Massage Therapy Basics

Massage is a form of passive exercise that relieves tension and pain. Massage activates the thicker tactile receptors in the skin, which compete with pain signals. When a body part is therapeutically stroked or kneaded, the action can effectively relieve pain.

Through massage, the soft tissues of the body are systematically manipulated and stimulated. The benefits of massage include:

- Pain relief
- Increased range of motion
- Reduction of some types of edema
- Increased circulation
- Better lymphatic flow
- Improved conditioning of scar tissue
- Improved health of the skin

Psychological benefits include:

- Relaxation
- Stress relief
- Sense of increased energy and vitality

This type of healing is seen as a two-way street. Attention to communication, concern, empathy, and a desire to promote healing will encourage the patient to participate in the healing process. While giving a massage, the therapist can encourage the patient to understand the potential source of healing in his or her own consciousness. The patient can be helped to avoid depression, feelings of hopelessness, and despair, and instead on positive attitudes that involve being a capable and active participate in the treatment process.

Massage therapy can be used on all parts of the body and may involve several techniques, such as:

- Effleurage
- Petrissage
- Friction
- Vibration
- Tapotement

**Effleurage**

Effleurage is used more than any other technique and involves gentle strokes that glide over the skin without attempting to move the deeper structures. This technique is often used during childbirth when a light, circular stroke over the lower abdomen is done in rhythm to controlled breathing. This technique aids in the relaxation of abdominal muscles.
Petrissage
Petrissage involves a deeper massage where the muscles are lifted and squeezed gently in a kneading or rolling action. This technique should be practiced on the back before it is attempted on other parts of the body.

Friction
Friction involves using the fingertips, the thumb, or the heel of the hand to perform small, circular movements that press into muscles. It is also used to massage deep into joint spaces and avoid bony prominences. It is useful around well-healed scar tissue to break down adhesions between the skin and tissues beneath. The traditional back rub uses friction.

Vibration
Vibration can be accomplished by making fine, tremulous movements with the fingers or by using a mechanical device.

Tapotement
Tapotement involves using a series of brisk blows of various types. Because it has been misrepresented on television – frequently showing the excess pounding and slapping of athletes – it is sometimes shunned by practitioners. The following seven types of tapotement may be of interest to students:

- **Hacking**
  Hold your hands in front of you, palms parallel. Allow your hands and wrists to relax. Strike the patient’s back gently with the backs of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th fingertips - one hand, and then the other. Progress from the hips to the shoulders, avoiding the kidney area.

- **Cupping**
  Using cupped hands, strike the patient’s back with one hand, and then the other.

- **Slapping**
  Same as above, but with flattened hands.

- **Tapping**
  Using the tips of your fingers, tap the back with one hand, and then the other.

- **Quacking**
  Holding both palms together with the fingers apart, tap the back with the tips of the little finger and ring finger, allowing the fingers to fall together at impact.

- **Pincement**
  Gently pinch the back, pulling up small portions of tissue between the thumb and 1st finger.

- **Skritchies**
  Gentle pinching or plucking of the scalp.