



Feel the

Booking a massage tends to slip down most of our to-do lists – after all, which of us has the time, money and ability to ignore the vague sense of guilt? But professionals, ancient wisdom and scientific research all agree that the healing benefits can genuinely ease your emotional woes. And relax...

BY HELEN BROWN

FORCE!

Massage has always been an emotional experience for me. Sometimes it is as though the therapist's fingers have flicked hidden switches to my tear ducts – from shiatsu pressure point work on my hands that caused tears to gently trickle out to a soft tissue release of my shoulder blades that, within seconds, pushed me down a roller coaster of physical agony, laughter, then a flood of anguish. There have been countless times when a good massage has got my self-reflective juices flowing far more effortlessly than a stint on the psychotherapist's couch ever has. In fact, in challenging times (be they a break-up, bout of depression or work-related stress), massage has provided the ultimate emotional catharsis. And there's a sound physiological explanation why.

As scientist Dr Candace Pert proved in her groundbreaking research on the link between the mind and body, the cells in the body possess opiate receptors that respond to information from peptides in the brain. "I see the process of communication we have demonstrated, the flow of information throughout the whole organism, as evidence that the body is the actual outward manifestation, in physical space, of the mind," she writes in *Molecules Of Emotion* (Pocket Books, £8.99). Dr Kavita Vedhara, an expert in psychoneuroimmunology from the University Of Nottingham agrees: "There is a lot of robust scientific evidence that emotional experiences such as stress have a very real effect on our physiology."

Equally, ancient eastern medical systems have long upheld that emotional states can reside in specific parts of the body. In the Indian chakra system, the seven chakras (or energy centres) that run from the base of the spine to the top of the head represent

everything from painful memories to fear. Traditional Chinese Medicine says that different organs represent different emotions (for example, the liver denotes anger; the lungs represent sorrow) and that problems with these emotions manifest along the meridians (energy channels) that run throughout the body to our extremities.

So how do emotions get stuck in the cells of the body in the first place? Most body workers believe it is a result of an evolutionary glitch – modern day conventions don't allow us to conquer stress in the way we were designed to.

More and more experts now understand that physical pains (those that recur surreptitiously, rather than those that are an obvious knock-on from a physical

action such as carrying a cumbersome handbag, or running without stretching first) frequently have an emotional trigger and intensive techniques that prompt the body to 'unwind' (a spontaneous response to pain where you may cry, laugh or make movements) are becoming increasingly popular. From soft tissue release and myofascial release; guided meditation to encourage the client to recognise the emotional cause of their tension; craniosacral techniques that coax out restrictions in the connective tissue; and deep tissue techniques that intensify the physical pain, allowing a second chance to deal with the emotion involved, the most profound massage treatments are capable of radically transforming your mental outlook.

EMOTIONAL BODY MAP

Which body part relates to our perfectionism and which suggests anxiety or the feeling of being stuck in a rut? Follow our step-by-step guide to uncovering and obliterating your body-bound emotional blocks.

HEAD

THE EMOTIONAL SUBTEXT: Frustration and closed-mindedness. "Issues relating to the head are usually to do with having decided that the world is one way and then being presented with something different in reality," says massage guru Ben Barnett. The traditional Chinese medicine model would agree. "Pains in the forehead are connected with the liver which governs our frustration levels and ability to make decisions," explains aromatherapist Michelle Roques O'Neil.

HOW TO LET IT OUT: Open your mind. "Try to allow your concepts and the reality to exist alongside each other," says Barnett. "As long as your ideas about yourself are allowed to express themselves from time to time, without taking over, there shouldn't

be a problem." To reconnect with this area and unleash the physical tension, try Indian head massage, a head, neck and shoulder massage that works intensively on the many pressure points found on the skull, or craniosacral therapy (see Essential tool box, overleaf), where the practitioner holds your head in several different positions to softly encourage the intricate bones of the skull to realign.

