

## THE HEALING POWER OF TOUCH

*By Kim Smith, Director of Volunteer Services, Overlake Behavioral Health Services*

**T**ouch can be a powerful tool in healing. Gentle touch and soothing massage can be especially beneficial in situations when people are feeling most vulnerable. Hospital patients typically fit into this category, often facing multiple stressful emotions, including uncertainty, fear and loneliness. Coupled with the lack of familiar surroundings, a hospital stay can be especially distressing. That's why many hospitals and health-care providers across the country, including Overlake, have started to offer a variety of massage and touch therapies for patients.

Studies show that touch is essential to an infant's development and that babies deprived of touch don't grow and develop normally. The same holds true for adults. Research shows that regular touch has been proven to:

- Decrease anxiety
- Lower blood pressure
- Increase endorphin levels (your feel-good hormones)
- Enhance sleep

At Overlake, Special Touch is part of the hospital's larger Healing Arts program designed to provide holistic health care and a soothing hospital environment. Special Touch is not therapeutic treatment, but still offers patients a host of benefits, including reduced anxiety, help with pain management, and an all-important one-on-one connection with another human being during treatment for illness, injury or disease.

Four volunteers dedicate their time to Overlake's Special Touch program and offer patients gentle 10- to 20-minute hand and foot rubs when patients request a visit from their nurse. One of the volunteers, a retired nurse who found her second calling back at the patient's bedside, helps train newcomers to the program. While none are licensed massage therapists, two are in massage school with plans to pursue a massage career and the two others are experienced caregivers who enjoy spending their time to ease a patient's stress and anxiety and simply offer some welcome company.

All volunteers are trained on the techniques of touch, ensuring that it's a safe, neutral experience and one that's tailored to each patient's needs.

Health experts agree that massage can help reduce the stress responses associated with pain, such as elevated levels of cortisol. In addition, healing touch helps establish a state of relaxation that allows people to better manage pain and gives them an overall feeling of well-being.

Special Touch volunteers spend most of their time with patients in the cancer care and joint replacement units. These patients generally have longer lengths of stay and may be bedridden and required to remain immobile during recovery.

Overlake nursing staff agrees that patients love the Special Touch volunteer visits. For some patients, it helps make their hospital stay a little more like a spa visit. And for others, it helps with pain management and also offers a pleasant distraction during the day.

While nurses are the patient's primary caregiver during their hospital stay, they don't have the uninterrupted blocks of time to spend with patients like Special Touch volunteers do. Nurses at Overlake consider it an extension of their care and an important one in enhancing the patient's experience.

A recent national research project conducted by Opinion Research Corp. International in Princeton, N.J., found that:

- 90 percent of Americans feel massage is good for a person's health.
- 93 percent agree with the statement that massage can be effective for pain relief.
- Use of massage in people age 65 and older has tripled from 4 percent in 1997 to 15 percent in 2005.
- 73 percent of those who had a massage would recommend it to a person they know.
- 46 percent of respondents at some time had a massage to relieve pain.
- The transformative healing

power of touch is literally at our fingertips. The simple act of holding someone's hand in times of stress can offer a tremendous relief to a friend or loved one.

Here are some easy ways to incorporate healing touch into your daily routine:

- Learn simple massage techniques and share your skills with your family. Children will look forward to a short 10-minute backrub as part of their bedtime routine.
- Offer to give a friend a backrub; then ask your friend to return the favor.
- Offer a coworker or friend a pat on the back as gentle reassurance.
- Treat yourself to an occasional therapeutic full-body massage.
- Offer a hug to someone who needs it, or ask for a hug if that someone is you.

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