

Deepen Your Skills, Deepen Your Art Through Research

By Douglas Nelson

While practitioners often feel that science lurches forward a millimeter at a time, it is a beneficial and wise approach, especially in a field like massage therapy where so much more research needs to be explored.

The more studies we have, the more comparisons we can make and the stronger our evidence will be. As always, one or two studies should not be taken as gospel, whether they show positive or negative outcomes. As our massage research literature continues to grow and improve, this work reflects well on us as a profession; other disciplines see us question what we do and why, using the shared language of scientific inquiry. Look to the science for a deeper understanding of the question, not for formulaic answers and precise treatment protocols.

Embracing the science does not mean abandoning the art. That which deepens understanding, deepens the art.

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For massage practitioners, the work I am currently excited about addresses the lumbodorsal fascia (LDF).

The full neural impact of the LDF has not been clearly understood, but new research shows it is rich with neural input. In fact, hypertonic saline injections into the LDF had greater spread and tissue sensitivity than injections into the muscle itself.¹ This has important implications for us as practitioners, as directed treatment to the LDF may be very important for people suffering with low-back pain.

Massage consumers should be very excited to see all the ways that massage can play a role in issues that directly affect their health and well-being. Read the following studies, then share the results with your clients.

Headaches—Tension-type headaches affect millions of people and are the most common type of headache. Numerous studies show massage and soft-tissue techniques to be helpful.²

Low-Back Pain—There is very good evidence that massage therapy can indeed be beneficial in the treatment of low-back pain. One study compared massage therapy to routine physical therapy, with very favorable results.³

Fibromyalgia—This syndrome can be very frustrating for both patient/client and provider. A recent study found Swedish massage quite helpful in reducing the effects of fibromyalgia, while also reducing pain and stress levels. Perhaps most helpful, this study also had proposed guidelines as to frequency and duration of the sessions.⁴

Cancer—There are many studies on massage therapy and its possible role for the cancer patient. In a 2018 study, researchers looked at the psychological impact of massage therapy and found very beneficial effects in anxiety, depression, and emotional control.⁵ A particularly interesting study looked at the effects of massage on both the cancer patient and also caregivers.⁶


The research literature is a vast resource, inviting therapists to deepen our understanding of the richness and depth of this wonderful field of massage therapy.

From cadaver labs where practitioners can see the body in a way they never imagined, to our greater understanding of fascia and its practice implications, to honoring those who laid the research

groundwork we can build on, research and in-depth learning must be part of your healthy practice if you hope to fluently address client conditions. **m&b**

Notes

1. A. Schilder et al., "Sensory Findings After Stimulation of the Thoracolumbar Fascia with Hypertonic Saline Suggest its Contribution to Low Back Pain," *Pain* 155 (2014): 222–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pain.2013.09.025>; A. Schilder et al., "Electrical High-Frequency Stimulation of the Human Thoracolumbar Fascia Evokes Long-Term Potentiation-Like Pain Amplification," *Pain* 157 (2016): 2309–17, <https://doi.org/10.1097/j.pain.0000000000000649>.
2. T. Gal and Leonid Kalichman, "Soft Tissue Mobilizations as a Treatment for a Tension-Type Headache," *Annals of Musculoskeletal Medicine* 1, no. 1 (2017): 13–18.
3. F. Kamali et al., "Comparison Between Massage and Routine Physical Therapy in Women with Sub Acute and Chronic Nonspecific Low Back Pain," *Journal of Back and Musculoskeletal Rehabilitation* 27, no. 4 (2014): 475–80.
4. F. R. de Oliveira et al., "Massage Therapy in Cortisol Circadian Rhythm, Pain Intensity, Perceived Stress Index and Quality of Life of Fibromyalgia Syndrome Patients," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 30 (2018): 85–90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2017.12.006>.
5. M. Alves et al., "The Effect of Massage Therapy on the Cancer Patient," *International Journal of Scientific Research* 7, no. 3 (2018), www.wwjournals.com/index.php/ijstr/article/view/3036/3000.
6. G. Lopez et al., "The Effects of Oncology Massage on Symptom Self-Report for Cancer Patients and Their Caregivers," *Supportive Care in Cancer* 25, no. 12 (2017): 3,645–50.

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