NECK

THE EMOTIONAL SUBTEXT: Resentment and guilt. "Our conceptual world is held around the head, while our experiential life is held in the body," says Barnett. "The neck and shoulders are the intersection between these worlds. If you try to have concepts in your experiential life and →

experiences in your conceptual life you will hit problems. Shoulder pain often results from resentment, or not doing or getting what you want. It is the emotion that bridges the gap between the intention to do something and not doing it. Notice how your shoulder pain subsides when you take the action you want to.”

HOW TO LET IT OUT: “Do what needs to be done or discharge your responsibility for it by finding the justification for why you aren’t taking an action,” says Barnett. Deep tissue massage and soft tissue release techniques often highlight problems in the neck and shoulders. When pain arises, try to think about any responsibilities you feel you are neglecting.

LOWER BACK

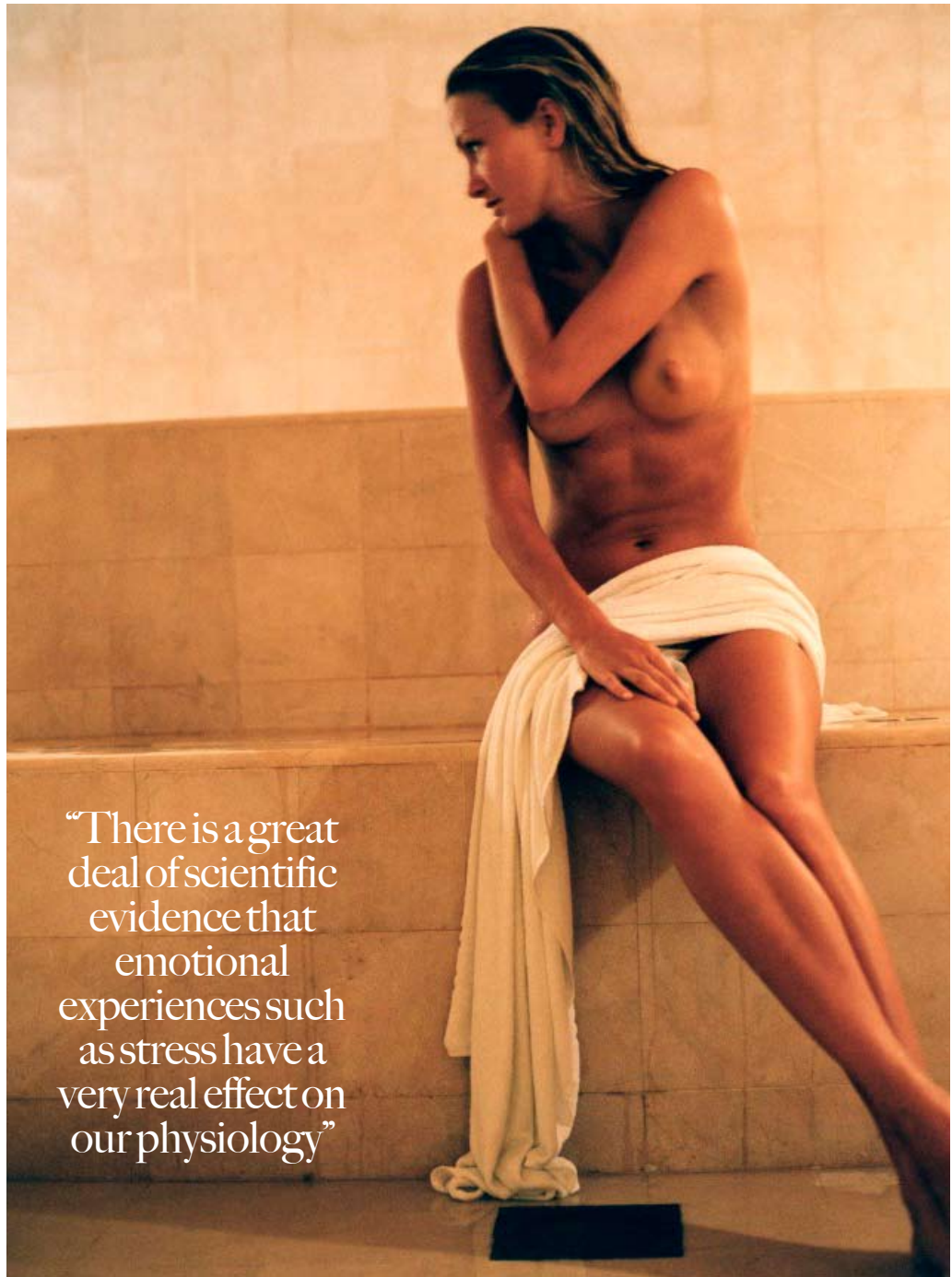
THE EMOTIONAL SUBTEXT: Connected to the sacral chakra, pain in the lower back is thought to represent feelings of wanting and attraction. “This area is about bringing to you what *you* bring to you and the opposite – attraction and repulsion,” says Barnett. “When people aren’t getting what they want or are overly attached to someone or something, it centres around the umbilical cord and all the muscles that link into this area.” According to many bodyworkers, sexual problems, low self-esteem and feelings of incompleteness after the break-up of a relationship can manifest here.

