



Updates in research further solidify the benefits massage provides for people managing symptoms of dementia.

November 1, 2024



The massage therapy profession is not young, with some estimating the practice is over 5,000 years old. Even so, research is changing how both massage therapists and the consumers who benefit understand the difference massage therapy can make for a wide variety of conditions.

Updates in research are common, sometimes shattering myths (like massage being contraindicated for people with cancer), but oftentimes further solidifying the benefits massage provides. The latter is true for massage and dementia.

Massage + Older Adults with Advanced Dementia

Researchers wanted to assess the acceptability and preliminary effects of Namaste Care, a specialized program that offers health care providers, volunteers and families ways to meaningfully engage with individuals with dementia using activities like music, massage, reminiscing, socialization, aromatherapy and snacks.

The study. This 2024 mixed methods multiphase design was used to assess effects of the approach using trained volunteers for older adults with mid- to late-stage dementia. The program was delivered over six months with focus groups, as well as individual interviews with one volunteer and two family members.

A prospective pre-post-test study design was used to evaluate preliminary results. Outcomes measured include quality of life, neuropsychiatric symptoms, and pain for patients with dementia and family carer role stress. Quality of visits for the family was also measured.

Data were collected from June 2018 to April 2019, and descriptive analyses of participants' characteristics were expressed as standard deviation for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. Thematic analysis was used to analyze focus group and individual interview data.

The results. A total of 15 patients received the intervention. Families, staff and volunteers, all perceived patients experienced benefits from the approach. Staff, volunteers and families reported feeling fulfilled in their roles, and the activities included in the program were perceived as necessary for the patients.

“There were no statistically significant improvements in patient outcomes,” researchers noted. “There was a statistically significant decline in family carer role stress.”

Aromatherapy + Dementia

This meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials explored the efficacy of aromatherapy on behavioral and psychological disturbances (BPSD) in people with dementia.

The study. BPSD is common in people with dementia. This 2024 meta-analysis investigates what research says about how aromatherapy may reduce the frequency and severity of BPSD and improve the functional ability in people with dementia.

A literature search was conducted using PubMed, Emboss and Cochrane Library for randomized controlled trials published before March 2024 comparing aromatherapy with

control treatments in patients with dementia. There were 15 trials comprising 821 patients included in the meta-analysis.

The results. Significant reduction in BPSD was observed after one month of aromatherapy treatment. Meta-analysis results showed significant improvement in Cohen-Mansfield Agitation Inventory scores in patients receiving three to four weeks of aromatherapy compared with the control group, and four of the five trials reported improvement in depressive mood. Significant improvement in functional ability was shown in three trials.

“Aromatherapy is a safe and viable nonpharmacologic treatment to improve BPSD in people with dementia and its combination with massage showed higher efficacy,” researchers noted.