in the state of Illinois where I live. The city of Chicago alone makes the whole state seem high risk, even; I live in the suburbs and my small suburban county alone has been reporting as many as 100 new cases almost daily overnight. Despite all this uncertainty I am still clearly focused on the goal of attaining this bachelor's degree and planning for my future in a positive and constructive way. I want this thesis paper to reflect theories I have tested and tried during these difficult times in an effort to live my best and most healthy life now and into the future. I was inspired by Queen Elizabeth II address to her nation and the world on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and specifically the phrase she ended her speech with by reminding us all that we have the "instinctive compassion to heal." Massage therapy perfectly epitomizes this phrase to me.

I believe regular massage can be part of a healthy lifestyle and a helpful component in keeping the critically important mind/body balance. It is tangible proof that you really care about your well-being and want good things to happen for yourself and your body. It is a useful tool in helping to treat depression and the often-accompanying feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that can lead down a dark and dangerous mental spiral. It is one of many avenues to seek treatment along with proper medical intervention by way of medication along with talking therapy. I can speak from years of personal experience with untreated depression and anxiety that I was desperate to find relief from in any way! A therapeutic massage can help with the aches and pains in the body that accompany being in a prolonged depressed state, as well as help achieve better and more productive sleep. Even more importantly it is peaceful nature can help remind people of the good feelings that can be released within that were buried under layers of pointless worry and profound sadness.

As I write about a healthy lifestyle, I will be referring to the works and findings of Japanese doctor Keizo Hashimoto (1897-1993), founder of Sotai. He developed Sotai based on his knowledge of Eastern medicine and modalities such as acupuncture, moxibustion, Shiatsu massage, Seitai Jutso, yoga, etc. and applied them alongside Western medicine. Dr. Hashimoto believed that “feel good movements” that helped bring peace to both the body and the mind improved the body’s miraculous self-healing ability and power. He believed that certain factors could enable and empower the human body to regain its natural integrity and healthy balance without undue stress or pain. There are five Sotai holistic factors that contribute to this inner balance that is reflected in a healthy mind and body state. The five factors that contribute to this inner balance are: *breathing* (respiration), *diet* (eating and drinking), *exercise* or physical activity, *mental activity*, and *environment*. All together they make up the necessary components for a healthy lifestyle (Komatsu, 2020).

Dr. Hashimoto lists *breathing* as the first factor contributing to inner balance, which is easily the most immediately accessible and within our control. We only need to mindfully take several deep breaths focusing on long inhalation and even longer, slower exhalation. This is a key component in meditation and beginning to have some control over uncontrollable thoughts and unhealthy mind states. I want to begin by focusing on the 10<sup>th</sup> cranial nerve, the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve is a squiggly, shaggy, branching nerve connecting most of the major organs between the brain and the colon. The word vagus is translated in Latin to mean vagrant because it meanders and wanders, like a vagrant, among the organs. Breathing deeply can immediately relax the entire body precisely because it stimulates the vagus nerve. This nerve runs from the neck to the abdomen and is responsible for turning “off” the “fight or flight” reflex response. The vagus nerve is largely responsible for the mind/body connection because of its key role as mediator between thinking and feeling. When people say, “trust your gut”, what they really mean is “trust your vagus nerve follows the breath and sends to appropriate.” By stimulating the vagus nerve you are activating the relaxation response to the brain and the heart. When we take deeper and more mindful slow breaths it decreases of the oxygen demand on parasympathetic nervous system known as the heart muscle (myocardium) “rest and digest” response. In this state we can have peace of mind that all is well in our external world and the heart rate naturally drops lower and we feel more peaceful and relaxed. By contrast, when we are in an anxious and agitated state the breathing can become shallow and we may experience ragged breathing or shortness of breath as the heartbeat that reverberates throughout our physical being is told to increase and try to meet the oxygen needs that arise with this kind of breathing and the “fight or flight” response is thereby being triggered.(Zimmerman, 2019).

The vagus nerve is simply following the orders that the breath is sending to the brain and the heart to increase or decrease the need for oxygen within the body. When we take deeper and more mindful slow breaths it decreases the oxygen demand on the heart muscle (myocardium) and the heart rate naturally drops lower and we feel more peaceful and relaxed. By contrast, when we are in an anxious and agitated state the breathing can become shallow and we may experience ragged breathing or shortness of breath as the heart is being told to increase the rate of breathing to try to meet the oxygen needs that arise when the “fight or flight” response is being triggered (Zimmerman, 2019).

