

Qualities in rhythmical massage therapy and their potential application in spinal disorders

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Abstract

Overcoming gravity is intrinsic to human nature, as expressed in our upright posture and freedom of movement. Today, a range of influences is increasingly drawing us back into weight and gravity. At a young age already this gives rise to back problems or even spinal deformities. The movement qualities of rhythmical massage therapy invoke the forces of lightness ('levity') and uplift in the body, thus strengthening the living organism and supporting self-healing capacities. The deep tissue respiration and thorough warming this stimulates resolve tensions at the level of both musculature and soul. The human soul and spirit are thus 'invited' to enter into a new relationship with the bodily organism, and new inner equilibrium can be achieved. Thus rhythmical massage therapy is of great therapeutic significance.

Key words

Wegman/Hauschka rhythmical massage therapy

Levity / buoyancy

Qualities of touch

Overcoming gravity

Movement impulse

Effleurage

Kneading

Binding and releasing

Two-handed airy kneading

Other movements in rhythmical massage therapy

Lemniscates

Rhythm as fundamental principle

Relation to the spine as organ

Therapeutic potential

Rhythmically applied organ embrocations (einreibungen)

Supporting patients' active participation

Case history example

Content of treatment

Wegman/Hauschka rhythmical massage therapy

Based on the anthroposophic picture of the human being, rhythmical massage therapy was developed from 'Swedish massage' in the 1920s by Ita Wegman MD. Subsequently, Margarethe Hauschka MD further elaborated the method in a way that allowed it to be taught to others.

Insight into the higher nature of the human being required not only a broadening of pharmaceutical method and the development of artistic therapies, but also a new engagement with massage technique. Dr. Wegman sought to take account of the whole human being through qualities of touch which address both the life forces and the soul and spirit of each patient.

Levity / buoyancy

A first step in this new direction is to overcome gravity in touch, and thus at the same time avoid pressure. Pressure and gravity correspond to the material, earthly, physical principle. Continually active in our bodies, in fact, are forces opposed to gravity, which we can call forces of lightness, buoyancy or 'levity'. These create a foundation upon which living processes unfold.

We can see in the plant realm how life rises energetically sunwards and away from the earth, in a heliotropic orientation. We can form a wonderful picture of this if we consider how much water is sucked upwards away from gravity through a big tree on a summer's day, to the leaves where it evaporates. In the living organism the element of water is the carrier of the forces of buoyancy and itself also follows their laws.

We overcome gravity when our soul and spirit grasp hold of the living organism, and this comes to expression in our capacity to stand upright. We take up our free stance between the heavens and the earth.

In the spine we can see a reflection of these influences.

Where earthly forces of gravity cannot be sufficiently overcome, or where imbalances arise in the living interplay of soul and spirit, this can lead to all kinds of disorders.

Qualities of touch

We may therefore ask how rhythmical massage therapy can exert a balancing and healing effect on disorders and illnesses of the spine and the whole back. In answer, I wish first to consider in more detail the various movement qualities used in rhythmical massage therapy.

Overcoming gravity

As mentioned already, the therapist has to overcome gravity in touch. This depends on overcoming one's own corporeal gravity, on standing in a loose, relaxed way in inner lightness (best compared with the force of uplift in eurythmy, or the inner lightness one can feel when standing at the sea-shore or on a mountain top when the sun is rising, and experiencing the beauty of this moment in calm reverence). This lightness must now permeate the massage therapist right through into his arms and hands.

Movement impulse

Movement in rhythmical massage receives its impulse from the perceiving hand. Neither the arm nor elbow should participate. All joints are relaxed and merely allow the movements to resonate through them. This prevents any angular or simply repetitive action, or impulses originating in arbitrary movements of the body or arms which would be transferred to the patient.

Despite the inner lightness, we must establish a warm, full, soft contact with the patient's body surface. If touch is too light, it will feel unpleasant, cold, ticklish or uncertain.

An exercise can help practise this: place your hand on the surface of water.¹ Let your hand connect with it but without sinking into it. Now slowly raise the middle of your hand and you will find that the water initially ‘clings’ to it, following its motion. Thus, very like a suction cup, you can raise the water surface out of gravity. Then release this contact again by relaxing your hand. Circling and stroking movements which you carry out on the surface of the water with this quality resonate into the depths, giving rise to vortices, wave forms, currents and streams under your hand. The same principle also applies to the body’s fluids.

