

BEYOND TALK:

The Case for Massage Therapy in Mental Health Policy



Hayley Snishko
Massage4MentalHealth

Supported by Dr Joanna Smith, GP

Contents Page

Overview	Page 3
The Physical Burden of Mental Health	Page 4
Scientific Evidence: Massage and Mental Health Outcomes	Page 6
Massage, Mental Health, and Return-to-Work Initiatives	Page 8
Massage as a Solution for Loneliness	Page 9
Policy Recommendations	Page 10
Massage Therapy and Social Prescribing	Page 12
The Pilot Program	Page 13
Conclusion	Page 14
References	Page 15

Overview

Mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and chronic stress affect millions across the UK. Yet, their physical symptoms; muscle tension, sleep disruption, nervous system dysregulation, fatigue, and chronic pain, are too often left untreated. Massage therapy offers an effective, science-backed solution to this missing piece of mental health care. Research shows that therapeutic massage can significantly lower cortisol levels, increase serotonin and dopamine production, and activate the parasympathetic nervous system; directly addressing the physical burden of mental illness.

Massage therapy also offers something equally important: safe, therapeutic human connection. In a time where loneliness is a growing social issue, linked to a 27% increase in mortality risk (1) the regulated, compassionate touch provided by massage therapists can serve as a lifeline for those isolated by mental health struggles.

As someone who has personally experienced the physical impact of PTSD, depression, and anxiety, and the healing that body-based approaches can offer; I am deeply committed to seeing massage recognised not as a luxury, but as an recognised intervention within mental health support services.

As conversations around welfare reform and return-to-work policies evolve, it remains clear that people with mental health challenges need the right support to re-enter the workforce sustainably and safely. Massage therapy can bridge this gap; easing physical symptoms, improving emotional regulation, and supporting sustainable recovery pathways back into community life and work.

We call for massage therapy to be integrated into NHS social prescribing pathways, making this evidence-based intervention available to those who need it most. It is time for mental health strategies to fully recognise the body's role in healing; and for massage to be formally recognised as a credible and valuable element of integrated mental health care.

The Physical Burden of Mental Health

Mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD are often seen as just emotional or cognitive dysfunction . However, these conditions can have a negative impact on the physical body.

Research consistently shows that mental health challenges are accompanied by tangible physical symptoms:

- Chronic muscle tension and pain, especially in the neck, shoulders, back, and jaw
- Autonomic nervous system dysregulation, including heart rate variability issues, digestive disturbances, and systemic inflammation
- Severe insomnia and disrupted sleep cycles, impairing the body's ability to rest and repair
- Persistent fatigue and low energy, even without a clear medical cause
- Gastrointestinal problems and appetite changes

These symptoms not only reflect emotional distress but can also intensify it. Creating a vicious cycle that conventional talk therapies and psychiatric medications can struggle to break.

An article written by Madhukar H Trivedi (2) demonstrates that treating both the emotional and physical symptoms of depression is crucial, as research shows that the improvement of physical symptoms is directly correlated with overall depression improvement. Since depression and pain share a common neuro-chemical pathway involving serotonin and norepinephrine, addressing the physical symptoms alongside emotional ones is essential for achieving full remission. Failing to treat these physical symptoms could result in incomplete remission, increasing the risk of relapse and hindering the patient's return to full social functioning.

The Physical Burden of Mental Health

Traditional mental health care such as talking therapies and medication, whilst essential, tend to focus on just psychological treatment, and often overlook the crucial role of the body in both the manifestation and healing of mental health conditions.

This can leave many people underserved, struggling with real physical pain and dysfunction that remains untreated. Massage therapy offers a scientifically validated, non-pharmaceutical approach to addressing this missing piece of mental health care. Multiple studies have shown that therapeutic massage can:

- Lower cortisol and stress hormone levels
- Boost serotonin and dopamine production
- Activate the parasympathetic “rest and digest” nervous system
- Alleviate muscular tension and pain
- Improve sleep quality and nervous system regulation

By targeting these physical symptoms; many of which both stem from and perpetuate mental distress, massage offers a compassionate, evidence-based, and accessible solution. One that deserves to stand alongside psychological care in our national mental health treatment systems.