This “fight or flight” response of the Sympathetic nervous system and is completely normal; however, what is not normal or healthy is when the body is constantly in this state due to experiencing stress or anxiety on a regular day-to-day basis. The anxiety could be coming from a job, relationship, social situation, or even while safely at home if the mind is in a state of constantly anticipating imaginary disaster which may or may not actually occur. This anxious response causes cortisol and adrenaline to be constantly circulating throughout the body and sabotaging good health with prolonged elevated blood pressure as well as difficulty relaxing and achieving good rejuvenating sleep. Elevated and prolonged circulation of cortisol has many other debilitating effects: it can lower the immune system, cause inflammation throughout the body, and will even begin to dissolve connective tissue throughout the body. By simply being aware of the breath and focusing on deep breathing, it will trigger the vagus nerve enough that it can act as a brake on the stress response. “The vagus nerve is essentially the ‘Queen of the parasympathetic nervous system’ the more we do to stimulate it, the more we banish the effects of the sympathetic nervous system flooding the body with unnecessary cortisol and adrenaline. 1) reference (Zimmerman, 2019).” When we breathe in sensory nodes on our lungs (“lung stretch receptors”) send the information up through the vagus nerve and into the brain and the brain in turn sends a response back down to tell the heart to either slow down or speed up as needed. Breathing slowly and deeply slows the heart rate and we feel more relaxed. Conversely, when we breathe in a quicker and more shallow way our heart rate accelerates and we feel anxious, the opposite of a peaceful state of mind. “Vagal activity is highest, and the heart rate is lowest when you are exhaling; most calming breath rate is six times per minute: five second inhalation and equal five second exhalation (Zimmerman, 2019).” There are ways to improve vagal tone beyond just deep slow breathes; laughing, singing, yoga, massage, and even splashing the face with cold water all are positive contributors. Massage encourages stillness in the body and the mind, and the extended state of deeper breathing has been shown to lower cortisol levels and raise serotonin levels. Massage can improve both mental and physical function and lower anxiety by instilling a sense of the ability to cope with everyday life stressors. There has never been a more appropriate time to realize that we have more control over our stress and anxiety levels than perhaps we realize. By remaining calm and healthy we strengthen our immune system from within and can remain in a healthy state despite CO-VID fears.

The next factor within our immediate control is our *diet*, what we eat and drink to fuel our body. Every day we have the opportunity to make healthy choices; a diet that is rich in whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat protein, and healthy dairy such as yogurt, milk, and cheese. Of equal, if not more, importance is choosing to limit, if not eliminate, foods that are highly processed and loaded with sodium, saturated fat, and refined sugar. It is also critical to keep the body properly hydrated by drinking plenty of water and tea while restricting sugary beverages, highly caffeinated drinks, or alcohol- all of which can have a debilitating and dehydrating effect on the body. To be conscientious of this, I have become a much more mindful grocery shopper during quarantine. I used to be more of an impulse shopper, I only focused on what was on sale, what looked appealing, or what I was excited to snack on when I got back home. Now, a trip to the grocery store is no longer the enjoyable experience it used to be, I must wear a face mask, gloves, and keep a six-foot social distance between myself and other shoppers. I have gone from grocery shopping 2-3 times a week to once every 10 days or so. It has forced me to plan family meals and snacks that are delicious and nutritious before I even leave for the store. I have focused my shopping by strictly following a pre-made shopping

list and utilizing my time and effort to get back home safely as soon as possible. I'm no longer tempted by cookies at work and have made smarter choices to snack on such as fresh fruit and yogurt instead. I have replaced salty snacks like potato chips (a personal favorite) with mixed nuts and made a real effort to drink more tea while severely restrict refined sugar in my beverages and snacks. I also practice intermittent fasting, meaning that I stop eating by 7:00 PM in the evening and do not break my fast and eat until at least 11:00 AM the following day. That means that I go at least 16 hours without eating any food at all, however I do stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water and even enjoying a cup or two of coffee in the morning time. I believe that this has been an integral part in helping to keep my weight at a healthy level. It has also helped to give me more energy, my skin looks clearer, and I feel healthier overall.

The third factor in the Sotai system is *exercise* or your physical activity. Even though the quarantine has forced us indoors, it has never been more important to make time to go outside, go for a walk and feel the sunshine on your face. I used to belong to a gym where I would attend hot yoga classes and hit the treadmill or stationary bike once or twice a week. Now, I get up in the morning and follow a yoga routine at home that has been so energizing for me. It is a routine based on the book "Ancient Secret of the Fountain of Youth" by Peter Kelder. It is a series of five yoga moves done in a specific order with equal number of repetitions for each move. All these exercises are specifically targeted anti-aging yoga moves that build strength, balance, and confidence. For my cardio, I have a stationary bike in my living room, and I have been riding 30-40 minutes about three times a week. I have also focused on making time to sit in quiet meditation; even only 5-10 minutes can help quiet my mind and focus on taking deep, mindful breaths. This has been a real game-changer in helping me to prepare both physically and mentally for meeting the challenges of whatever the day might bring my way. I cannot underestimate the importance of the mental component of my workout. I find yoga to be the perfect combination of physical exertion and mental focus that help me clarify my thoughts and intentions for the day, for my family and loved ones, and for my life. The addition of the meditation after yoga has made me feel that I am at my most healthy point, despite the circumstance.