Effleurage

The first quality, which connects softly with the tissue and resonates through it in streaming, flowing movements, is effleurage or stroking.

Kneading

If the tissue is now to be brought more strongly into movement, we proceed to kneading. Here the hand connects more intensively with the tissue, immersing itself in it. Here too, pressure is avoided. In rhythmical massage therapy this quality of immersion can be summarized as that of listening, hearkening, feeling one’s way in. The massage therapist must practise sensing his way into the tissue, and from this contact developing the possibility of inner connection with the depths. Immersion is followed by a release phase, in which the hand feels its way through the tissue and calmly releases it, followed by a connecting stroke or a renewed immersion at the same place.

Kneading can be performed with either one or both hands, depending on the part of the body being treated. In two-handed kneading, the tissue is first compressed by leading the two hands together, then drawn along with the movement in the subsequent release phase, thus creating a suction effect extending into the depths. This is also called ‘uplift compression’.

To stay with our picture of the water surface, this motion is similar to that of a gentle wind stroking over calm water. If a stronger wind starts blowing, the surface first becomes rippled and then waves of varying sizes develop.

Binding and releasing

The kneading quality determines the intensity and interrelationship of the different phases of massage. The deeper the hand penetrates into the tissue, the more resonance can be created within it.

Soft immersion with a slow, gentle release phase of the hand emphasizes releasing, and tissue exhalation. Energetic, deep immersion, combined with exploratory, sculpting movements enhances awareness of the massage site and connects the soul and spirit more strongly to the body, with an emphasis on inhalation.

During treatment, the scope and size of movements will vary depending on whether, for example, the musculature of the back is first to be released across a broader surface, or massage work is to penetrate the depths via particular joints.

¹ A wash basin is adequate for a first attempt; however, a larger surface allows more freedom of movement

Two-handed airy kneading

This is carried out between two hands. The suction quality in the second part of the movement is further intensified towards airiness, and the tissue is drawn into breadth. This expands interior space and helps the tissue breathe.

Other movements in rhythmical massage therapy

The range is broad: warming circles and lemniscates are special strokes carried out in varying qualities; frictions, through their elastic vortices, engender deep suction effects in the tissue; tapotements are a kind of elastically-sprung tapping movement.

Lemniscates

Lemniscates, in particular, are central to the treatment of back and spine problems. They can be carried out at right angles to the back so that each crossing point lies over the vertebrae; or lengthwise to the body, either in parallel or syncopated rhythm. Again this is determined by the varying emphases of treatment. Lemniscates connect different parts of the body and resonate through joints, creating a sense of symmetry and wholeness. As a symbol of the apparent course of the sun (seen from the earth), the lemniscate is connected to the human individuality, relating earthly and cosmic forces to each other, and mediating between forces of gravity and levity.

Rhythm as fundamental principle

In all these massage movements, the underlying criterion is to allow binding and releasing to occur in continual alternation. In this process one observes a breathing, musical quality, giving rise to conscious transition between different massage phases. Thus an effleurage will always bear within it a musical crescendo and diminuendo. Kneading is not simply 'getting to grips', and airy kneading must seek airy transitions from the experience of breadth to renewed immersion in the patient's tissue. In this way, composure always prevails within activity – but should not be confused with slowness or sluggishness.

Relation to the spine as organ

If we observe the vertebrae, either individually or as metamorphic sequence, we can perceive in their forms a rhythmic interplay between expansion and contraction. Each time we take a step, the spinal column reverberates and absorbs any shocks. Within the spinal column, the level of the cerebrospinal fluid surrounding the medulla rises and falls with every breath we take. Rhythm is the sustaining principle of its form and function.

In rhythmical massage therapy this principle is addressed by the way the two phases of 'binding' and 'releasing' are patterned, and through consciously structured transitions, and the choice of movement qualities.

This supports the creation of new equilibrium in the tissue's rhythmic activity. The impulse to change inner processes offered by this means helps the patient to activate his own self-healing forces. Adapting treatment to each individual, and the wide diversity of changing movement qualities, means that it is possible to treat chronic to acute disorders, and both inflammatory and sclerotic conditions of all degrees of severity. In

rhythmical massage therapy, therefore, even illnesses that would be contra-indications for other methods can be treated.

