

Chapter 1

Not Just a Rub: How Massage Can Improve Your Life

In This Chapter

- ▶ Introducing the benefits of massage
 - ▶ Running through the various types of massage and how they help you
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What does massage really do for you anyway? Sure, receiving one feels incredible, and watching beautiful people massaging each other on how-to videos looks nice, but what's going on beneath the surface? Is it worth it to actually fork over your hard-earned cash to have someone rub your skin for an hour? Should you spend your precious time and energy learning how to give a good massage yourself? Is massage really effective, or is it just an unnecessary, flashy indulgence, like fish eggs on toast?



Well, being a massage junkie myself, I can't imagine why anybody *wouldn't* want to get a massage anytime, anyplace, for any reason or no reason at all. For me, massage has just always seemed like such an obviously good thing to do, starting way back in 11th grade when Grace came over to visit at my parent's house one afternoon, and nobody else was home. Being a typical 17-year-old, I was hoping that we were soon going to engage in some good old-fashioned hanky-panky, and when Grace told me to loosen my belt and lie down on the carpet, I began singing Handel's *Messiah* silently to myself.

Grace touched me then on the small of my back, and I'll never forget the sensation. "This is a massage technique that somebody taught me," she said. "How does it feel?"

"Ah, it feels, um, kind of, uh, unbelievable!" I said, and *unbelievable* was exactly the right word. Grace was doing something clearly nonsexual, and I couldn't believe that anything nonsexual could feel so good, that there was a way to be so intimate with somebody and yet not get in trouble with her father if he were to find out about it. In short, I couldn't believe that something that wasn't illegal, immoral, or fattening could be so sumptuously pleasurable.

I asked Grace to keep doing what she was doing, and as she did so, I began devising, right there with my face buried in my parent's green shag carpeting, a future lifestyle that included the absolutely highest number of massages possible.

This early experience pointed out a fundamental truth about massage therapy that those people who judge it without trying it often miss: There is a difference between sex and massage therapy. There, I said it, right here in Chapter 1, and I'm glad. Some people out there will forever mix the two up, which does a disservice to everybody else, especially those people who have shied away from massage over the years because of a perceived less-than-pristine image.

I discovered, in that youthful, eye-opening experience, that massage does indeed feel unbelievable, and that discovery was a great place to begin. Now, years later, after studying and teaching massage and experiencing the myriad facets of massage in both the United States and other countries, I've been introduced to other, deeper reasons for including it in my life, reasons with profound implications for improved health, well-being, and even longevity.

In this chapter (and throughout this book), I share these reasons with you. I also introduce you to various types of massage and finally provide you with a fun, quick activity to get you started on your massage journey.

Appreciating the Basic Benefits of Massage

If I were to go into some of the stories about how massage has helped people change their lives, heal themselves, become rich and famous, and so on, you probably wouldn't believe me right away, because, after all, I'm still in Chapter 1. So I'm going to start out slowly and offer you some of the simplest, everyday ways that massage can help you, some of which still may come as a surprise to you.

Here, then, not ranked in any particular order, are some basic benefits of massage that perhaps didn't pop straight into your head the first time you thought about it. Massage

- ✓ Helps relieve muscular spasm and tension
- ✓ Raises immune efficiency
- ✓ Improves circulation
- ✓ Promotes the healing of tissues

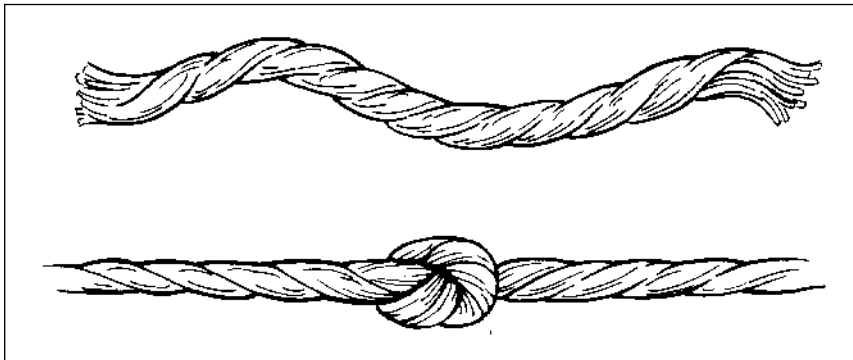
- ✓ Increases healthy functioning of the skin
- ✓ Engenders profound relaxation
- ✓ Offers emotional reassurance
- ✓ Improves appearance

The following sections take these points one at a time and let you get comfortable with them.

