

Massage—Hands On!

Maggie Jacobus

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I am a tactile person. I love touching and being touched. Wherever I am in the country or the world, I like to sample whatever bodywork therapies are new or unusual to me. I also learn best by doing, so in order to get an authentic feel for some of the lesser known styles of massage available in the Milwaukee area I decided I had to, well, *feel* them. Once again, for the sake of the Exchange Readers, I submitted my body as a human guinea pig, which meant experiencing three styles of massage. It's a tough job, but someone has to do it. I would like to have sampled the technique of all 60+ therapists listed in the Exchange Natural Choice Directory, but wallet and calendar dictated three as my limit (actually, even three was beyond my limit, but I've been known to ignore limits). Following is a recap of my experiences.

Hot Stone Massage

Last year when I was staying at a fancy schmancy spot in Las Vegas for a convention, hot stone massages were all the rage at the hotel spas. I tried one there and oozed back to my hotel room. I was looking forward to melting again.

I'm told the use of hot stones in massage was developed by practitioners in the Southwest and is a contemporary interpretation of native forms of healing. On one level, the purpose of the stones is to heat the muscles as a precursor to massage. But there is also the belief that the electromagnetic qualities of the stones impart some of the earth's energies into the recipient. Rocks made of lava, which locks in the earth's magnetism through its slow cooling process, are often used in the therapy.

Hot stone massage has made it to Milwaukee—a few spas and individuals offer it, including Azana Salon and Spa in Brookfield, Apple A Day Massage and the newly opened Seven Stones Center for Wellness.

I had my treatment with Jaci McCoy, NCTMB, at Seven Stones (1924 N. Farwell Ave. 414-224-1074), which induces relaxation starting with the reception area. It is quiet and the décor is sparse Eastern style: nothing fussy, everything clean and simple.

Jaci started me face up, with warm stones about the size of small pancakes covered with a towel running up along my spine, and a larger one the size of a squashed orange under the cervical area of my neck. The polished, rounded basalt stones are heated to 125°-130°. As I relaxed into the radiating warmth of the stones (remember lying on sun-warmed concrete after swimming?), Jaci began massaging my neck using a small, smooth stone as a tool to penetrate just a little further in certain areas. The one-hour massage was a blissful full body relaxation treatment primarily featuring the well-known sweeping Swedish massage strokes, punctuated by some shiatsu-style

pressure point work and deeper tissue techniques using small stones. Warmed stones of varying sizes and weights were added to various body parts throughout—on my hara (stomach), between my toes, on top of the sacrum. In addition to heating the body in preparation for deep tissue massage and being used as a tool, the stones are also used to create weight...or, more importantly, a feeling of weight being *lifted* once the stones are removed from the body area. The treatment is done using oil and without clothing on, but sheets keep things very discreet.

Jaci said this style of massage is effective for just about everyone, including people with chronic fatigue syndrome, back pain and stress. Someone with disc problems would need a modified version.

My verdict: This is a fabulous treat, inducing deep relaxation and release of tension. A sure-fire pleasure for both the massage connoisseur and neophyte alike. The ambiance of Seven Stones gets ranked as one of the best in the country in my book—the austere style matches the serenity of the services (and the rooms are warm—there is nothing more distracting than being *cold* while being massaged!). Men would feel equally as comfortable here as women. The one roadblock to this being a regular ritual for me is the cost--\$100 a pop. Seven Stones is offering new clients \$10 off services and is hosting a Beauty and Wellness open house Saturday, June 29 from 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Tui Na

The website *acupuncture.com* describes Tui Na is an Oriental bodywork therapy that's been used in China for 2,000 years. Pronounced *twee nah*, it uses the Traditional Chinese Medicine theory of the flow of *qi* (chi or energy) through the meridians as its basic therapeutic orientation. The goal is to establish a more harmonious flow of Qi through the body, allowing the body to naturally heal itself. Methods include the use of hand techniques to massage the soft tissue (muscles and tendons), acupressure techniques to directly affect the flow of Qi and manipulation techniques to realign the musculoskeletal and ligamentous relationships.

OK, that's the official explanation. Here's my experience: "Youch!" "Zowie!" "Hoo-hah!" "Yippee!" As I sat in the nondescript reception area of Registered Massage Therapist Sunny Wong's office at 5321 N. Port Washington Road (414-963-0903), it was clear that people come here for serious therapeutic treatment. There are no frills, no faux Eastern kitsch. Sonny doesn't need it. He's the real deal, born in China and trained at the Chinese Medicine University in Guang Zhou. Clients aren't looking for an experience; they're looking for healing.

I decided to lay my problems before Sonny and see what he could do: a weird, recurring, searing pain in my left groin and a sporadic, deep, throbbing pain in my sacrum were my complaints (of course, I've ignored them for ages). Years of working my legs out with weights and birthing babies was my guess as to why I hurt (although I didn't share this with Sonny). His first question was if I had been pushing weights with my feet. I scurried out of my clothes, hopped under the sheets and let the Tui na begin.