Therapeutic potential

With its diverse movement qualities, rhythmical massage therapy can address a multitude of clinical pictures. By adapting rhythms to the patient's needs and the processes at work in him, it is possible to work in a structuring, sculpting, awareness-enhancing and awakening way, accentuating a releasing, breathing, warmth- and resonance-permeating quality, or mediating upbuilding forces.

In most cases, rhythmical massage therapy does not restrict itself to the area of the disorder itself.

Often the actual back treatment is also accompanied by addressing the extremities, the stomach or the chest.

Thus nutrient streams can be guided towards the problematic area (osteoporosis, weak discs),² pain can be drawn off (ischalgia, cervical spine syndrome), the connection between torso and limbs can be supported (lumbalgia, hyperlordosis), respiration can be locally or generally improved (cramps, scoliosis), and elimination can be supported (blockages, pain). Depending on need, the therapist will lead nourishment towards the spinal column, support uprightness and consciousness, stimulate the forces of levity in the lower organism, release specific muscle parts or mediate between the two halves of the body to re-establish balance.

Where distortion of the spinal column exists, the treatment only follows the spine's physical form inasmuch as it can sometimes be necessary to locally release muscle areas. In general the therapist will however follow the ideal form, the etheric spine, in order to stimulate and consolidate uprightness and buoyancy.

In the case of very painful or inflammatory processes (e.g. acute phases of MS, ankylosing spondylitis etc.) very gentle qualities are often needed which belong more to the domain of rhythmical embrocations (einreibungen). It is thus possible to apply the appropriate ointment locally without triggering or intensifying the pain.

The rhythmical embrocations of organ areas are an important aid in treating back complaints. However, describing the indications for individual organs is beyond the scope of this article.

Supporting patients' active participation

The opportunity to re-establish one's own inner equilibrium and to find a new sense of the body by actively participating in these changes, is a further therapeutic goal of rhythmical massage therapy. Often, the treatment sessions make it possible for patients to participate actively in the process of healing, giving them courage and endurance for embarking, for instance, on subsequent artistic therapies or eurythmy therapy.

Case history example

² Each process cited here is given as an example rather than as sole treatment. The procedure will vary depending on the individual patient, and the qualities used and aims of treatment will be mutually adapted.

Finally, here is a case history which is not spectacular perhaps, but can be representative of the mode of action and the potential of rhythmic massage therapy.

Mr. H started work as a forester as a young man (around 23) and had to perform arduous physical work each day. Because of back problems, it became impossible for him to continue in his profession, and subsequently he completed an anthroposophic sculpture training. He has now been working for many years as therapist and trainer.

As sculptor he often has to move heavy loads, and in recent years this has repeatedly led to problems, primarily in the lumbar region. He sought help from a chiropractor, who 'reset' the vertebrae several times.

Since his son was born six months ago, back and hip pain has arisen on the right side. He suspects that this has a dual cause: current stress in his work combined with too little, restless sleep.

Findings: Pelvic obliquity, scoliosis; cramps in the paravertebral musculature, primarily in the lumbar region. Stomach area poorly respirated, tense, chiefly on the sides. The patient came twice weekly for massage from May to July 2002. After the summer holidays, in September-October, a few more treatment sessions took place at longer intervals (about once weekly). Subsequently the patient felt such improvement that he no longer considered massage necessary.

Content of treatment: Primarily back treatment: releasing in the lumbar region, stimulus of levity and permeability in the lower back. Improvement of connection between lower and upper back. Stomach treatments, between back massage sessions, to promote elimination and support uplift forces.

Hip massage is embarrassing for the patient and does not improve the situation in the joint. He prefers not to repeat it.

Experience of treatment, efficacy: The patient remarked as follows on the difference between his experience of chiropractics and rhythmical massage therapy: the chiropractic treatment gave him the sense of the back problem simply being removed, as if the complaint were remedied without his involvement. The problem was 'sorted' for him, but really without his participation.

In rhythmical massage therapy he acquired a quite new feeling for his back, and felt able to take hold of it himself in a quite new way. He experienced strength in his back and a sense of bodily wellbeing. While he was not yet entirely free of pain, he experienced the possibility of becoming an active participant himself, and bringing about change.

His wife, who always applies ointment to his back after his weekly meetings, found after the first three treatment sessions that his back was quite changed, enlivened, and as if '10 years younger'. Since receiving massage treatment he says that he can once again carry heavy loads without this triggering pain or cramps.

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