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Massage Goes Mainstream

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As you read this, thousands of Americans are lying in gloomy rooms, stripped naked, being pummeled by complete strangers. Why are the cops doing nothing? Because these people are doing it willingly, paying in fact, handsomely, to be poked and prodded and rubbed and kneaded and generally treated like human pie crust.

Massage used to be practiced mostly at the social extremities, in the homes of the very wealthy or in seedy parlors where the handiwork was offered with euphemistic "happy endings." Its health benefits were championed in hard-core homeopathic enclaves, but then again, so was dandelion root. Now massage has gone mainstream. It's the feel-good equivalent of having your teeth cleaned, the more therapeutic version of getting a pedicure.

These days the person lying on the heated table draped discreetly in a towel is as likely to be a realtor as a movie star. Shanna Woodbury, a Minneapolis, Minn., fund raiser, or her attorney husband Shawn gets a massage every three weeks without fail. "We have a standing appointment," explains Shanna. "We trade off based on who needs it most."

Lots of people are feeling that need. According to an American Massage Therapy Association survey, 17% of American adults had a massage in the past year, twice as many as in 1997. And nearly a quarter of those polled said they expect to get a massage this year. Of these, only about 35% are feeling kneady for medical reasons; most of them want to relax, relieve stress and pamper themselves.

Certainly there are more places to get rubdowns than ever before. Anywhere that can accommodate one chair, two people and lots of stress seems to be fair game, including airports, offices, factory floors, military bases, sports stadiums, day-care centers and soup kitchens. Massage therapists were onboard the Acela Express on April 15, offering 10-min. "tax break" massages courtesy of Amtrak. Miles west, in Lakewood, Colo., accountants at Bradley Allen & Assoc. were visited five times by deft-fingered folk from the Whole Body Health Center. Nearly half the 103 Wild Oats grocery stores in North America offer

massages, as do many of the high-end Whole Foods markets, the largest natural-foods chain in the U.S. "You don't think to yourself, 'I'm going to get some spinach and a rubdown,'" says Liz Feldman, who goes to her local Whole Foods every two weeks for a stint in the massage chair. "But even if it's in a grocery store, I don't care. If you have a knot in your back, all you need is 10 minutes."

Since the invention of the portable massage chair in 1986, seated massage has become the fast food of health care, particularly in the workplace. Businesses, even quite small ones, are discovering that massages make a cheap bonus, improve morale and encourage employees to work longer. And since people remain clothed during a chair massage, the message such a gift sends can't be misconstrued. "It's a thank-you that says, 'I care about your well-being,'" says Elizabeth Schueneman, president of Em-space, a six-member graphic-design firm in Omaha, Neb., which a massage therapist visits once a month.

Why the new enthusiasm for massage, a practice at least as old as grooming? (Earliest known spa: the Roman bath.) Many therapists attribute it to people's greater awareness of the effect stress has on health, and the wider acceptance of alternative or complementary medicine. Then there's the Pashmina effect, wherein goods and services originally marketed to the very rich become repackaged for the mass market. And some point to the isolation and lack of physical contact in contemporary society, where much communication is done electronically and any touch could be considered inappropriate. "People don't touch that much. They're watching TV or on the computer," says Dr. Paul Schwinghamer, a chiropractor and owner of a massage school in Los Angeles. "It's one of those things you don't really notice that you need. But nine times out of 10, after a massage, you think, 'I should be doing this more often.'"

Part of massage's current appeal has to be its sheer availability. There are now 950 state-licensed massage schools in the U.S., 14% more than there were even two years ago. Last year they turned out an estimated 30,000 new graduates (or "body workers"), all eager to get their hands on someone, whether at spas, on cruise ships, in hospitals and holistic health centers or during bar mitzvah celebrations. What are the attractions of the profession? Oddly, hardly anyone says it's because they can spend much of the day stroking seminaked women. In fact one of the earliest proponents of massage in Minnesota was a Catholic nun, Sister Rosalind Gefre. In 1984, when she first opened her business, she was busted by the police. Since then she has led the way in changing the local legislation covering massage and has opened three clinics and five schools. "Not only is there physical healing in massage, but there is also a spiritual healing," says Sister Roz, as she is known throughout the Twin Cities. "People are skin hungry and God hungry. Before Jesus helped people, he touched them, and that is the work we do."

The rise of spa culture also plays a role in the mainstreaming of massage. Hotels, such as the hip L'Ermitage in Beverly Hills, Calif., that formerly touted their state-of-the-art gyms are ripping them out and replacing them with spas. Radissons are adding spas, as are many health clubs. Choosing from the variety of rubdowns offered at these oases can take the kind of focus and endurance normally expended on choosing a career. There is traditional Swedish massage in which muscles are stroked and kneaded,

Shiatsu and other acupressure-based Eastern techniques, reflexology (in which the hands and feet are prodded) and aromatherapy, which uses scented oils to enhance the effects of massage. For those with real backbone, there is the menage a trois of back rubs, the four-handed massage.

The fanciest purveyors try to top one another with combinations of techniques, spiced with beauty treatments. Grove Park Inn Resort and Spa in Asheville, N.C., offers "Fire, Rock, Water and Light," in which the client's body is patted down with cool water, exfoliated with a blend of sugar and aromatic oil, painted with buttermilk and honey and then wrapped, whereafter cool rocks are stroked on the face. Once demummified, the client is given a "waterfall massage"--a spraying by multiple showerheads. In September the North Carolina Association of Realtors will send 1,000 participants to a conference at Grove Park. Even before the conferees check in they will be greeted by a phalanx of massage therapists offering chair massages at registration.

But for many, massage is not simply about paying someone to help them relax. It's about maintaining their health. Massage has long been part of the treatment for muscular and arthritic conditions, sports injuries and chronic pain. Prenatal and infant massage are also catching on and a rape-crisis center in North Carolina even offers massage or "safe touch" as part of its therapy. A national survey of employer-sponsored health plans by William M. Mercer found that 15% of HMOs offer massage. Cigna and Blue Cross Blue Shield cover massage in some packages too.

How much difference does massage make to your physical well-being? The National Institutes of Health is currently funding three studies trying to quantify the medical benefits. And in March the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy released a paper calling for more research into massage and more public education on massage. Its chairman, James Gordon, says that although he prescribes massage to about half his patients, some of its healing qualities may come simply from being touched by another human. "We shouldn't put too much weight on its benefits, but at the same time we should make it available to everyone," he says. "Massage does decrease anxiety, reliably. It does decrease pain in a number of people with chronic-pain syndrome. It does improve mood. Exactly how it does it, I don't think we know."

The medical and pharmaceutical industries have created substances that make people feel as good as massages do. But unlike massages, they require prescriptions, are addictive or induce hangovers. So there's the rub.

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