Helps relieve muscular spasm and tension

As you can see in Figure 1-1, muscles that are relaxed and happy are definitely physically different than muscles that are tensed up due to stress, overuse, injury, and more. The limp rope in the figure is your muscle. The knotted rope is your muscle on stress.

Figure 1-1:
Ropes
representing
stressed
and
unstressed
muscles.



But there's more to it than that, believe it or not. Regardless of how wickedly clever my rope analogy is, the human body is much more complex. In fact, it's so complex that nobody has completely figured it out yet, even though countless researchers have spent a lifetime trying to do so. A whole bunch of really interesting things about the body have been discovered, however, along with how it responds to various types of stimuli, including massage.

For example, one of the most direct effects of massage is to help loosen the tension you experience as knots, kinks, and spasms in your muscles. Massage achieves this goal in a number of ways:

- ✓ The application of pressure creates awareness of tension in a particular area, and the person receiving the massage can then begin to consciously release that tension.
- ✓ Through the application of friction to the area, a thermodynamic effect takes place, warming and softening tight, hard connective tissue.
- ✓ Stimulating trigger points soothes the local nerves, allowing a release of contractions.

Raises immune efficiency

Did you know that you have a vast system of vessels running through your body, roughly parallel to your circulatory system, and that this system is filled with a fluid that is responsible for carrying away and eliminating many of the organisms, bacteria, viruses, and other microscopic bad guys that may otherwise attack you? Yes, it's true. This setup is the lymph system, otherwise known as the Canadian Mounties of your body.



Your lymph system has nodes at various strategically located areas throughout your body, and these nodes have the job of capturing the invaders and processing them before eventual expulsion through your excretory system. Now, you may be wondering, how the heck does this lymph fluid get pumped through my body anyway? Funny you should ask. I've devised a test to discern your knowledge on that very subject. Don't worry, this is just a one-question quiz, so don't let your anxiety levels rise too high over it. Here it goes:

Question: How does the body pump the critically important lymph fluid through its lymph vessels, keeping your inner ocean clean and healthy?

- a. The heart pumps the lymph, just like it pumps the blood, even though the heart isn't directly connected to the lymph system and this answer can't possibly be true.
- b. The centrifugal force from riding various carnival rides is the best way to get the lymph fluid moving.
- c. Fear caused by sudden, unexpected physical proximity to vampires or werewolves causes the lymph vessels to contract, circulating the fluid.
- d. Movement, muscular contraction, and massage therapy are the ways lymph fluid is most effectively moved through the body because the lymph system has no pump of its own, such as the heart.

Right! The answer is d. By helping your body circulate this lymph fluid, massage aids in the elimination of noxious invaders (toxins) from your body.

There are other factors at play, too, in massage's effectiveness as an immune booster. Studies in orphanages have shown that infants and children deprived of touch experience stunted growth, both emotionally and physically. Further study showed that touch promotes the release of human growth hormone (HGH), which is essential to our development. If a child doesn't receive sufficient touch, his or her development is stunted, and susceptibility to disease increases, with potentially catastrophic results. Many of the untouched children in orphanages have died for lack of simple contact.

Improves circulation

The cigar-smoking octogenarians who frequented old-fashioned health spas used to give "It's good for the circulation!" as their reason for receiving massage. And they were right.

Students in massage school are taught to always massage in the direction of circulation — toward the heart — whenever they're applying enough pressure to move the blood underneath the skin. The reason is that your veins have little one-way valves in them that keep blood from going back in the wrong direction. So obviously, pushing the blood back against these valves, potentially harming them, isn't a good idea. In fact, when these valves don't work properly on their own, the blood seeps backward and pools up, causing the appearance of varicose veins, which are a *contraindication* (condition making massage inadvisable). But I'm skipping to Chapter 10. Sorry about that.

