



## **Touching alternatives**

### **Domini Stuart reveals the ultimate on-the-job stress release**

You walk away from your desk stressed and tense, then return 15 minutes later feeling relaxed, calm and focused. If it sounds like a miracle, you have yet to discover the joys of seated massage.

Seated massage has made it possible for therapeutic massage to move out of the salon and into the workplace.

“The real beauty is that it’s so convenient,” says Meg Johnson, Managing Partner of Innovative Corporate Massage in Sydney. “It’s also a very gentle introduction to massage if you’ve never had one before. You don’t even have to take off your clothes – you just relax in the specially-designed chair.”

### **Relief for your back and neck**

The chair in question is portable, easy to set up and gives the therapist access to your back, neck, shoulders and arms – the most common fatigue points for both office workers and people who are on their feet all day.

“When you sit looking at a computer screen all day, you can really feel the tightness in your back and neck,” says Nadine Pawsey, Customer Service Manager of The Laminex Group. “A regular massage really does make a difference.”

Originally introduced as a staff incentive for the Customer Service Department, seated massage is now available to everyone in sales and distribution. Two therapists visit on the second Tuesday of every month to knead and stroke their way through around 40 eager workers.

“We all look forward to ‘massage day’,” says Pawsey. “You feel so much better afterwards – and everyone sees it as a really nice thing for the company to do.”

At the Stacks/Goudkamp legal firm, seated massage has been happening every Monday morning for over two years. From 10am until 1.30pm, a continuous stream of workers file into the boardroom for their weekly treat.

“With soothing music playing in the background it’s very relaxing” says Managing Director and owner Tom Goudkamp. “In fact, it’s so relaxing that I generally use the time to snatch a power nap. When it’s over, I feel very calm and refreshed – and I like the idea that the people who work here feel as good as I do.”

Goudkamp also acknowledges the morale-building aspect of the massage. “It’s a way of demonstrating that you care, and people appreciate that. It’s also one more reason for working here rather than somewhere else. All round, I can only see positives.”

### **Measurable benefits**

Most people who have had a massage will tell you they feel better in some way, and massage therapists are employed in many intensive care and neonatal units, hospices and pain clinics. Corporate massage may even be a tax-deductible expense for employee well-being. Yet it’s only recently that scientific principles have been used to identify any measurable benefits.

Since being formally established in 1992, the Touch Research Institute within the University of Miami School of Medicine in Florida has carried out over 90 studies, including one on the effects of massage on job performance and stress.

For this research, 26 adults were given a 15-minute seated massage twice a week for five weeks. As a control, a further 24 adults spent the same length of time relaxing in the chair without having a massage. At the end of the five weeks study, both groups appeared to be more relaxed and less depressed. However, those who had received the massage also showed evidence of reduced job stress and anxiety, along with lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Their brain wave patterns were consistent with enhanced alertness, and they completed maths problems faster and with significantly fewer errors.

Johnson isn’t surprised by the findings. “Our clients tell us that a regular massage relieves tension and tired muscles and restores a calm mind and feeling of well being,” she says. “But you don’t have to be stressed to benefit. Massage can help anyone to achieve optimum health, and to feel fantastic.”

### **Touching alternatives**

If 15 minutes of seated massage leaves you aching for more, there are a number of other styles to try.

**Swedish Massage** uses a system of long strokes, kneading and friction techniques on the more superficial layers of the muscles, combined with active and passive movements of the joints. Developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Per Henrik Ling, a Swedish doctor, its main aim is to increase the blood flow and release toxins from the muscles. Swedish massage is said to shorten recovery time from muscular strain, stimulate the skin and nervous system and reduce stress, both emotional and physical.

**Reflexology** is based around a system of points in the soles of the feet which are thought to correspond or "reflex" to the internal organs and other parts of the body. The right side of the body is believed to be reflected in the right foot, and the left side in the left foot. Reflexology is said to help heal the whole person and not just the prevailing symptoms by restoring and maintaining the body's natural equilibrium.

**Acupressure** is the practice of applying finger pressure to specific 'acupoints' throughout the body. The aim is to correct any imbalance in the flow of the life energy known in China as 'chi'. There is evidence that acupressure predates acupuncture, appearing in China as early as 2000 B.C. It is still widely used in Asia for the promotion of wellness and the treatment of disease as well as relaxation. In the west, acupressure is probably best known as a way of reducing nausea when pressure is applied to the wrist-point.

**Shiatsu** is a Japanese form of acupressure, using finger pressure along the body's meridians as well as on the so-called acupoints. Again the aim is to free the flow of life energy, which is known as 'ki' in Japan.

**Sports massage** is said to help before and after exertion. Before, it is used to relax the muscles and improve flexibility, helping the athlete to achieve peak performance and avoid injury. After, it may help relieve soreness in the muscles and speed up recovery from minor injuries.