A recent report from Mind (2024–2025) on attitudes to Mental Health show us that access to timely mental health care has worsened, with waiting lists increasing, reduced availability of face-to-face therapy, and significant regional inequalities in services provided. Many people are being offered limited support. Often medication or short-term talking therapy while their physical symptoms of distress remain completely unaddressed. This has concluded in 57% of people with mental health problems are not receiving the support they need, with access to care declining significantly across the NHS. The report warns that community-based and early-intervention services are being squeezed, making it even more urgent to widen the scope of what is considered ‘treatment’ (3)

Scientific Evidence: Massage and Mental Health Outcomes

The therapeutic benefits of massage for mental health are grounded in a growing body of scientific research. Multiple meta-analyses and controlled studies have shown measurable improvements in both psychological and physiological markers:

- Moyer et al. (2004) (4) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of massage therapy research, concluding that massage significantly reduces symptoms of trait anxiety and depression across a range of populations. With a course of treatment providing similar benefits similar in magnitude to those of psychotherapy.
- Field et al. (2005, 2014) (5) provided evidence that massage therapy can lower cortisol (the primary stress hormone) levels while increasing serotonin and dopamine production, key neurotransmitters involved in mood regulation and emotional wellbeing.
- Field et al. (2005, 2014) showed that massage can enhance immune function, (increase in natural killer cells and killer cells activity), and led to an increase in vagal activity.
- Diego et al. (2004) (6) showed that moderate pressure massage in particular stimulates nervous system regulation, increasing parasympathetic activity "rest and digest" responses, and decreasing sympathetic activation "fight or flight" stress response.
- A 2025 study (7) looked at massage and insomnia, a common symptom in common mental health conditions. It found the impact of a single 45-minute relaxation massage session before bedtime had significant improvements in their sleep efficiency and total sleep time compared to both a placebo massage and no intervention.

Scientific Evidence: Massage and Mental Health Outcomes

- For depression specifically, a 2010 meta-analysis of 17 randomised trials found large, significant effects: the pooled effect size was about 0.73–0.76 in favour of massage over control. All included trials showed that massage consistently reduced depression scores. However, standardized protocols of massage therapy, various depression rating scales, and target populations in further studies are suggested. (8)

The outcomes above are supported by neuroscience foundations, in particular, the Porges' Polyvagal Theory. This theory emphasises the role of the vagus nerve in emotional regulation, stress recovery, and social connection.

Massage therapy, especially techniques that include moderate, rhythmic pressure, are believed to stimulate vagal pathways, promoting feelings of safety, calm, and physiological regulation. In supporting the nervous system's return to balance and strengthening the body's healing mechanisms, massage provides a natural, non-invasive intervention for many of the physical burdens experienced by those struggling with mental health conditions.

More than looking at the relief of physical symptoms, massage therapy can help provide long-term support for those with mental health conditions through body and symptom awareness. An overlooked tool to help with recovery. A small number of massage therapy sessions can help individuals identify different holding patterns within the body, including muscle tension, shallow breathing, digestive discomfort, and other somatic symptoms that are linked to their emotional states. This mind-body awareness will empower those to better recognise early signs of things such as anxiety and depression. This can enable them to use different tools and self-care practices to better manage their own conditions, lowering dependency on healthcare providers.

Massage, Mental Health, and Return-to-Work Initiatives

There is currently a significant rise in mental health-related work absences in the UK, this is leading to an increase of welfare expenditures and productivity losses. Recent data indicates that 9% of adults took time off work due to mental ill-health in 2024. Of these, 45% have been absent for a month or more. (9) As well as this, one-third of UK employees experienced mental health issues in 2024, averaging nine days off work due to these challenges. (10)

While current discussions have a focus on reducing benefits to encourage workforce re-entry, this approach overlooks the necessity of addressing the underlying mental health issues that prevent individuals from returning to work. Without providing adequate support, these measures may exacerbate the problem rather than resolve it.

Here lies a big opportunity for massage therapy.

Massage provides a cost-effective approach to helping improve both physical and emotional regulation. By reducing symptoms like chronic stress, muscle tension, and sleep disturbances, massage therapy can serve as support mechanism for those in recovery. It helps regulate the body's nervous system, ensuring that clients are better able to manage work-related stress and engage more effectively with their work environment.

If we can integrate massage therapy into social prescribing pathways, this will allow individuals to access this support without overburdening primary mental health services. Rather than relying solely on medication or psychotherapy, individuals would receive a holistic, preventative solution that complements traditional treatment options and can ease their journey back into the workforce.

Massage, Mental Health, and Return-to-Work Initiatives

Beyond helping bring people back to work, did you know that studies have shown that for every £1 invested in mental health support, employers can expect an average return of £4.70 in improved productivity and a reduction in absence. **(11)** If we can incorporate massage therapy into mental health strategies to help bring people back into the workforce, not only will this help support recovery for individuals with mental health conditions and increase workforce participation, but you will contribute to a more broader economic resilience and effectiveness.

Massage as a Solution for Loneliness

Loneliness is increasingly recognised as both a cause and consequence of mental health struggles. People experiencing mental health conditions can often find themselves isolated and disconnected from their social networks, friends, and family. This creates a viscous cycle as it can make their emotional suffering more intense.