You have the idea: Some massage movements physically push the blood around in its vessels and can therefore, when done properly, push it in the right direction, improving circulation.

Massage also draws more blood to the surface of the body and into areas of relatively poorer circulation, thus bringing with it much-needed oxygen and other nutrients for the tissues.

Promotes the healing of tissues

This benefit is primarily a result of those in the preceding two sections. By helping to bring nutrient-rich blood into areas that are recovering from any type of problem and by helping to cleanse these same areas of toxins (by stimulating the lymph system), massage promotes quicker healing.

Also, certain types of massage stretch and soften tissues in traumatized areas, helping them regain natural elasticity and strength faster.



But beware: You definitely don't want to rush straight in and massage your cousin John's swollen knee after his recent surgery unless you've been trained in bona-fide massage classes and know what you're doing.

Increases healthy functioning of the skin

The skin is where massage has its most pronounced effects. In fact, I've devoted much of Chapter 3 to it. So let me just say here that massage includes several actions that leave the skin silky, vibrant, and fully functioning in both directions. By that I mean it promotes the shedding of dead cells while also encouraging the absorption of moisture, nutrients, vitamins, and other vital elements, especially with the aid of massage creams, oils, and lotions created for just that purpose.

In this sense, massage helps the skin "breathe." Just as your lungs breathe both in and out, inhaling and exhaling, healthy skin must breathe in both directions, too, and massage can help with that.

Offers emotional reassurance

In a famous experiment conducted by some truly sadistic researchers, some unfortunate little monkeys were brought up in cages with surrogate mothers. Each monkey had two mothers in the cage with him. One was a rag doll and the other was a hard wire shell. The uncomfortable wire mother had a nipple with real milk coming out, but the rag doll mother had no nipples and no milk. The researchers shocked the monkeys and then sat back with smug-researcher-expressions on their faces to see what would happen. In every case, when they were desperate for comfort and safety, the monkeys scampered straight over to rag-doll mommy, regardless of the fact that she had never provided any other kind of food or sustenance beyond the fact of being soft and cuddly. The researchers were able to conclude, with a good degree of confidence, that tactile sensations are the most important factors involved with emotional comforting.

These findings bring up an important realization as far as humans are concerned, too: Almost every person alive, when shocked, would rather squeeze a rag doll than a hard wire shell with a nipple attached. This bit of information, I've found, makes a fascinating ice-breaker at cocktail parties. Massage, by offering a sustained, intentional, caring form of tactile stimulation, is one of the best ways to impart emotional reassurance, and emotional reassurance

just may be the number one need of humans in the 21st century. Modern urban dwellers are all a bunch of shocked monkeys searching for Mom, basically. And massage is the ultimate rag doll.

Engenders profound relaxation

Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard wrote in *The Relaxation Response* (Avon Books) that by repeating certain breathing and concentration exercises, people can greatly reduce their levels of stress. Massage, by its very nature, induces a similar response. It's a mini-vacation that you can take right there inside your own body. No need to buy expensive plane tickets or submit yourself to the hassles of taxi rides and hotel rooms. Just close your eyes and let someone else send you to your own virtual Tahiti.

If you receive a massage and don't allow yourself to relax, it's the same thing as going to Tahiti and not enjoying the scenery, the warmth, the water, or the colorful little umbrellas in the cocktails. In other words, it's up to you. Nobody can force you to relax while receiving a massage, just as no one can force you to enjoy the South Pacific, but you have to be kind of crazy not to.

Improves appearance

The combination of all the preceding benefits leaves just about anybody who receives them looking better than they did before they started, and in that way, massage can improve the appearance of even the most stubbornly unattractive person. You know the type: the man with the big crease down the middle of his forehead, or the woman with her mouth pulled taut like she just chewed an entire lemon. Most of what people deem unattractive is simply poor attitude, and the people with the strangest looking faces and bodies can still be very attractive, especially if they're

- ✓ Tension-free
- ✓ Healthy
- ✓ Flushed with the rosy glow of good circulation
- ✓ Quickly recovering from any painful conditions
- ✓ Covered with silky "breathing" skin
- ✓ Confident and emotionally assured
- ✓ Profoundly relaxed

Who can resist a person like this?

