

# How, Exactly, Does Massage Therapy Work?

## The Anatomy of Happiness

Douglas Nelson

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As I greeted Craig in the waiting room, the radiant smile on his face told me we were making good progress on his shoulder pain.

"My shoulder is so much better," he remarked as he entered my treatment room. "I hardly think about it anymore." As a massage therapist who specializes in dealing with specific muscular issues, this is exactly what I hope to hear from the people I serve.

"I must say that the educational process has been just as valuable as the hands-on work. It has given me a greater

treatment is the effect on my mood. When I leave your office and go back to work, I seem to function much more efficiently; I get way more stuff done than usual. Mostly, I am in a much better mood, much happier, and more positive about the world. I have really enjoyed understanding how massage helped my shoulder, but now I'd like to understand how massage affects my mood."

Ready to accept the challenge, I jumped in.

"Here is one reasonable explanation based on emerging neuroscience. For many decades, the prevailing wisdom was that emotions are experienced in the



### Why do you feel so good after a massage?

understanding of my own body, what to do, and maybe more importantly, what not to do. I have a better sense of what was happening to my shoulder and why. This whole process is so interesting and educational.

"I came to see you for help with my shoulder," he continued, "but one of the most striking benefits of my massage

mind and, as a result, those powerful emotions then affect our body. For example, when someone offends us, we have the emotional experience of anger. Shortly thereafter, we experience physical symptoms of anger, such as increased muscle tension, constricted breathing, and an increased heart rate.

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On the other hand, powerful positive emotions like joy and happiness also have corresponding physical effects. Our emotions and thoughts have physical consequences. As it turns out, however, the new scientific understanding reveals that these mind-body experiences are at least bi-directional, if not completely the other way around."

"I'm a little lost," he said. "What do you mean by the other way around?"

"The emerging science is providing some really good evidence that the physical sensation can lead to the emotion, instead of the emotion manifesting as a physical experience."

"Wow, that seems completely backward!" he exclaimed.

"Your mind is always trying to make sense of what the body experiences. The brain needs a reason for what it experiences; we interpret meaning so we know how to respond appropriately. I am sure you can remember being really tense some morning, feeling completely out of sorts. If someone asked you why, you probably couldn't point to any specific offense as the reason. Throughout the morning, however, little things that would normally go unnoticed now really bothered you. You looked for things that were wrong to confirm that the tension you were feeling was perfectly appropriate for the terrible mood you were in. In essence, you created a viable emotional reason to explain your tense physical state."

"I assume that the reverse is also true, correct?" Craig interjected. "A better physical state should have a positive effect on emotions."

"Exactly. This might indeed explain what you experience after a massage. You leave my office with a very different physiology than when you arrived. The optimization of muscle function after massage will be experienced as efficient and effortless movement. The muscle tension in your shoulders is drastically reduced. Your breathing is slower and there is a heightened sense of awareness. Think about the emotional correlate your brain must then assign to this new stream of physical information. When do you normally feel such lack of tension, such lightness and freedom?"

"When I am extremely relaxed, happy, and contented; when the world seems like a wonderful place," he responded.

"The experience of physical ease is then interpreted by the brain as being a sign of emotional ease. Relaxation of the body is also relaxation of the mind, as evidenced by the fact that the same class of drugs (benzodiazepines) given as muscle relaxants is also used in the treatment of anxiety disorders. Furthermore, when you return to work with that emotional framework, it changes what you notice around you as well. Little annoyances don't seem as disturbing. Since attention is selective, your peaceful and positive emotional state predisposes you to notice lots of little blessings that you previously might have overlooked. This process becomes very self-reinforcing."

"I find this subject fascinating," Craig

said. "In fact, after each of our previous sessions, that evening I'd share with my wife some cool anatomy fact or principle I learned from you. I even gave each lesson a name."

"You're kidding," I said, bemused and curious. "If I might ask, what might you call this one?"

"The Anatomy of Happiness," he replied with a smile.

*Douglas Nelson is the founder and principal instructor for Precision Neuromuscular Therapy Seminars and president of the 16-therapist clinic BodyWork Associates in Champaign, Illinois. His clinic, seminars, and research endeavors explore the science behind this work. For more information, visit [www.nmtmidwest.com](http://www.nmtmidwest.com), or email [doug@nmtmidwest.com](mailto:doug@nmtmidwest.com).*



**Your physical state can affect your emotional well-being.**

# Relief for Computer Users

Mary Betts Sinclair

According to the American Optometric Association, 46 percent of Americans spend at least five hours a day on a computer or smartphone. When looking at a screen, many people hold their head forward of center and slouch, which puts many upper-body muscles in a shortened position.

HERE ARE SOME WAYS TO AVOID PAIN AND STRAIN:

Computer users tend to blink very little and stare straight ahead, not using their peripheral vision. Be sure to keep blinking, which washes your eyes in naturally therapeutic tears and breaks up your stare.

Take frequent rest breaks using the 20-20 Rule: every 20 minutes, spend 20 seconds looking at something far away, preferably gazing out a window. Also, stand up and move as much as possible. This is a great time to do eye-muscle stretches and range-of-motion exercises for your back and neck. Use your fingertips to gently

massage around your eyes, temples, and forehead. Finally, rub your palms together and gently cup your closed eyes. Relax and breathe freely.

Make sure you have good light, and check that your monitor is the correct distance away from your eyes and at the right height. Also, adjust the screen settings to where they are comfortable in terms of resolution and flicker.

If you wear eyeglasses, have them checked. For example, in order for some people to see clearly with their heads held in an upright and balanced position, and without chronic tightness in the back of the neck, they may need to have a prescription for a longer focal length or larger bifocal inserts, or have an adjustment of their eyeglass frames if they are bent or twisted. Some people may need a stronger or weaker prescription. If your doctor has prescribed a pair of glasses specifically for seeing the computer screen, wear them.

Mary Betts Sinclair is an Oregon-based educator and bodyworker. Learn more about her at [www.marybettsinclair.com](http://www.marybettsinclair.com).



Take frequent breaks to avoid eye strain.

## Try This Breathing Exercise

Anne Williams

Do you ever find yourself unconsciously holding your breath when you're tense? This can cause tension to build in your body and may let the chest collapse, leading to misalignment.

Proper breathing provides oxygen to the muscles and body, helps you stay relaxed and centered, and even helps you maintain correct body alignment throughout your day.

You can also use breathwork as part of a stress-reduction program by following this progressive relaxation exercise.

1. Begin by lying in a comfortable position without crossing your arms or legs, and focus on your breathing to create a slow, deep pattern. Inhale through your nose while counting to 10 and expanding your abdomen. Hold the breath for one second, and exhale

through your nose on the count of 10. Inhale and exhale in this pattern five times.

2. Beginning with your head, tense your facial muscles as tightly as possible and count to five. Release the muscles completely, and sense the muscles feeling heavy and still. Work down your entire body, tensing muscle groups and then relaxing them. After the head, move to the neck, chest, arms and hands, abdomen, back, thighs and gluteals, lower legs, and feet.

3. After relaxing each set of muscles, mentally scan your body for any areas of remaining tension and ask those areas to relax completely.

4. Repeat the slow breathing exercise.

5. Gently begin to move your body to come out of the deeply relaxed state.

Try using progressive relaxation directly

before or after your sessions, directly before bed, or at any time during the day as a pick-me-up. Focus on taking full, deep, even, rhythmic breaths. With a little practice, you can become more aware of your own breathing patterns and use breathwork effectively as you move throughout your day.

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Frank

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