

Health

Debbie Malina considers the role of massage and masseurs

HELPING HANDS

There can be little doubt that the history of massage has sometimes been less than salubrious over the past couple of hundred years. Even 40 years ago, the practice fell into disrepute, more closely allied to massage parlours and the sex industry than recognised as a serious form of medical treatment.

In recent times, massage has been able to shake free of these associations, regaining its reputation as a therapeutic technique, which was how it had been envisaged originally during earlier centuries. It is now readily accepted by the medical profession as a useful tool helping many patients with a range of conditions. This is emphasised by the fact that massage is included within the curricula of several nursing degrees.

Today, almost anyone involved in some level of physical activity on a regular basis, such as athletics, dance or sport, would probably regard massage as a fundamental element in maintaining overall health and wellbeing.

Within the dance world, most medium- and larger-sized companies are usually able to call upon the services of a masseur on a regular basis. Independent dancers and individuals in smaller organisations are equally likely to seek the help of a practitioner as often as possible, since massage is seen to be a

basic requirement rather than a form of indulgence.

HOW MASSAGE WORKS

It is easy to forget that the skin is an organ with a large surface area. Some of the skin's many roles include protecting the body from outside dangers, maintaining a stable body temperature and preventing infection. Above all, the skin is a sensory organ, enabling the body to respond to external sensations. These stimuli are perceived by nerve endings, or receptors, within the skin, that are extremely sensitive to warmth, cold, pain, touch and pressure. Messages received through these nerve endings are sent along the nervous system to the brain.

Whenever the skin is stroked, beneath its surface there is a release of endorphins, or natural painkillers, that contribute towards creating a sense of wellbeing. Relaxation is an important aspect of massage, having a direct effect upon heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and digestion as well as reducing the level of stress hormones circulating around the body.

When more vigorous massage is applied, muscles

are stretched and joints eased, improving flexibility and mobility. Massage of the muscles increases local circulation, reduces spasm and tension, toning up muscle. Circulation is enhanced through massage; blood is pushed along the veins, boosting the supply of oxygen and nutrients to body tissues.

The lymphatic system is also stimulated through improving the elimination of waste and toxins, such as lactic acid; if left, these may lead to pain and stiffness in joints and muscles. Lymph is a watery fluid distributed throughout the body, bathing cells in nutrients and oxygen as well as collecting waste materials for disposal. There is an area just below the skin surface where lymph has to find its own drainage; when there is a blockage, or too much lymphatic fluid has been produced, this results in oedema (swelling) and massage may help drain this excess.

FORMS OF MASSAGE

Of the many types of massage available, dancers are most likely to use the services of a practitioner providing either sports

or remedial massage. The latter has been used for thousands of years to deal with minor aches, pains and soft tissue injuries. Physiotherapy evolved in the early 20th century from a group of remedial massage therapists. Initially, the aim of these masseurs was to help overcome any limitations of massage; physiotherapy went on to develop its own techniques, procedures and equipment. As a consequence, physiotherapists now employ massage relatively little, whereas remedial masseurs use massage alone. While both therapies have different approaches, they can successfully combine forces, when, for example, massage therapists work in physiotherapy clinics.

Sports massage is a speciality within remedial massage using the same range of clinical skills, focusing on recovery and the early identification and treatment of potential soft tissue problems. While remedial massage tends to take a gentler approach, sports massage works on releasing knots and helping to realign damaged muscle tissue. Whichever you opt to use depends largely on what you wish to achieve – whether you want to work on a specific injury or on maintenance to prevent problems in the future.

Athletes, dancers and sportspeople are likely to suffer from injuries of overuse and muscle strain/ ➤

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