Exploring the Massage Menu

There are literally hundreds of types of massage practiced around the world, many of them with wonderfully evocative names like tui-na and Lomilomi. This isn't the section in which I'm going to explain each of those massages to you, but you can find a fairly extensive explanation of several major styles in Chapter 4. Instead, what I'm doing here is explaining the generic types of massage, broken down into categories based on the observable effects they can have in your own life.

Think of this section like the menu in a restaurant. Each category (breakfast, lunch, dinner) consists of distinctly different dishes, and yet the foods used to prepare the dishes can be the same. So the same eggs used to make your omelet at breakfast can be used in your egg salad at lunch or your dessert after dinner. It's the same with the following categories of massage. Any particular massage technique can be used to create various effects.

Relaxation massage

This category may be the most familiar to those who haven't delved into the world of massage before. In essence, the purpose of the relaxation massage is to relax. Relaxation massage is particularly helpful in these instances:

- ✓ For stress relief, when the daily grind is just too much and the simple act of lying down and having someone pay solicitous attention to you for an hour is enough to make a big difference
- ✓ For pampering, which is fine as long as you don't feel guilty about it

Sports massage

Just ask the world-class athletes who travel with their own personal massage therapists. They can tell you what a difference a massage can make. Many Olympians and high-level players in all sports are true believers, but they aren't the only ones who use massage as part of their training. Even amateur athletes and weekend warriors incorporate it whenever they can: pre-event, post-event, and for ongoing training.

Rehabilitative massage

This type of massage helps the body repair itself. Many people have found that it was the key factor in helping them heal quickly and get back to normal activity levels as soon as possible after injuries and surgery.

Doctors like massage, too

Doctors, in case you haven't noticed, have really gotten aboard the massage bandwagon over the past several years. You seldom hear of any physicians questioning the validity of massage or its ability to help people in many situations. In fact, more and more hospitals have been incorporating massage into their programs, some with stellar results.

The prestigious Mayo Clinic in Minnesota has implemented a Complimentary and Integrative Medicine Program that features massage therapy. The director of the program, Brent Bauer, MD, is a firm believer in the importance of massage, having spearheaded several successful massage-oriented studies in the hospital. One such study involved giving cardiac patients a series of massages after their surgeries. People came from far and wide to sign up for this program, and the massage seemed to help in their healing — on average, they were able to leave the hospital earlier than those patients who weren't part of the program. Dr. Bauer ran

into an unanticipated problem, however. Many patients who improved dramatically and were able to leave the hospital early refused to do so. The reason? They didn't want to miss out on the massages that were still owed to them as part of the program!

In France, where my co-author Michel Van Welden received his training, physicians look at massage in a wholly different light. "What we do is respected as part of the medical model all across Europe," says Michel. "Physicians there have no qualms about referring particular cases to massage therapists. In fact, the word we use in France for massage therapist is *kinesiotherapeut*, which really signifies a combination of massage therapist, physical therapist, and holistic practitioner who utilizes a number of healing tools, such as aromatherapy and herbology. There are 25,000 of them in France, which is an area the size of Texas. Most of them have their own clinics, and they are very highly regarded by physicians and patients alike."

Esthetic massage

Folks all want to look as good as they can, and massage can help. Through a combination of several of the benefits I mention earlier in this chapter, massage softens your skin and gives you a healthy glow. It can also improve the appearance of certain skin irregularities such as cellulite, with varying degrees of efficacy. People include massage in their beauty regimen for its ability to promote a youthful appearance and as an auxiliary treatment to enhance the effects of other beautifying procedures, such as plastic surgery and facials.

Energy-balancing massage

If massage were a map of the world, energy-balancing would be China. Yes, that's how big it is. Because energy is invisible, it's easily dismissed as unimportant, as far as our bodies go. But for a moment, imagine your body without energy. That's right: limp as a cooked noodle, flat as a pancake, blah as

all get-out. Several of the massage styles I go over in Chapter 4 are based on an understanding of the body's energy systems, focusing on how to balance and enhance your inner invisible energy.

