

## How Do You Spell Release?

*Find the bodywork technique that works best for you.*

*By Charmian Christie*

Ever wonder what your body would feel like without tightness, pain, or stiffness? Or how it might be to sail—rather than stoop—your way through the day? Bodywork might hold the key to regaining your body's natural elasticity, bringing you back into balance—and grace—in ways you never believed possible, at least not since you kissed your 30s good-bye. A number of studies suggest that bodywork, which includes a plethora of treatments ranging from acupressure to zero balancing not only offers drug-free pain management, but also lowers stress, increases circulation, and even stimulates the healing of delicate connective tissue.

While the nature of your complaints will determine what types of bodywork are appropriate, you still have a lot of options to accommodate personal preferences and needs. Some people respond well to bodywork that's emphatically physical, such as Rolfing, while others surrender more readily to less intrusive techniques that offer a more nuanced energetic shift, such as craniosacral therapy. Whether you suffer from migraines or muscle aches, perimenopausal woes or Parkinson's, there's a bodywork practice designed to suit your ailments.

Not sure where to begin? Feeling is believing: If a treatment sounds intriguing, get a referral and take a chance by booking a session. If the cost seems prohibitive, you can check out bodywork and massage schools in your area. They often have students who charge a reduced rate. Still hesitant? Reading up on the following bodywork treatments might be a good place to start.

### Shiatsu

This Japanese technique literally translates as "finger pressure," but depending on the style of shiatsu, a practitioner does much more—relying on her thumbs, elbows, knees, and even her feet—to open blockages in the meridians (or energy pathways) within the body. Yolanda Asher, a nationally certified shiatsu therapist from Stone Mountain, Georgia, says that the principles of shiatsu, derived from Chinese medicine, are based on the premise that "pain is due to lack of free flow and lack of free flow causes pain." The treatment encourages relaxation while stimulating blood circulation and lymphatic flow.

Best for: Shiatsu addresses a wide range of issues, including allergies, asthma, headaches, and menstrual and perimenopausal symptoms. Unlike most bodywork techniques, shiatsu is safe for cancer patients and pregnant women. Asher says shiatsu can help counteract the side effects of cancer treatment and aid laboring women during childbirth. Asher warns, however, that only therapists fully trained in these specific areas should treat these special cases.

### Watsu

In a Watsu session (also called water shiatsu), clients float in a pool of body-temperature water while the therapist performs shiatsu. The water lets the therapist continually rock the client while stretching her arms and legs. The gentle rocking, coupled with a tangible sense of being held and supported, enables the client to experience a profound state of relaxation.

The results? Tight muscles and stiff joints melt away during treatment, promoting increased flexibility, a looser spine, heightened receptivity, and greater relaxation.

Watsu addresses more than just the physical—it can also provide an emotional, almost spiritual release. Don Michaels, certified Watsu practitioner in Amelia Island, Florida, says clients liken the session to swimming with dolphins or how they imagine the experience of the womb.

Best for: The seemingly weightless environment means it's ideal for people with arthritis, fibromyalgia, or Parkinson's. The water's calming effect also helps clients suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. Since warm water initially increases blood pressure, pregnant women and people with high blood pressure should check with their doctor before receiving Watsu. But don't let a fear of water keep you away—the pool is shallow enough to stand in.

### Craniosacral

Roy Desjarlais, vice president of clinical services for the Upledger Institute in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, has tried for 21 years to describe craniosacral therapy (CST) in one sentence, and he thinks he's close when he says, "Craniosacral is a light-touch manual therapy that treats the whole body, targeting the central nervous system—the brain and spinal cord." Desjarlais compares the central nervous system to the hard drive of your computer. If the hard drive isn't functioning properly, the whole computer suffers. By applying light pressure, about the weight of a nickel, to the cranial and spinal bones, the therapist releases restrictions in the body's soft tissue. This helps realign bones and relieve joint pressure, and it reboots your nervous system so the body can self-correct.

While CST's ability to produce such big results may seem dubious to anyone accustomed to more aggressively physical forms of bodywork, the general rule of "less is more" applies to bodywork too. "By going lighter, you go deeper because there's less resistance, less guarding," says Desjarlais. The touch is so noninvasive, it's safe for anyone, even those with brain-related issues such as stroke, aneurysm, or skull fractures, as long as the primary physician feels the patient is in stable condition.

