

## Massage therapy benefits aging people

*By Ellen Waldman*

*February 9, 2015*

Mary and Doris were both in their 80s, diagnosed with dementia, living in an assisted-living facility in Ashland.

Both women were married for what I like to admiringly describe as “a million years”, before their husbands passed away. Neither had family nearby and did not have many interactions with others. Overall, Mary fared much better than Doris with regards to her level of overall health and happiness. Could it have been that Mary received massage therapy once a week for over a year and Doris did not? Evidence points to that very possibility.

Here’s what we know about some of the benefits of massage for the elderly. These treatments can help enhance blood circulation, combat depression, improve balance, flexibility and posture, reduce the pain of arthritis and increase joint mobility and physical capability. Elderly people often suffer from a variety of age-related diseases, such as Parkinson's, diabetes, heart disease or strokes. Massage can help them maintain and improve their overall health, and possibly regain certain physical functions that have been reduced or lost from aging.

For people living with Alzheimer’s disease, massage is a low-risk and relatively low-cost intervention. It can even be easily taught to family caregivers, which may reduce caregiver stress, as well. Particularly with the concern over the long-term side effects associated with many of the medications used to manage behavior in people with Alzheimer's disease, massage is a promising intervention.

Massage therapy has also been shown to relieve anxiety, depression and loneliness, and to provide comfort, especially to “touch-deprived” elderly people. This can certainly improve their quality of life. This point is very important. As children, we are frequently touched, held and comforted. When we get older, we are often in the company of friends and loved ones, including partners and spouses, who keep us connected through touch. But once people are older and alone, it’s often the case that no one is being touched. I have to believe that the need for touch does not change; only that access to it becomes diminished or totally absent.

"Touch is a natural and therapeutic way of being with the elderly. It is relaxing and healing, and at the same time pleasurable and sacred. Touch and its life-enhancing benefits are too frequently denied the elderly in our culture." writes Mary Ann Finch in her book "Care through Touch."

I encourage all of my clients and their families to at least try some form of this therapy. Many people have a friend or family member join them for their first visit to ensure they have a comfortable and relaxing experience. There are so many choices of therapeutic massage. Sometimes, it’s only the hands or feet being treated, and that is also very beneficial.

If you’ve lived in Ashland for more than a week, you know there are massage therapists of every variety and modality available here. How fortunate for us, but how do you know what is best for an elderly person, and how would you find the right fit? The Ashland Directory alone has more than 65

practitioners listed. This is a very personal choice and needs to fit the elderly person's needs. You could start by talking with others you know who have experienced an especially sensitive and licensed massage therapist. Of course, you want to be certain that elder massage is something they have training and experience with, as this is definitely a specialty.

Another option is to contact the Ashland Institute of Massage on Hersey St: [aimashland.com](http://aimashland.com); 541-482-5134. They have actual training for their students in elder massage. In addition, they have a senior clinic for those 65 and up, held two times a year with a student practitioner, for a very reasonable \$25 per session. Most massage therapy fees range from \$50 to \$90 per hour from an experienced practitioner.

The famous entertainer Bob Hope was known to have a massage every day, and had a therapist with him whenever he traveled. He lived to be 100 years old, and his wife to 102. I have to credit the years of massage therapy for at least a portion of his happy longevity. Even if you're not Bob, you can still enjoy the fruits of receiving massage from time to time. You live in a wonderful town where this is abundantly available.