

Nothing to do, nowhere to be—just rest.

A Reflective Account on Massaging Clients with ADHD

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Introduction

As a massage therapist, I've observed that individuals with ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) often have unique and varied sensory needs. While some clients find massage deeply soothing—helping them regulate hyperactivity, emotional overwhelm, and anxiety—others may be more sensitive to touch, pressure, or sensory input. These differences make it essential to approach each session with flexibility and attentiveness.

Client Observations

I worked with three clients (women aged 30–45, two of whom are mothers). All the clients expressed interest in yoga. I observed the following:

- **Client 1 - 5h:** Often arrived visibly stressed after a long drive and the school run. She described herself as highly sensitive to touch and shared a past experience where she screamed during a spa treatment when her feet were touched. Initially hesitant about footwork, she gradually responded well to firm, steady holds. Over time, massage helped her feel calmer and more grounded. She consistently left the session feeling more present and confident, once saying, “I always feel like a princess after your massage.”
- **Client 2 - 5h:** Had difficulty relaxing due to racing thoughts. Enjoyed the emotional reset massage provided. As a musician, she benefited from relaxing, content-free ambient music so that her mind could relax and not engage with the music.
- **Client 3 - 1h20min:** The session was generally going well. Though the room's light was dim, she requested that her eyes be covered after turning supine. Breathing cues and slow strokes helped her relax deeply, especially when I said, “breathe deeply,” while holding her head.

Shared considerations: Clients with ADHD can be very sensitive to the environmental triggers, which a therapist should be mindful of. I provided

- Dim lighting
- Soft, calming music
- Subtle scents (e.g., natural candles or oils)
- Comfortable room temperature

Massage strategies used:

- Guided breathwork (“Let’s take a deep breath in... and exhale.”)
- Long, fluid strokes and extended holds
- Gentle head holds to promote stillness

Common outcomes:

- All clients said massage helped with emotional regulation.
- All clients found breathwork, head holds, and foot holds to be grounding and deeply comforting.
- Each reported greater body awareness and mindfulness.

Main Takeaways

Effective strategies for working with ADHD clients include:

- Creating a peaceful environment with dim lighting and soft, calming music
- Offering clear, simple instructions and cues
- Using slow, consistent movements such as long holds and gentle swipes
- Speaking in a calm, grounded tone with gentle verbal guidance
- Integrating mindfulness techniques and breathwork throughout the session
- Incorporating affirming language inspired by Yoga Nidra, such as¹:
 - “Feel the peace and happiness around you.”
 - “Your body is heavy and deeply relaxed.”
 - “You are safe, supported, and at ease.”
 - “Nothing to do, nowhere to be—just rest.”

Appendix: ADHD vs Anxiety Comparison

Though many with ADHD also experience anxiety, there are key differences. Massage environments for both should be calm and controlled, with extra attention to safety and sensitivity for anxiety clients.

Feature	ADHD	Anxiety
Primary Issue	Attention and impulsivity	Worry and fear
Symptom Consistency	Consistent across settings	Fluctuates; increases under stress
Restlessness Reason	Hyperactivity or boredom	Nervousness, apprehension
Onset	Begins in early childhood	Can start at any age
Concentration Issues	Distractibility or boredom	Worry or fear
Physical Symptoms	Often mild, restless	May include trembling, fatigue

¹I am also learning to incorporate more of these. Thanks L!

References

- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) criteria for ADHD. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519712/table/ch3.t3/>
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) criteria for Anxiety. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generalized_anxiety_disorder