Is Cancer Contraindicated for Holistic and Beauty Treatments?

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I came to holistic and beauty therapies late. After working in science and hard facts for a long time, coaching at all levels within large organizations, it was time for a change and therapies were the change. I was taught, as are we all, that cancer is contraindicated for most therapies (well done to Reflexology and Reiki for not excluding those affected by cancer). I wasn’t given any detail. My accredited, high level massage qualification conveyed unsubstantiated suggestions that massage could do harm - was your experience similar?

At the same time as leaving my science behind, or so I thought, I was asked by my local NHS hospital to create a skin care range to help those going through treatment for cancer. The creation of the skin care collections, Defiant Beauty, is another story. The invitation to work with the patients, ex-patients and staff at the hospital opened my eyes to a world of injustice. The women I met felt that this was the time when they needed beauty and complementary therapies the most - it was denied them. I’m not good with injustice - it was time for change. I started to delve into the research relating to cancer and massage. I was looking for the evidence to justify the contraindications that we are all taught about. I didn’t unearth any but I did discover lots of very interesting research findings.
Is Massage Harmful to those Living with and Beyond Cancer?

The evidence does not support the theory that massage is or can be harmful. It appears to be a misconception based in fear. Adapted massage (more later) has many benefits, which are supported by evidence and research as well as anecdotal experiences.

**Short-term benefits include:**

- Reduced anxiety, depressed mood and anger in breast cancer patients [1,2,4,9]
- Increased vigour [2] (breast cancer patients);
- Reduced mood disturbances and perceived stress levels [3]
- Improved sleep quality [4,9]
- Improved quality of life [4] (breast cancer patients);
- Reduced pain and improvement of mood, reduced stress levels [5,9]
- Reduced perception of pain, nausea and increased relaxation after 10 minutes (5 minute per foot) foot massage [6]
- Pain intensity, pulse rate, and respiratory rate significantly reduced immediately after the massages. At study entry, the massage group reported higher pain intensity, which decreased by 42% (25% reduction in the control group) [7]
- Reduced anxiety scores, depression, general fatigue, reduced motivation fatigue, and emotional fatigue [8]
- Reduced depression and improved sleep [10]
- Decrease in physical discomfort, group fatigue, and mood disturbance. The effect of massage on mood disturbances was greater when treated continuously by the same therapist [12]

**Long-term benefits include:**

- Reduced depression and hostility, increased urinary dopamine, serotonin values, natural killer cell number and lymphocytes in breast cancer patients [1,2]
- Reduced mood disturbances and perceived stress levels [2] (breast cancer patients).

There appears to be no evidence to suggest that adapted massage carried out by specialist massage therapists is potentially harmful to those going through treatment for cancer. Macmillan have published the following advice, as have Cancer Research UK.

> “Some people worry that massage could cause cancer cells to spread to other parts of their body. Research has not found any evidence of this….” [13]

> “Some people worry that having a massage when you have cancer may make the cancer cells travel to other parts of the body. No research has proved this to be true” [14]

Cancer Research UK suggest the following as possible side-effects of massage for those going through treatment for cancer.

> “Most people don’t have any side effects from having a massage. You may feel a bit light headed, sleepy, tired or thirsty afterwards. Your massage therapist may advise you to drink a glass of water when your treatment has finished and if you feel thirsty. They usually allow you to get ready to leave in your own time so that you don’t have to rush. Some people find that they feel a bit emotional or tearful for a while afterwards.” [14]

Both charities emphasize the need for cancer patients to visit specially trained massage therapists who are able to adapt the massage to meet the needs of their client. [13,14]

We have embarked upon our own research, using an adapted MYCAW form at the beginning and end of every treatment. Clients are able to tell us of their concerns and rate them before a treatment and after. We haven’t collated all of the data at the time of writing but it’s looking ‘significant’.

The ‘proper’ research is compelling; adapted massage does good. The scientist in me is both impressed and reassured. The scientist in me is slightly more detached than the therapist within. I read the words in the papers and I collate the information and use it to train therapists to integrate their good work with conventional cancer treatment. Their work within the integrated field helps patients through the process of diagnosis and treatment. The research feels factual. It doesn’t convey emotion to me. The only emotion I feel is outrage that women have been denied treatments along with an understanding that it was with good intention that we were taught all that we were taught.

The therapist within has exposed me to a whole host of emotions, all positive and usually tearful. We invite those living with and beyond cancer to model during our accredited courses. The models are, on the whole, delighted to do so. We have no shortage of volunteers.

My colleague, Karen, and I worked with Ragdale Hall recently, to provide the entire organization (with 140 therapists employed and an army of front of house and admin staff, this was no small feat) with cancer awareness training. We also trained 12 therapists in 3 of our accredited post-graduate qualifications. The models came via a local NHS hospital support group and each had their story to tell. Maureen was the wonderful group leader. Maureen is a complementary therapist and had worked in a hospice prior to her diagnosis and treatment. She had arranged for her associates to come at a specific time on the appointed day to the chosen location. Maureen climbed onto the therapy bed after having made sure that all were ok. She lay, stiff as a board…….for two minutes at which point she melted. After the event Maureen told us that she had not been relaxed for many a year. During the massage, she was deeply relaxed. Maureen had forgotten what it was like to relax. Having remembered, she was hooked and returned to model for the second course three days later.

**Penny**

Penny had been a regular visitor to Ragdale but, having been turned away from another spa post-diagnosis, she believed the world of spa, massage and beauty to be denied to her. Penny was so delighted to be back that she sobbed for 15 minutes after the massage. Her therapist was happy to join her in her joyful tears, as were we all. It is certain that Penny will be back for more.

**Sadie**

Sadie was actively in treatment, and had been for some years, at the time of her massage with Ragdale Hall. She was beyond pleased to be welcomed and given a relaxing massage. Sadie’s expectations were exceeded. She reported being pain-free in her left leg for the first time in four years. It seems that the massage was more effective than her morphine patch.

We had 12 ladies visit us as models. I could write an essay on each. Their words are more powerful than mine. Here they are – the red and black are words that the ladies used to describe their experiences of complementary therapies and beauty treatments outside
The second word cloud, green and purple demonstrates the impact of the treatments.

Massage and beauty treatments need no longer contraindicated for those living with and beyond cancer. The six accredited qualifications offered by the Jennifer Young Training School allow therapists to use their skills to help those affected by cancer and be insured to do so. We teach adapted techniques and help our therapists to appreciate the issues that are faced by people going through or recovering from their treatment for cancer.

I used my scientific background to do some research and discovered that there is no evidence to suggest that adapted massage is harmful. Worse, there is a huge body of evidence to show that massage is enormously and measurably beneficial to those going through treatment for cancer. It seems that I can’t leave the science behind.

Our six accredited qualifications are practical and fun. They differ from my therapy training in that all assertions are referenced. Research underpins all that we teach. I feel the responsibility that comes with developing new therapies for a new client group and I don’t take that responsibility lightly. I’ve done the research and it informs our training.

Science and therapies work well together - who knew?

*names have been changed

References