Best for: Desjarlais says CST is especially good for relieving migraines, headaches, and chronic lower back and neck pain. It also helps with neurological disorders such as autism, ADHD, developmental delays, and even dementia.

### Rolfing

Ida Rolf, a biological chemist, developed this branch of therapy—generically known as "structural integration"—in the 1930s and '40s. Rolfing realigns postural imbalances by working on the fascia—the connective tissue that holds our bodies together like a web. Unlike the quick, gliding rubs that characterize many a massage, Rolfers use a firm, slow, penetrating stroke.

Jonathan Martine, certified Advanced Rolfer and Faculty Chair at the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration in Boulder, Colorado, says fascia is the key to postural health. "It surrounds each bone, muscle, organ, nerve, and tissue." According to Rolf, this interconnectedness means a lack of alignment in one area can cause the whole body to suffer.

Over the course of 10 bodywork sessions, Roling realigns the fascia, balances the body, relieves pain, and increases range of motion. To prevent reinjury, clients can also undergo three additional movement sessions where they learn how to sit, stand, walk, and breathe with greater ease.

Best for: Roling can relieve headaches, repetitive stress injuries, misalignments, and aches or pain, especially in the lower back, neck, and shoulders. Many dancers, athletes, and yogis seek out Roling not only for injuries but to improve their range of motion. Although beneficial for most, Martine says he does not recommend Roling for acute injuries, pregnant women, or people with severe emotional disorders.

### **Trager**

Milton Trager intuitively discovered his eponymous technique at 18 and then spent more than 50 years perfecting it. This noninvasive approach releases muscle restrictions and also uses the mind-body connection to reteach the body how to stay relaxed between sessions.

Gary Brownlee, a certified Trager practitioner and instructor from Redondo Beach, California, says Trager takes the path of least resistance. "The body is going to resist anything painful, so we do just the opposite, getting softer and lighter when we meet restriction." To get muscles to release, the practitioner moves the body through its normal range of motion, feeling for restrictions. The practitioner then "teases" the muscles into letting go. You might be rocked, shaken, or jiggled gently (it feels surprisingly good). You lie back on a massage table while the therapist swings your arm in a circle or sweeps your leg back and forth. "We're attempting to give the unconscious mind a reminder of how the body could be looser, softer, freer, more open," Brownlee says.

Simple exercises called Mentastics, a term Trager coined by combining the words mental and gymnastics, complement Trager table work by helping the receiver maintain the work's benefits. "They're intentionally simple," Brownlee says. "You don't want to have to think about how to do them. It's about giving the unconscious mind a feeling." The exercises range from swaying from foot to foot to letting your arm dangle while gently shaking your hand. Because they bring back the kinesthetic memory of the table treatment, they are surprisingly powerful and serve as mini-Trager sessions you can do for yourself.

Best for: Trager's mind-body approach makes it ideal for rehabilitating anything from chronic neuromuscular problems to traumatic injuries.

### **How much is enough?**

When it comes to bodywork—Roling excepted—there's no standard timetable for treatments. "I want my clients to play an active role in their healing, so they determine when their next treatment will be," Asher says. Likewise, Desjarlais says a lot depends on the client's issues. "Some people come once and don't need to return. Others come for several treatments."

Not sure when or if to return? Ask your therapist. Your body might need time to assimilate the treatment, or outside circumstances might influence how your body responds. Regardless of which bodywork technique you select, communication with your practitioner lays the foundation for success.

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### **Get the Most Out of Your Treatment**

The following tips help ensure you feel the effects of your session long after you leave.

- \* Watch your waist. Don't arrive full of lunch or with your stomach rumbling from hunger. If you're famished, eat something light and easy to digest, like a piece of fruit.
- \* Ease back into things. If possible, schedule your appointment at the end of the day. If you can't get a late session, don't rush back to work. Book some downtime to go for a walk or sit quietly before resuming your day.
- \* Support yourself. Some treatments release toxins. Be sure to flush your system with plenty of water before and after treatment. If possible, soak in a hot Epsom salt bath.
- \* Don't stress. Believe it or not, some people worry that they'll somehow mess up their treatment. Fretting that you won't relax enough will only make things worse.
- \* Dress for (treatment) success. If you don't need to undress for treatment, wear loose-fitting clothes that will allow you to move. Leave your jeans at home, and put on yoga wear or workout clothes.
- \* Speak up. Bodywork is collaborative, not prescriptive. Most practitioners welcome feedback during treatment and are more than happy to answer your questions.