The UK government has acknowledged the staggering impact of loneliness on public health. Recent studies show that loneliness is associated with a 26% increase in mortality risk. **(12)**. The social isolation triggered by mental health conditions can significantly worsen one's physical health, making it harder to manage conditions like anxiety and depression.

Massage therapy can offer a solution to this epidemic of loneliness.

Massage therapy provides a form of meaningful, non-judgmental human connection, a much-needed antidote to the isolation felt by many struggling with mental health conditions.

Massage as a Solution for Loneliness

The act of therapeutic touch, carried out in a safe and compassionate setting, promotes oxytocin release, a hormone known to enhance feelings of bonding, trust, and social connection. Studies show that repeated massage raises oxytocin and lowers vasopressin and cortisol which are linked to stress and isolation.

In one experiment, twice-weekly massages produced large increases in oxytocin, but not only this, reported an increase in sense of affiliation (13) This tells us that massage can have the ability to help counteract loneliness by way of enhancing feelings of social connectedness. The impact of this human connection cannot be overstated. Safe, therapeutic touch creates a sense of security and emotional regulation, which enhances emotional resilience.

For those who are facing mental health challenges, especially those feeling disconnected from their communities, massage therapy could be a way to help those struggling with loneliness, creating both physical and mental wellbeing in a way that other interventions may struggle to replicate.

Policy Recommendations

Looking at the evidence and points made in this paper, I urge policymakers to think about the following recommendations to ensure that massage therapy becomes an integral part of the broader mental health care landscape:

- Officially Recognise Massage Therapy as an Eligible Intervention under NHS Social Prescribing Pathways: Massage therapy should be included as a recognised and reimbursable intervention within the NHS's social prescribing framework. Social prescribing is already a proven model in addressing various health challenges. Massage therapy, with its well-documented benefits in mental health care, should be formally recognised as a legitimate, evidence-based option that can be prescribed alongside traditional treatments.

Policy Recommendations

- **Fund Pilot Programs Integrating Massage Therapists into Primary Care Hubs Focusing on Mental Health Recovery:** To ensure that massage therapy is integrated into the healthcare system effectively, I recommend funding pilot programs where trained massage therapists work alongside primary care teams in settings focused on mental health recovery. These programs could involve collaboration with GP practices, mental health services, and community health centres to provide holistic, accessible support for people struggling with conditions such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. The success of these programs would open the way for nationwide implementation.
- **Commission Further Research into Cost-Effectiveness for Broader Rollout:** While research already supports the benefits of massage for mental health, further studies should be commissioned to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of integrating massage therapy into national health systems on a larger scale. Additional evidence would further validate massage therapy's role and potential economic benefits.
- **Include Therapeutic Massage in Government-Backed Return-to-Work Support Strategies for People Recovering from Mental Illness:** Given the increasing pressure for those with mental health conditions to return to work, therapeutic massage should be incorporated into government-backed employment recovery programs. These programs, which aim to support people transitioning back into the workforce, should think about massage therapy as an element for improving emotional and physical wellbeing. Integrating massage therapy as part of return-to-work initiatives could help reduce burnout, alleviate stress, and improve overall workplace resilience, ensuring that those with mental health conditions are better equipped to succeed in their careers.

Massage Therapy and Social Prescribing

By connecting individuals to non-medical, community-based interventions, social prescribing addresses the wider determinants of health. Things such as loneliness, stress, social isolation, and lack of physical activity. It will help empower people to take control of their health in a holistic, sustainable way, complementing their conventional treatment.

There remains a significant gap. Physical therapies like massage therapy that directly address the physical symptoms of mental health conditions are underrepresented within social prescribing frameworks. Massage therapy, with its extensive evidence base, is uniquely positioned to fill this gap. By supporting the body to regulate and recover, massage complements existing mental health interventions, such as talking therapies and community support groups. It provides an accessible, low-risk, non-pharmaceutical option that can help to significantly enhance recovery outcomes, as shown in research.

Massage therapy also fulfills core goals of social prescribing:

- Reducing loneliness and isolation through compassionate human interaction
- Empowering self-management of health conditions by reducing symptom burden
- Strengthening emotional resilience and coping skills through physiological regulation

Incorporating massage therapy into social prescribing would:

- Broaden the spectrum of accessible, evidence-based treatments
- Lighten the load on over-stretched GP and mental health services
- Offer individuals meaningful, physical support alongside emotional and social interventions

Given its demonstrated benefits, massage therapy is not an alternative to mental health care; it is an essential complement that strengthens overall outcomes. It aligns perfectly with the NHS's vision for personalised, community-rooted, preventative healthcare, and is a natural, necessary next step in the evolution of social prescribing. One that recognises the mind and body as interconnected.

The Pilot Program

The Kensington & Chelsea Complementary Therapy Pilot, created in collaboration with the NHS West London Clinical Commissioning Group, shows us compelling example of how massage therapy can be effectively integrated into social prescribing models to support mental health.

