

# Help in Maintaining Positive Mental Health

## FACT SHEET 8

### About this fact sheet

Remedial massage therapists, remedial massage therapists and myotherapists (professional qualified therapists) often fill the gap when patients seek alternatives to medication and other therapies because they feel that remedial massage therapy and myotherapy provides a level of treatment and relief appropriate to their needs.

While a proportion of massage therapy treatments are initiated by patients self-directing their care, many appointments are initiated through a referral from a registered medical practitioner such as a GP or an allied health practitioner.

Remedial massage therapy and myotherapy is not a cure for disease, injury or a chronic condition. However, it can provide relief from pain and stress, improve mobility, and help rehabilitation and recovery. Patients should always seek medical advice first when new conditions or pain arise.

The following will assist you in understanding what a professional qualified therapists is, and how the appropriate training, experience and skills can help in maintaining or restoring a level of health and wellbeing.

### Mental health issues in Australia

Mental health is a key component of overall health and wellbeing. Many people experience preventable physical and mental distress, relationship breakdown, stigma and loss of life satisfaction and opportunities.

During 2022, for the sixth consecutive year GPs reported that psychological issues were the most common reason for patient appointments.<sup>1</sup> Eighteen per cent (18%) of the Australian population were dispensed a mental health-related prescription in 2022-23 [\(AIHA\)](#). Of Australians aged between 16 and 85, 43% will experience a mental illness at some time in their life.<sup>2</sup>

The ABS 2023<sup>3</sup> reported that the most common mental illnesses in Australia, in the 12 months prior to the study, were:

- » anxiety disorders were the most common – (3.4 million people or 17% of the population)
- » affective disorders involving severe lows called depression or highs called hypomania or mania (1.5 million or 8%)
- » substance use disorders involving legal or illegal drugs, alcohol, or medications. (650,000 or 3%).

### Considering remedial massage therapy and myotherapy in mental health management plans

The HILDA survey, as outlined in the Productivity Commission Report,<sup>4</sup> Measuring health-related quality of life, combines peoples' answers to physical and mental health-related questions. The responses provide a guide to understand more fully the impact of mental health issues on the quality of patients' lives.

[Pain Australia](#) reports that:

- » Rates of mental health and suicide are higher among people living with pain.
- » 30-40% of people with a diagnosed mental health condition also present for treatment for chronic pain.

- » High rates of generalised anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance misuse are often present for people living with chronic pain.

This correlates with the US Pain Foundation's report on the effects of chronic pain, with 60% of those surveyed reporting that they feel anxiety-like symptoms daily or a few times a week, and a similar portion (59%) feel depression-like symptoms daily or a few times a week.<sup>5</sup>



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### Remedial massage therapy and myotherapy and stress, depression and anxiety

While remedial massage therapy and myotherapy are not cures for mental illness, the role of these therapies in managing pain and stress across all population groups indicates that professional qualified therapists play an important role in maintaining positive mental health and improving the quality of people's daily lives.

The link between physical and mental health is well documented. People with mental illness are also 18-36% more likely to have musculoskeletal problems.<sup>6</sup>

Examination of the relationship between mental health and physical illness reveals that physical therapies, including manual manipulation and exercise, shows that professional therapy can have a positive effect on emotional wellbeing, relaxation, vitality and quality of sleep. For example:

- » A 2022 study concluded that aromatherapy massage with lavender, chamomile and rosemary oils is effective in significantly reducing anxiety and depression of elderly adults living in the nursing homes.<sup>7</sup>
- » A 2020 meta-analysis found that massage improved function and pain in chronic lower back pain in the short to intermediate term.<sup>8</sup>
- » A 2016 meta-analysis found that massage therapy is effective for treating pain compared to no treatment [standardised mean difference (SMD) = -0.20] and active (SMD = -0.55) comparators. Compared to active comparators, massage therapy was also found to be beneficial for treating fatigue (SMD = -1.06) and anxiety (SMD = -1.24).<sup>9</sup> For older people, massage can also enhance positive wellbeing and reduce stress perception among older adults.<sup>10</sup>
- » A 2010 meta-analysis concluded that massage therapy is significantly associated with alleviating depressive symptoms.<sup>11</sup>
- » A 2006 study suggested that massage therapy is a beneficial tool for the health of nurses as it may reduce psychological stress levels.<sup>12</sup>

Given the relationship between physical health and mental health,<sup>13,14</sup> improving the quality of people's daily lives through massage therapy can have profound effects on maintaining positive health and wellbeing.<sup>15</sup>

Improvements in a patient's ability to walk<sup>16</sup> with less pain, drive,<sup>17</sup> engage in social activities,<sup>18</sup> reduce stress<sup>19</sup> at work,

improve mobility<sup>20</sup> and maintain social ties for older people or people with chronic disease such as diabetes,<sup>21</sup> are significant for patients limited by chronic or acute pain and/or prone to mental health issues.

Easing the debilitating symptoms of cancer<sup>22,23</sup> or improving sleep,<sup>24,25</sup> after cardiac surgery in order to achieve a more positive disposition and normal functions are profound improvements for seriously ill patients.

As shown in Chart 1 below, responses from the 2023 Massage & Myotherapy Practitioners' Survey indicated that professional qualified therapists are called upon in a variety of circumstances, including the maintenance of positive mental health.

Practice area or circumstance	% Involved
Sports injury management and rehabilitation	76%
Pregnancy	49%
Self-directed care	47%
Occupational injuries and rehabilitation clinic	39%
Motor vehicle accident and rehabilitation	33%
Mental health	32%
Aged care	28%
Cancer/lymphoedema	21%
NDIS	19%
Palliative care	11%
Department of Veterans Affairs	5%
Addictions rehab support centre	4%
Other	7%
None of the above	5%

Table 1: Massage consultations in relation to condition treated

Hence, integrating physical therapies with mental health therapies and medical treatments would provide a deeper level of support alongside a greater choice of response strategies to low level mental health issues. This of course will also assist in preventing progression to higher level mental health issues.

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#### More information:

- » [Australian Massage Directory](#) – find a professional qualified local therapist
- » [Massage & Myotherapy Australia](#) website – consumer section
- » [Australian Government Health Directory](#) – free health advice
- » [Better Health Channel](#) – Complementary and alternative care - [Massage](#) and [Myotherapy](#)
- » [Oncology Massage Training](#) provides a [national directory](#) of oncology massage therapists

#### Endnotes

1. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners 2022, General Practice [Health of the Nation 2022](#) report.
2. ABS Survey 2023, Cited Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Prevalence and impact of mental illness](#)
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4. [Productivity Commission's Draft Report – Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health, Volumes 1 and 2 \(PC Report\)](#) p. 2.
5. US Pain Foundation, A Chronic Pain Crisis 2022 Survey Report
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13. Pain Australia, electronic persistent pain outcomes collaboration: [A snapshot of how Australians are managing their pain](#).
14. Australian Government, Productivity Commission's Draft Report, [Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health](#), Volumes 1 and 2.
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