Massage for increased awareness

Most people inhabit their bodies without giving it much thought. They walk, sit, and lie around in them on automatic pilot, relying on the old patterns and habits they picked up in childhood. Sometimes, they're negatively influenced by injuries and other traumas that turn these unconscious habits into potentially debilitating conditions. They feel stuck in certain postures and can't get out. A massage can help you become aware of how you're holding onto certain patterns of tension and thus let you break them, and it can help you gain self-confidence through releasing old, negative body images.

Spiritually oriented massage

Depending on your frame of mind, any massage can be a spiritual experience, regardless of whether you receive it in an ancient Asian temple or the treatment room of your local health club. All you need are two people focused on awareness, breathing, releasing, and compassion. This spiritual aspect of massage can be used in the following ways:

- ✓ For meditation, when the sensitive sharing that takes place between two people in a good massage leads you to quiet your mind and remember some of the more important things in life.
- ✓ By ministers, nuns, and other clergy members who use this laying on of hands as a means to express compassion and in some cases to invoke healing.
- ✓ By practitioners of Eastern traditions such as Taoism and Buddhism. Buddhist monks in Thailand, for example, often learn the art of massage and practice it in their temples.

Massage for emotional growth

Allowing yourself to be touched with caring, therapeutic intentions takes a high degree of maturity. Several types of massage have been developed to access psychological issues and bring them to light. This situation is especially true in cases of past emotional trauma involving abuse and negative body image.

Massage for sensual pleasure

This type of massage can be performed by any two consenting adults who have a relationship of respect and trust between them. It's especially useful for long-term couples seeking new and exciting activities to spice up their lives and for short-term couples looking for ways to slow themselves down and enjoy the moment rather than rush through to you-know-what.

Massage for non-humans

Believe it or not, special courses offer to teach people how to massage animals. As anyone who's ever scratched behind the ear of an appreciative pet can tell you, they love it. Certain animals in particular have been the lucky recipients of massage:

- ✓ Horses, especially race and show horses that are each worth more than the gross national product of the average third-world country
- ✓ Dogs and cats and other "people with fur" that people live with on an intimate basis

Your Very First Massage Touch

Humans are sensitive creatures, and when you give something as personal as a massage to someone else, you're making yourself vulnerable to his judgment. What if he doesn't like your technique? What if he doesn't like *you*?

When you give of yourself through massage, it's natural to be afraid of what people may think and to wonder, secretly, if you're doing it *right* or if you're *good enough*.

I think you should forget all about that stuff. Your massage abilities are not something to be proud of or ashamed of. Your abilities are something you should share. As long as you tune in and become sensitive to your partner, you can give a good massage. The idea is not to focus on *being* good, but to focus on *doing* good. If you do these things, you never have time to worry about whether you're good or not. As long as your heart is into what you're doing, you're guaranteed to do it the *right* way.

Regardless of what I've just said, you may be nervous about getting your hands on somebody else and actually doing a whole massage. It's intimidating, right? In order to quell those fears right here in the first chapter, you're

going to get your hands, ahem, oily, and do one little massage move on the most public, non-threatening, often-touched part of anyone's body, the hand. Don't worry — it's easy:

- 1. Place a dime-sized dab of massage oil, cream, or lotion in one hand and rub your hands together vigorously to warm the lotion up.**
- 2. Gradually bring both of your hands into contact on either side of your partner's outstretched hand and hold them there for a moment, just feeling the warmth.**
- 3. Slowly start to rub — squeeze the fingers, press the palms, and rub your thumbs over the wrist.**
- 4. Ask your partner how the movements feel.**

Does he want more pressure? Less? Does a certain spot feel particularly good? Get used to the give-and-take that is an important part of every good massage.

- 5. Keep massaging the hand for at least five minutes; when you're done, slowly bring your hands away.**

The number one complaint most people have about massage is that it ends too soon, so don't shortchange your partner. You can apply a warm, damp washcloth for an extra added relaxing effect at the end.

- 6. Ask your partner to compare the way his massaged and non-massaged hands feel.**

Both of you may be amazed!

See, that wasn't so scary, was it? That's just the tip of the iceberg. The chapters that follow give you all sorts of information to help you add to this basic technique.