This pilot program is aimed at older adults with long-term conditions, and included massage alongside other complementary therapies to provide holistic care. Participants reported notable improvements in confidence, reductions in symptoms of depression, and a decreased reliance on GP services.

This highlight the potential of what massage therapy can do to enhance emotional resilience, promote psychological well-being, and alleviate pressure on primary healthcare. It demonstrates the value of massage as a viable, cost-effective tool within mental health support frameworks. (14)

Conclusion

Mental health is not just an emotional struggle, it is a full-body experience, with physical consequences that are too often overlooked in traditional care models. Massage therapy, backed in scientific evidence and human connection, offers a powerful, natural way to ease the physical burden of mental health conditions, strengthen emotional resilience, and reconnect isolated individuals with the healing power of compassionate touch.

It can also help provide individuals with a deep understand of how their mental health impacts them physically, and therefore better understand how to manage their symptoms long-term.

At a time when the government is seeking cost-effective, proactive strategies to improve mental health outcomes and support people back into work, the integration of massage therapy into social prescribing pathways is both urgent and achievable. We have the research. We have the practitioners. We have the demand.

What we need now is the vision and leadership to recognise massage therapy as the essential mental health support it truly is. By taking action, we can transform countless lives; not just alleviating suffering, but building a healthier, more connected, and more resilient society.

Hayley Snishko

training@mindbodytouch.co.uk
www.massagementalhealth.com
instagram.com/hayley_snishko

Supported by:

Dr Joanna Smith, GP

References

1. Henriksen J, Larsen ER, Mattisson C, Andersson NW. Loneliness, health and mortality. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci.* 2019 Apr;28(2):234-239. doi: 10.1017/S2045796017000580. Epub 2017 Oct 30. PMID: 29081321; PMCID: PMC6998928.
2. Trivedi MH. The link between depression and physical symptoms. *Prim Care Companion J Clin Psychiatry.* 2004;6(Suppl 1):12-6. PMID: 16001092; PMCID: PMC486942.
3. Mind. "Mental Health in Crisis: People Left Without Support." Mind UK, 2024–2025.
4. Moyer CA, Rounds J, Hannum JW. A meta-analysis of massage therapy research. *Psychol Bull.* 2004 Jan;130(1):3-18. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.130.1.3. PMID: 14717648.
5. Field T. Massage therapy research review. *Complement Ther Clin Pract.* 2016 Aug;24:19-31. doi: 10.1016/j.ctcp.2016.04.005. Epub 2016 Apr 23. PMID: 27502797; PMCID: PMC5564319.
6. Diego MA, Field T. Moderate pressure massage elicits a parasympathetic nervous system response. *Int J Neurosci.* 2009;119(5):630-8. doi: 10.1080/00207450802329605. PMID: 19283590.
7. Ntoumas, I.; Karatzaferi, C.; Giannaki, C.D.; Papanikolaou, F.; Pappas, A.; Dardiotis, E.; Sakkas, G.K. The Impact of Relaxation Massage Prior to Bedtime on Sleep Quality and Quantity in People with Symptoms of Chronic Insomnia: A Home-Based Sleep Study. *Healthcare* 2025, 13, 180. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare13020180>
8. Hou WH, Chiang PT, Hsu TY, Chiu SY, Yen YC. Treatment effects of massage therapy in depressed people: a meta-analysis. *J Clin Psychiatry.* 2010 Jul;71(7):894-901. doi: 10.4088/JCP.09r05009blu. Epub 2010 Mar 23. PMID: 20361919.
9. <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/improving-care/ccqi/ccqi-news/detail/2024/09/27/15--of-households-taking-time-off-work-due-to-mental-ill-health>
10. <https://www.unum.co.uk/about-us/media/mental-health-issues>
11. <https://www.deloitte.com/uk/en/about/press-room/poor-mental-health-costs-uk-employers-51-billion-a-year-for-employees>
12. Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Baker M, Harris T, Stephenson D. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspect Psychol Sci.* 2015 Mar;10(2):227-37. doi: 10.1177/1745691614568352. PMID: 25910392.
13. Rapaport MH, Schettler PJ, Larson ER, Carroll D, Sharenko M, Nettles J, Kinkad B. Massage Therapy for Psychiatric Disorders. *Focus (Am Psychiatr Publ).* 2018 Jan;16(1):24-31. doi: 10.1176/appi.focus.20170043. Epub 2018 Jan 24. PMID: 31975897; PMCID: PMC6519566.
14. <https://www.cnhc.org.uk/articles/complementary-therapy-service-and-social-prescribing-pilot-programme-funded-by-kensington-%26-chelsea-ccg-by-teresa>