

Incorporating Whole-Body Health Into Your Massage Practice

By Moriah Petrini, LMT

As massage therapists, most of us have encountered a similar challenge when dealing with chronic injuries such as shoulder, neck or spinal pain: You push, pull and even dig into your client, and yet they never truly experience that “whole body” release. If you are like me and really care about your clients, unsatisfactory results are not an option. In fact, after years of giving deep-tissue massage, I started having arthritic symptoms myself. I constantly was stiff and in low-lying pain, which then created a snowball of ailments, including irritability, stress and fatigue. Finally, I decided to investigate a solution. The results might surprise you: Nutrition plays a much bigger roll in our practice than you can imagine.

After investigating tons of pain-relief agents – both pharmaceutical and alternative – I found that most relieved the system temporarily, but never got to the root of the problem. And, as most of you know, many of the pharmaceutical drugs have harmful side effects.

One day a client of mine recommended that I read a popular health book by Jon Barron called *Lessons From the Miracle Doctors*. It became painfully obvious that the root of the problem is that you can't look for a magic bullet when it comes to pain, but an entire host of health issues, including detoxing, pure water, good fats, exercise, nutrients and much more. The book does mention one critical factor that could drastically help my massage practice: Help clients reduce systemic inflammation.

Systemic inflammation is largely caused by the fact that we cook our food and destroy the food's natural enzymes, which are needed to digest food and allow the nutrients to be absorbed in the body. When this happens, the body has to work overtime to replace these digestive enzymes and the pancreas diverts its focus from making other enzymes for the body, such as ones needed to purify our blood. These are called proteolytic enzymes.

The topic of enzymes should not be taken lightly. Your digestive system, immune system, bloodstream, liver, kidneys, spleen and pancreas, as well as your ability to see, think, feel, and breathe, all depend on enzymes. All of the minerals and vitamins you eat and all of the hormones your body produces need enzymes in order to work properly. In fact, enzymes govern every single metabolic function in your body: your stamina, energy level, ability to utilize vitamins and minerals, immune system, and more.

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I found that applying all this to my massage practice was essential. First, you need proteolytic enzymes to increase the flow of “good” nutrients into the muscles, reduce scar tissue and help remove lactic acid out of the muscles. Second, inflammation is a natural response of the body to injury; however, most people suffer from excessive inflammation that actually retards the healing process, making our jobs as therapists almost impossible.

How Proteolytic Enzymes Work

To understand how important proteolytic enzymes are to the massage, let me explain how they work. According to research, proteolytic enzymes reduce inflammation by neutralizing the biochemicals of inflammation (bradykinins and pro-inflammatory eicosanoids) to levels at which the synthesis, repair and regeneration of injured tissues can take place.¹ Reducing inflammation can have immediate impact on improved heart health, circulation, and to help speed up recovery from sprains, strains, fractures, bruises, contusions, surgery – even arthritis. Trials have shown that supplemental proteolytic enzymes can help reduce inflammation, speed healing of bruises and other tissue injuries, and reduce overall recovery time when compared to athletes taking a placebo.^{2,3}

My Findings

After several weeks of using proteolytic enzymes, I first noticed that my own back pain and arthritis began to subside. I was more capable of truly focusing on my clients and actually enjoyed the experience of giving massage again. More interesting was the response from my clients! Overall, I found that the ones that used proteolytic enzymes had incredible results. Shoulders were getting a larger range of motion, sensitive backs and swollen knees were subsiding and the natural structural alignment of their bodies moved with ease. Some mentioned later that they were sleeping better and that my massage efforts were lasting over a longer period of time.

What was even more remarkable was that it helped me to massage the sensitive lymph areas since proteolytic enzymes digest organic debris from the circulatory and lymph systems. With great surprise, some of my clients who had only set out to reverse and/or eliminate painful chronic issues found great healing among other systems of the body, including reducing allergies, sinusitis and asthma.

The Massage Therapist-Client Relationship

Although this all sounds good, it's important to note that it's very difficult to recommend nutrition to clients when many clients simply just want a massage. We also have to be careful to not pretend to "diagnose or cure" any client of any disease. I found there is a gray area where, just as we encourage clients to "drink plenty of water" after a deep therapy massage, we can mention proper nutrition. Information is power and if we simply give clients options to their health, I find they usually appreciate it and recommend me to others. Quite simply, we stand out as true healers and not as someone that is just manipulating muscle to some peaceful tunes.

I also found that most clients were actually starving for real information about natural health remedies. Due to the confusion in the market, they all had the same question: "With so many products and differing opinions, who can you trust?" I simply remind them to talk to their doctor before taking any supplement, but that, just as I had found incredible resources, there is a ton of unbiased information available online.

In the end, the more we help our clients, the more they help us. To provide true healing for our clients, we need to look at the body as a whole system and approach the massage, as only one aspect of a client's true healing process. Simply put, our body needs nutrition to accept the benefits of a good massage and the benefits of nutrition are enhanced when the body is not stressed and relaxed from a good massage. The bottom line: Nutrition and massage are perfect complements to each other.



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