The fourth factor for achieving healthy inner balance is our *mental activity*. It cannot be stressed enough that the quality of your thoughts directly influence the quality of your life. I feel that regular massage, just like regular yoga and meditation practice, can greatly contribute to an ongoing positive mental attitude. As it pertains to mental activity, I feel I must address the issue of anxiety. It is a common term and an all too familiar feeling during this current CO-VID Crisis, but technically speaking, it is a form of mental illness and categorized as a mood disorder. I was fortunate enough last year, in 2019, to attend a continuing education course: Massage and Mental Health Disorders. It was led by Ruth Werner, the author of *A Massage Therapist Guide to Pathology*, a textbook that I utilized while in school and still refer to on a regular basis at home and in my practice. She taught that the most common form of anxiety disorder is known as General Anxiety Disorder, which is a constant anticipation of disaster. A variety of common symptoms for this condition include restlessness, being on edge, fatigue, lack of concentration, irritability, muscle tension, and problems sleeping. Her professional opinion, as far as treatment

goes, is medication, such as an antidepressant, anti-anxiety, beta-blocker, along with psychotherapy and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Her course also stressed that an important component of rehabilitation is practicing mindful relaxation, specifically massage was stressed, as Ms. Werner herself had been an LMT, but also yoga and meditation. Unfortunately, like an insidious shadow, often following anxiety is depression. These are the two most common mental health disorders in North America, and as of 2019, when I took the course, an estimated 40 million Americans alone were suffering, although a scant 1/3 will ever seek treatment. Common signs and symptoms include sad and empty feelings, difficulty sleeping, an inability to experience pleasure and enjoyment even with loved one, an unexplainable feeling of guilt, irritability, loss of interest and energy, a decreased ability to concentrate, and of course, the ever present and exacerbated aches and pains throughout the body. All of this can be addressed through diet, exercise, breathing, mental activity, and environment. A key component to all this is good sleeping habits which can be influenced through many different means. It is important to limit eating and stop a few hours before bedtime and even more importantly, limit the amount of caffeine and alcohol. It is also important to create a quiet space conducive to relaxation- no TV, or anything too mentally stimulating; however, quiet, background noise or soothing music can be a helpful for peaceful sleep. It cannot be overstated how important regular exercise can contribute to overall good health, but specifically can help aide in sleep. I appreciated Ruth Werner's research and lecture that supported massage as another real and powerful way to improve mood, raise serotonin levels, and most importantly, imparting a sense of the ability to cope with the stresses of everyday life. All of this has direct bearing on the aspect of mental activity, and it cannot be stressed enough that the quality of your thoughts directly influence the quality of your life. Yoga and meditation have truly helped me to calm my mind and bring my best self to my family, workplace, and any given situation really that a peaceful state of mind would be best. I feel that regular massage can greatly contribute to an ongoing positive mental attitude precisely by encouraging a peaceful state of mind mirrored by a peaceful state in the body.

The last contributing factor to a healthy and balanced lifestyle according to Sotei is *environment*, which takes several factors into consideration: your home, family, workplace and co-workers, your social circle of friends, neighbors, acquaintances, hobbies and more all factor into your environment. In order to create a peaceful home environment, especially during this Quarantine where we are being asked to simply stay home, a clean and tidy environment is important to reflex a peaceful state of mind. It has never been more important to properly disinfect the home and do everything possible to stop the spread of the COVID virus. I also find it very peaceful to incorporate essential oils into my living space daily. I have an aromatic diffuser that I run in the living room and the entire family can benefit. Some of my personal favorite oils include jasmine, lavender, geranium, tulsi (holy basil), frankincense, eucalyptus, and ylang ylang. I almost always try to incorporate essential oils into a carrier oil to be used during massage, it is a real therapeutic enhancement.

In conclusion, I truly feel that massage can be a key, helpful component in harmony with all the factors that contribute to a balanced healthy lifestyle. *Breathing, diet, exercise, mental*

*activity, and environment* all should be incorporated to work together with the body and the mind to achieve healthy balance. The positive effect of these five Sotei holistic factors are each complimented by regular massage. As I still face uncertainty in the massage industry in the face of a pandemic, I remind myself of an inspiring quote from the artist Vincent Van Gogh, “Your profession is not what brings home your paycheck. Your profession is what you were put on Earth to do with such passion and such intensity that it becomes spiritual in calling.” Thank you for your time and patience reading this paper – Be Well!

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