HOW TO LET IT OUT: As your therapist works on your lower back, try to recognise your unfulfilled desires and ask yourself whether you are overly attached to someone or something. “I use guided meditations for problems in this area to encourage my clients to see how they could actually get what they think they are getting from a partner or thing from themselves,” says Barnett. Techniques that promote mobility in the pelvis, such as rocking the pelvis and tilting it up and down, are helpful, while craniosacral therapy offers effective methods for combating lower back pain that focus on realigning the sacral bone which can have knock-on effects to the body’s structure when out of place.

STOMACH

THE EMOTIONAL SUBTEXT: In traditional Chinese medicine, worry gets lodged in the stomach; the solar plexus chakra found in the stomach area is also thought to represent anxiety.

HOW TO LET IT OUT: Incredibly, the



“There is a great deal of scientific evidence that emotional experiences such as stress have a very real effect on our physiology”

surface area of the small intestine is roughly the size of a tennis court so a lot of pent-up worry can become trapped here. A specific technique to try is Chi Nei Tsang (CNT), an ancient Taoist stomach massage where the practitioner works intuitively to hone in on deep-rooted tension and the corresponding emotional issues. Visit learn-shiatsu.co.uk for details of CNT practitioners nationwide.

LEGS AND FEET

THE EMOTIONAL SUBTEXT: The terms ‘restless legs syndrome’ and ‘having cold feet’ didn’t come about by chance. Problems in this area often denote feelings of being

stuck in a rut and inability to move forward. “They suggest feelings of not being where you think you should be and of being supported or undermined,” says Barnett. “If you are in a place you perceive as hostile (a job you don’t like, for example), the body retracts heat from the legs and feet to protect the vital organs and you literally get ‘cold feet.’”

HOW TO LET IT OUT: During a massage, if you are experiencing pain in your legs and feet, you should ask yourself whether you are happy in your current situation and, if not, what you could do to change it. Reflexology, where just the feet are massaged, could help you get back in touch with these issues. Visit The Association of Reflexologists’ website (aor.org.uk) or call 01823 351010 for details of practitioners.

Must-see mind/bodyworkers

BEN BARNETT

In his 60-minute Hydrotherm Transformational Massage, (£75, Wallett's Court hotel, Dover; 01304 852424) Ben Barnett uses emotional body mapping principles, a deep touch and guided meditations to troubleshoot the causes of aches and pains. His treatment is such an empowering self-discovery process that clients (including ballerinas and pop stars) frequently realise their dreams after a course.

ZENNY GABLE

Zenny Gable (£100 for an hour's massage, KX Gym, 151 Draycott Avenue, London; 020 7584 5333) has an intuitive knack for panning in on her client's emotional scars. Using reiki alongside pressure that feels like it's going deeper than a wishing well, she fishes out your sore points and provides positive affirmations with such infectious clarity that they stay away.

