

Flotation Therapy: Rejuvenating the Body in a Body of Water

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Watsu

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Watsu: East meets West

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But what is Watsu?

It gets its name from "water Shiatsu" and involves holding and massaging patients in a pool of warm water. Shiatsu, also called acupressure, means "finger pressure" and is a traditional Japanese healing arts form.

Done in a warm pool or whirlpool bath, it helps trigger relaxation responses, encourages superficial circulation and relieves pressure on joints. With ears submerged and eyes closed, the patient enters a peaceful "sensory deprivation" state - an atmosphere of weightlessness, stillness and silence.

"As a Watsu therapist cradles your body, you go completely limp," said Laurie Steelsmith, who has a doctor of naturopathy degree and is the author of "Natural Choices for Women's Health." "You have to completely surrender and trust the therapist. You have to let go of everything."

The "holding" techniques that deliver Watsu benefits can be an obstacle, requiring a physical intimacy that intimidates those who prefer their personal space.

"We're trained in how to establish rapport with someone," explained Andrew Yavelow, a Watsu practitioner and instructor at The School of Shiatsu and Massage at the Watsu Center just north of San Francisco.

"When necessary, we moderate and modify specific moves that might feel too intimate for patients not yet comfortable with Watsu," he said.

Most patients quickly overcome trepidation when they discover the security and pleasure of Watsu holding, said Yavelow, the author of "Embodiment."

"[Patients] just want to feel that you see them, hear them, relate to them and understand them, and are not going to push them beyond their comfort level."

Cradling the patient gently, the Watsu practitioner applies Shiatsu techniques, gently stretching and manipulating a patient's floating body and applying pressure to specific points and broader areas.

Watsu's manipulations are based on the Eastern medicine concept that all living things possess a "life force" energy - or qi - which flows through the body on channels called "meridians." When the natural flow of this energy is blocked, through external trauma or internal emotional strife, disease and pain take root.

Eastern medicine modalities like reflexology, acupuncture, Shiatsu and Watsu all seek to restore wellness and alleviate pain by locating and releasing these energy blockages.

Watsu builds upon traditional Shiatsu principles and stretches with gentle, graceful movement sequences, which Yavelow described as "flowing movement - swishing the body through the water like seaweed."

As the passive Watsu patient is guided from one flowing movement sequence to the next, the warm water provides support and gentle resistance. Each sequence targets different body parts.

As the practitioner holds the patient's body differently through each movement sequence, the warm water's "drag" (resistance) gently stretches free body parts. According to Yavelow, watching a Watsu session is akin to watching a graceful water dance, as the practitioner smoothly transitions the limp, relaxed patient from one swishing sequence to the next.

Watsu has been shown to be beneficial to patients suffering from conditions such as chronic pain, musculoskeletal disorders, arthritis, headaches and the pain syndrome fibromyalgia. Weightless floating enables stretching and manipulation that cannot be achieved on dry land. Free of gravity's pressure, the spine, joints and soft tissues open and release tension.

Watsu also alleviates "muscle guarding," a common affliction associated with impaired circulation and toxin buildup, where the body protectively tightens muscles around areas of pain. Patients often report reduced pain, enhanced flexibility, greater range of motion and even improved posture following Watsu sessions.

"Many patients respond to Eastern healing treatments like Watsu and acupressure. Being submerged in water under the supervision of a skilled massage therapist creates a safe environment and encourages the activation of the body's natural healing process, thereby enhancing the healing potential of the therapeutic massage," said [Bradly P. Jacobs, M.D., M.P.H.](#), chair of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Channel for Revolution Health Group's Medical Advisory Board.

Some say that Watsu's greatest benefits transcend the physical.

Patients have reported deeply meaningful Watsu experiences that replace stress and emotional disharmony with sublime sensations of "flying" or "returning to the womb." As Watsu dissolves stress and promotes relaxation, its benefits extend to the psyche.

Yavelow said people have experienced reduced anxiety, diminished emotional pain, improved self-esteem and better sleep patterns - all benefits that have been especially helpful to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

As Watsu encourages stillness of body and mind, patients often feel a transcendental oneness of being - a warm, peaceful feeling that may have broad reaching benefits for mind, body and spirit.

"Everybody in the world should experience this. This can be a profound and life-changing experience, putting us in touch with what's real," Yavelow said.