

<https://doi.org/10.17784/mtprehabjournal.2020.18.1188>

Implications of therapeutic touch and relaxation massage on aging

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ABSTRACT

Background: The social, technological and scientific advances mainly linked to the health area were important for increasing the longevity of the world population, which highlights the need for studies and public policies aimed at the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases associated with aging. The search for complementary therapeutic techniques and practices to improve the quality of life of the elderly has increased in order to decrease the complications of the aging process such as chronic pain, fatigue, changes in sleep quality, stress/anxiety, depression and the risk of polypharmacy. **Objective:** Discuss the importance of touch in the elderly and the implications of using this therapeutic technique in improving the quality of life of the elderly. **Methods:** Through bibliographic review, it was selected studies on touch and its implications on the physical, emotional and sentimental aspects of the elderly's life. There are several methodologies that use touch as a trigger for benefits to the body, such as: therapeutic touch, reiki and relaxation massage. However, massage has been strongly considered in the scientific literature, especially as it is a non-invasive and non-medicated technique, based on slips, friction, compression and stretches with different intensities and in certain regions of the body that promote improvement of physical aspects, such as: increased blood flow, with consequent increase in oxygenation and the arrival of nutrients to the tissues. **Conclusion:** It is possible to suggest that the beneficial influence of massage on physical, emotional and sentimental aspects may provide an improvement in the quality of life of the elderly.

Keywords: Senescence; Quality of life; Elderly.

BACKGROUND

Aging is a natural biological process that can lead to a decrease in health indicators and an increase in mortality rates.⁽¹⁾ Currently, there has been a worldwide increase in life expectancy and according to data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. (IBGE), the elderly population aged between 60 to 89 in 2012 was 11.05%, which corresponded to about 23.1 million people. In 2018, this percentage increased to 13.09%, which characterizes an increase of approximately 4.3 million elderly people. It is estimated that in 2030, this population will be 18.13%, that is, 38 million elderly people in the country, which suggests an increase of 10.5 million people in this age group.⁽²⁾

The social, technological and scientific advances mainly linked to the health area were important for increasing the longevity of the world population. Among these advances, the reduction in infant mortality rates, improvement in diagnostic technology and development of new treatments for numerous diseases, can be considered the most important for increasing life expectancy.⁽³⁾ These factors are worrisome and raise the need for investments and public policies aimed at the health of the elderly, as well as the development of new

public policies for the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases associated with aging that can improve the quality of life of this population.⁽⁴⁾

The search for alternative therapeutic techniques to improve the quality of life of the elderly has increased in recent years, so several health professionals have offered strategies to reduce the complications of the aging process such as chronic pain, fatigue, changes in sleep quality, stress, anxiety and depression.⁽⁵⁾

According to Carvalho (2007), tactile stimulation can be an effective action strategy capable of alleviating some physical changes in the aging process, and also, a way to meet neglected needs, such as: gestures of affection, hugs, handshakes, among others, that act as significant and important tactile experiences for the one well-being. Touch is described as one of the most significant ways of establishing contact between subjects, especially when verbalizations to express emotions and feelings are not effective.⁽⁶⁾

In general, touch as handling is linked to a dynamic state of health in which the subject progresses towards a high level of functionality, reaching a balance considered optimal, between the internal and the external environment.

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Submission date 14 September 2020; Acceptance date 09 December 2020; Publication date 22 December 2020



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This well-being and balance are related to the positive and negative feelings that keep, for example, the elderly calm and confident enough to perform their daily tasks, thus improving their quality of life.⁽⁵⁾

The probable mechanism of action of alternative therapies based on touch is based on the hypothesis of the exchange of energies between practitioners and the patient, promoted by the existence of a bioenergetic field around subjects that can be modulated by various forms of touch.⁽⁷⁾ However, in the medical literature this hypothesis has been refuted by some authors, who through experiments with rigorous tests were unable to prove the existence of such bioenergetic field.⁽⁸⁾ In a systematic review of therapies with touch on the modulation of bioenergetic fields, there was strong evidence to reduce the intensity of pain in hospitalized and cancer patients, but moderate evidence on the reduction of the negative effects of dementia and anxiety in hospitalized subjects. They also emphasize that such evidence was obtained by studies with moderate quality and few randomized clinical trials, which justifies the need for a better quality of studies.⁽⁹⁾

METHODS

In order to performed this theoretical essay, searches of journals were carried out in the following electronic libraries: Virtual Health Library (VHL), SciELO, PubMed and Google Scholar, for the selection of manuscripts published until 2019 as a way of retrieving relevant materials to the topic addressed. The descriptors “aging, massage, touch and elderly” were used to perform the searches.

DISCUSSION

There are several methodologies that use touch as a trigger for benefits to the body, such as: therapeutic touch, reiki and relaxation massage. Therapeutic touch can be defined as a technique in which the use of hands is performed in order to harmonize the subject's energy field⁽¹⁰⁾, and it has been shown that this type of approach was able to decrease pain, signs of depression, agitation in cases of dementia, improved appetite, sleep and socialization in the elderly.⁽¹¹⁻¹³⁾ Another methodology that has stood out nowadays is the Reiki technique, which appeared in Japan more than 2500 years ago and has been used to treat several types of manifestations associated with aging such as anxiety and depression. Although there are modifications, the method most

traditionally used in the studies is carried out in sessions of 45 to 90 minutes and involves positioning the hands in about 12 distinct regions of the body, ranging from the frontal region of the head to the dorsal regions.