In a flurry of activity over the next 90 minutes Sonny pushed, pulled, prodded and generally pummeled me, searching out and destroying every knotted up, bunched up, stressed out point in my

body, some of which I was aware, others I only realized were there once Sonny found them. Mostly he was employing intense acupressure techniques using his fingers, but every once in a while he would use the entire surface of both his hands to vigorously rub my flesh in swift circular motions, stirring up circulation the likes of which this body has never experienced. Sometimes he incorporated some oil. Three or four times his hands came to a standstill...and then began to vibrate, sending waves of tingly, charging energy soaring through my body.

Acupuncture.com says Tui Na is “well suited for the treatment of specific musculoskeletal disorders and chronic stress-related disorders of the digestive, respiratory and reproductive systems. Tui na is not especially useful for those seeking a mild, sedating and relaxing massage, since it tends to be more task oriented than other types of body work.” Ah, yeah.

My verdict: In the words of rocker John Cougar Mellencamp, “Hurts so good.” This is an amazing, invigorating, intense therapeutic technique unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I love a deep massage and very few therapists can really fulfill that request. Anyone who wears a sweatband on their head while administering the treatment gets my vote. Because of the intense, no-frills approach, I think men would really like this therapy. Best of all, the price is right: \$25 for 30 minutes, \$45 for 60 and \$10 for every 15 minutes after that.

Focused Touch Shiatsu

I experienced my first shiatsu massage 11 years ago while living in Japan. I haven’t come across the therapy since being back in Milwaukee, so I was excited to find Dawn Larson, BA, RMT, NCTMB, who is a certified Oriental Bodywork Therapist and Shiatsu instructor trained in a variation on Japan’s traditional massage, called Focused Touch Shiatsu (FTS). Her eponymously named business is at 4465 N. Oakland Avenue (414-906-1647).

Shiatsu is the Japanese version of acupressure. Shi translates to “finger,” atsu to “pressure.” The purpose of the therapy is to facilitate the energy flow (called *ki* in Japanese) through the body, keeping the organs healthy, the immune system boosted and the body as a whole vibrant on an energetic level. This premise makes it an excellent tool for preventative-minded individuals.

Traditionally, shiatsu is done lying on a futon on the floor with your clothes on, but the FTS version found me on a table *sans* clothing (under sheets, of course) with comfy body cushions supporting me. No oils are used, so the client can opt to keep clothes on. The technique uses thumbs, fingers, elbows and sometimes feet and incorporates pressure points and stretching as well as some Western massage, depending on what the client needs. FTS is a blend of Eastern meridian flow philosophy and Western anatomy (meaning it includes the muscles and nerves) with a little reflexology and cranial sacral thrown in.

Dawn explained that there are *tsubos* throughout the body—areas where the *ki* can be best accessed. These are the acupoints. If they are *jitsu*, there is an excess of *ki* in the area and it may feel relatively painful to the client to have the point pressed. But pressing it releases the energy and disperses it. My head was one big *jitsu* spot, which can be the result of over-thinking, worrying, not resting enough, constantly running (who, me?). An over-abundance of *ki* in this case could cause

headaches, tension in the eyes, neck pain. As Dawn gently, yet firmly, pressed the points, the tension melted away.

Tsubo areas that are deficient in energy are called *kyo*. Accessing these points feels good to the client, as the therapist infuses the area with energy. My left hip (sounds like the sequel to a movie), when pressed by Dawn, felt as if something were being moved back into its rightful place. Through touch and diagnostic techniques, Dawn can determine whether a pain is an issue emotionally, in the muscle or in an organ.

This slow and gentle, yet strong, therapy is good for balancing the energy, which in turn creates calmness and relaxation. As mentioned, it is ideally suited as a preventative therapy. But for those who need fixin', Dawn finds it to be particularly helpful for migraine sufferers and people with sciatica, lower back pain and pain in general, as well as those recovering from an injury or surgery.

My verdict: This is a rhythmic, focused, rich therapy that's relaxing, releasing and fulfilling. In one hour I learned so much about why certain parts of my body are the way they are (my left hip is higher than the right because a muscle in my lower back has been hypercontracted for, oh, about my entire life. Dawn worked to release it and for the first time in years I started to relax in that area. More work is needed—Rome wasn't built in a day and neither were my aches and pains). As with the other treatments and locations, men would be comfortable with shiatsu and at this office. A one hour treatment costs between \$55 and \$65. Dawn and her massage therapy colleagues at Holistic Paradigm Therapeutics, where her office is located, are offering new clients a special fee of \$45 per treatment through June.

Experimenting with these three therapies reminded me that most of us live with aches and pains and misalignments and other less-than-ideal health conditions when we really don't need to. But, if you're like me, you ignore them because you're too busy. So the imbalances insidiously creep into our lives, compromising our health just a bit here and a tad there, until, after a while, things just aren't working as well as they used to and we just figure it's age and that's that.

Hey, lighten up. Go get a massage.