MICHELLE ROQUES O'NEIL

Aromatherapist Michelle Roques O'Neil's aromabalance therapy (£140, Kingyo therapy suite, 37 Spring Street, London; 020 7706 1997) combines essential oils, acupressure, reiki and a detailed analysis of previous illnesses and operations to tune into her clients emotional blockages. For the emotionally wrought, the first few sessions build up a cocoon of security to get them strong enough to work through emotions that bubble up in subsequent treatments using a variety of tools – from applying a patchwork of therapeutic oils to the body or writing an emotional journal – that gently, yet profoundly, purge negative patterns.

JOHN TSAGARIS

Combining his expertise in Chinese medicine with a remarkably precise radar for emotional issues, Tsagaris' He Mu Massage (£195 for 90 minutes, Energy Bodies, 26 Wheatley Street, London; 0871 903 0000) leaves you feeling mentally and physically lighter. You remain clothed and the session follows a sequence of Traditional Chinese Medicine diagnostics (such as tongue analysis), invigorating full-body shiatsu, then serenity-inducing acupuncture.

ESSENTIAL TOOL BOX

The main theory of unblocking emotions in the body centres around unleashing restrictions in the fascia, the body's support stocking of connective tissue that surrounds all of our bones, muscles and internal organs. It runs throughout the body in one connected piece, including around the brain and spinal cord, so a restriction in any part of the body will be detected and fed back to the nervous system. Many bodywork techniques focus on alleviating tension in the fascia to boost overall vitality and happiness. The most effective include:

▶ CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

Gentle, hands-on therapy where the practitioner monitors the rhythm of movement in the craniosacral fluid which surrounds the brain and feeds back information

about restrictions in the fascia that can affect our mood and behaviour. Tiny doses of pressure and heat from the practitioner's fingertips applied to various structures (especially the cranium and sacrum bones) encourage tension to disperse in its own time and the body to come back into alignment. Visit Paula Deveney (£125 per hour at Energy Bodies, 26 Wheatley Street, London; 0871 9030 000) or contact the Upledger Institute (01934 733611) for details of UK practitioners.

▶ MYOFASCIAL RELEASE (MFR)

A soft tissue massage technique that works to alleviate restrictions in the fascia. There are two kinds of myofascial release work – direct (techniques such as Rolwing or Structural Integration, which feels like a deep tissue massage without the oil) and indirect

(where the therapist gently stretches out the fascia and applies light pressure until the blockage in the fascia gives way). Myofascial work often prompts 'unwinding' where the client relives difficult past experiences in an attempt to free them from the body. A treatment with MFR expert Rachel Fairweather in Brighton costs £50 (01273 628942) or visit jingmassage.com to find a qualified practitioner near you.

▶ SOFT TISSUE RELEASE

A sports massage technique that works deep into the muscles to give a profound release. Such techniques can feel painful at times, but a deep 'freeing' sensation often results once the pressure is lifted off. Visit the Institute of Sport and Remedial Massage website (theism.com) for details of therapists.

BEYOND THE MASSAGE

■ During emotional release massage, reactions can vary from a few tears to the whole body shaking and an involuntary urge to curl up into a protective, tight ball like a hedgehog as past emotional experiences are relieved. Whatever the intensity of the expunging, it is important to have a therapist who can support you.

■ Some massage therapists (such as psychotherapist and bodyworker Michelle Roques O'Neil) may have counselling qualifications, while others are furnished with more general – but nonetheless crucial – non-judgmental listening skills.

■ Just like going on a date with a prospective partner, the best way to suss out the right therapist for you is to discuss the treatment before you book. "Have a chat with the therapist over the phone and see if what they say resonates with you," Roques O'Neil advises. "Half of the time it is about

listening; the other half it is about offering tools to help the client process emotions for themselves." This could mean anything from suggesting books to read, self-development exercises to complete at home or booking for talking therapy to help further unravel the emotions. Most therapists who specialise in emotional release work have their own experiences to draw on and have carried out various self-help exercises that they will share with you. Quiz them on what they can offer but be prepared to do some of the legwork yourself. "It is important to find a practitioner who can make you more proactive in your healing, rather than becoming too dependent," confirms Roques O'Neil.

■ We recommend clearing your diary after emotional-release massage, as you may need time to process any issues which can surface during a session. ■