According to a systematic review of Joyce and Herbinson (2015) there is insufficient evidence in randomized clinical studies on the effect of using Reiki to treat depression and anxiety. Among the alternative therapy methodologies associated with touch, massage therapy has been strongly considered in the scientific literature^(14,15), especially since it is a non-invasive, non-medicated therapeutic technique, which tends to help the health of the elderly and their well-being.⁽¹⁶⁾ It is a technique based on slips, friction, compression and stretches with different intensities and in certain regions of the body that promote improvement of physical aspects, such as: increased blood flow, with a consequent increase in oxygenation and the arrival of nutrients to the tissues.⁽¹⁷⁾ It has been widely described in improving the absorption of nutrients and weight gain via vagal stimulation, with a consequent positive effect on stimulation of premature newborn growth. Massage properly applied, rhythmic and with moderate pressure on the painful region for 20 to 30 minutes and for a period of 5 weeks, provides satisfactory results in contexts linked to chronic pain, such as: fatigue, rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia, cancer, among others.⁽¹⁸⁾

Since, over the years, some elderly people spend a lot of time complaining and worrying about their bodies, the methodologies associated with touch could act as a way to supply the feelings and emotions considered to be complicating in this phase of life. Unreleased tensions become chronic and could be responsible for creating a stiffness in the body promoting the accumulation of toxins and cellular waste, which consequently could cause bodily and emotional problems.⁽¹⁹⁾ According to Lopes et al. (2009) all subjects need touch, from children to build their identity to the elderly who can minimize the feeling of loneliness. As mentioned, touch can be a powerful and effective tool available to all health professionals⁽²⁰⁾, since it involves commitment and affection, and thus could act as a therapeutic technique for the elderly, contributing to the maintenance of psycho-affective and social aspects in the life of the elderly, who were often compromised by life circumstances. Still with regard to physical aspects, it has been described in the literature that, in the old age, the touch performed by means





of massage maneuvers tends to promote an increase in functionality and, consequently, autonomy to perform activities of daily living, by promoting the increase in the joint range of motion, which will increase the production of synovial fluid, and consequently its lubricating function.⁽¹⁹⁻²¹⁾ Thus, it is possible to suggest that these sensations may cause changes in the way in which the elderly person will relate to the world, especially in the sense of life, in addition to which there will be a benefit of physical, emotional and sentimental aspects, which can provide innumerable positive and functional aspects in the quality of life of the elderly.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Touching is part of the routine of health professionals and expresses zeal and feelings, consequently, revealing the quality of the care provided. However, initially some aspects when touching the elderly must be observed as: prior authorization, body region in which the elderly person will be touched, intensity of touch, constant monitoring of the elderly's condition to observe which reactions caused by touch are favorable or not.⁽⁵⁾

Among the alternative methodologies that use touch, relaxation massage tends to be the most described for bringing benefits to the elderly, such as: relaxation; strengthening of muscles and elastic fibers; decrease in pain; increased blood and lymphatic circulation; sleep benefit; decreased stress and increased tissue oxygenation, thus providing more energy to the cells and favoring muscle strengthening; increased collagen synthesis; stretching of the connective tissue of the joints, helping to improve functionality. Together, it promotes the improvement of body movements that consequently triggers greater willingness to perform activity, both physical and daily activities, which provides an increase in self-esteem and improvement in quality of life.⁽⁵⁾

Several studies also highlight the importance of knowing the correct technical procedures to achieve the benefits of massage aimed at the health of the elderly, in order to promote greater relaxation with diaphragmatic breathing and biopsychosocial well-being.⁽²²⁻²⁶⁾ In addition, the use of relaxing massage through the Integrative and Complementary Health Practices has also been described, promoting an improvement in the quality of sleep, reduction of the negative effects of tension, usually caused by high anxiety.^(23,24,27,28) It is worth mentioning that the human being is involved in the integration in his/her

environment and that this provides adequate physical and psychological conditions, which suggests the importance of touch as postulated by Winnicott (1988/1990). Thus, for the elderly population, massage is a fundamental technique that generates psychological benefits, such as improved self-esteem, in addition to social, emotional benefits and continuous well-being.⁽²⁹⁾ Recently, a systematic review with meta-analysis has suggested that non-pharmacological treatments, such as massage, are more effective in mitigating agitated and aggressive behavior in cases of adults with dementia, which again suggests the positive impact of this practice.⁽³⁰⁾

As a final consideration, the application of relaxation massage (touch) has shown positive results for the elderly population, mainly in improving physical and emotional well-being. However, it is also worth highlighting the importance of carrying out future studies on the evaluation of the direct effects of relaxing massage in relation to the affective and psychological aspects in the elderly, since the literature highlights the importance of procedures such as integrative and complementary practices in the sense of seeking to stimulate mechanisms for the prevention and recovery of aspects related to health.

Authors' contributions: GPM and NFNG: Drafting of the article, review and final approval of the article. ACA and JMM: Drafting of the article. MFB: Conception and design of the article, review and final approval of the article.

Financial support: The authors declare that there was no financial support.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there was no conflict of interests.

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