Seated Massage In History

The modern massage chair revived this form of bodywork in the 1980s.

By Patricia J. Benjamin

I t is a common misconception that seated massage is new in the history of bodywork. On the contrary, throughout its history massage has been given with recipients in various positions, including seated.

The idea that massage is only given with the client lying faceup or face-down on a table comes from the popularity of Swedish massage offered at salons and spas in the early 20th century, and its derivative Iaen massage in the 1970s. The invention of the massage chair in the 1980s sparked a revival in seated massage that continues to grow.

Around The World
There are many examples of seated massage practiced around the world. In cultures that did not have tables and chairs, massage was typically given on the ground, possibly on mats, with receivers in a lying down or seated position.

For example, picture a Ju/wasi healer, a bushman of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa, rubbing the head of a tribesman sitting cross-legged on the ground. The healer is holding the head of the seated man with the palm of one hand and rubbing his neck and back of the head with the other hand (New River Media, 1998).

In the past, people receiving massage sat on whatever structures or furniture were available at the time. For example, centuries-old Japanese block prints depict people sitting on low stools next to their baths to receive massage (Palmer, Chair Massage History, 2001). Sitting up from the ground or floor no doubt increased the comfort of the receiver as well as the giver.

Figure 1. Use of stool and boom for neck muscle sawing in Swedish movement cure. From Hand-book of Medical and Orthopedic Gymnastics by Anders Wide, 1909.

The “fundamental sitting position” was described as follows: “The buttocks and thighs rest on some horizontal support; the knee and ankle joints are kept at right angles and the feet rest on the floor or on some other support; the legs are kept close together ... the arms hang freely close to the body.”

Variations include hips-firm sitting, reach-sitting, stretch-sitting, long-sitting, half-sitting, stride- or ride-sitting, twist-sitting and other derivations. Positioning was creative, guided by the intent of the techniques to be applied, and limited only by the imagination of the practitioner.

Swedish Movement Cure
To receive the Swedish Movement Cure in the late 19th century, recipients might be in one of several different positions, including lying on a table, leaning against a rail, kneeling on a cushion, hanging from a bar, half-lying on a couch, or sitting on a stool or chair. Which position they took was determined by the part of the body to be exercised or massaged, and best access by the practitioner. The apparatus at the Gymnastic Orthopedic Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, in the early 1900s included a variety of furniture and equipment to facilitate various positioning. There were tables, stools, chairs, couches, wall-bars, poles and devices called “booms” on which to lean.

“Neck muscle sawing,” as demonstrated in Figure 1, shows use of a stool and a piece of equipment called a boom. Note that the boom is padded and adjustable in height, and is used in this case for the client to rest his arms at shoulder height while the practitioner, called a medical gymnast, is massaging the neck (Wide, 1909).

To access the muscles of the back, the practitioner, shown in Figure 2, had the recipient sit backward in a common chair and lean on his knees for support. The practitioner is exhibiting good body mechanics by kneeling to preserve his alignment while pinching the muscles of the back. On both giver and receiver might be sitting as in

Figure 2. Sitting backward on a chair for massage of back. From The Natural Method of Healing by F. E. Bilz, 1898.

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The natural method of healing

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Full-Body Table Massage
By mid-20th century, the concept of giving massage in the seated position had been largely forgotten in the West. Physical therapists may have had their patients sit for some applications, such as applying friction to a tendon in an arm or leg, but massage was a very minor part of physical therapy treatment by the 1960s. The days of whole massage units in hospitals had past.

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health promotion had taken off in the late 19th century, no doubt aided by the popularity of Mitchell’s Rest Cure (see Mansar Tertiary Jynxum, Winter 2001), and remained the massage of choice well into the 20th century.

On-Site Massage: 1980s

David Palmer of San Francisco developed an idea and a piece of equipment that was to revive the practice of seated massage in the 1980s. The idea was to create a method of bringing massage to the people—at work, in stores and in parks—that would increase the numbers willing to receive massage and the many benefits of touch. Massage adapted for the seated position seemed like the ideal vehicle for the task.

Trained in traditional Japanese massage by Takashi Nakamura at The Amma Institute in San Francisco in the early 1980s, Palmer became director of the school when Nakamura returned to Japan in 1982. It was there that Palmer began experimenting with working on clients seated in a chair, rather than lying on a table (Palmer, Founder Bio, 2001).

Palmer’s goal was to develop a form of massage that was applied over clothing, and so could be given without oil and in a public space. The client would be seated in an upright position on a portable chair, which could be taken anywhere. And finally, the time for the massage was shortened so that it was more affordable to clients (Palmer, Chair Massage History, 2001). Traditional Japanese massage could be adapted nicely for this scenario.

Thus, amma became the basis for the first “on-site” or seated massage as we know it today. It was given without oil, and could easily be adapted for the seated position. But the client needed to be supported comfortably to be able to relax and receive the pressure of the amma techniques. In 1983, Palmer began to develop a special massage chair.

In addition to accommodating the massage, the chair needed to be portable for easy transport to sites. The first massage chairs had the basic components of those manufactured today—seat, face-cradle, armrest and kneeler. The first model, put out by Living Earth Crafts in 1986, was made of plywood, padding and hardware easily found in stores. It could be taken apart and fit into the box frame like a puzzle. The chairs were somewhat unstable, heavy and awkward by today’s standards, but were a revolution in their time. An early Living Earth Crafts massage chair is shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

Originally called “on-site massage” because massage was brought to the client at his or her workplace or other public places, the idea caught on and is a popular form of massage in its own right today. Palmer continues to train and certify chair massage practitioners through the TouchPro Institute in San Francisco.

Seated Massage

The design of the original massage chair has evolved over the past 20 years. While the basic elements remain the same, the massage chair has become easier to transport, has more adjustments for different body types and sizes, and comes in many models.

The availability of the massage chair itself has sparked renewed interest in the advantages of performing massage and bodywork with the client in a seated position. In addition to wellness-oriented massage, clinical massage is also given on the massage chair, especially for treating the upper back and shoulders. Adjustments of Western massage and other forms of bodywork are being made for use with the massage chair.

Furthermore, once the idea of the massage chair caught on, massage therapists became more open to seated massage in general. Today, there is much more creativity in the use of the seated position, for example, with clients sitting on a chair and leaning on a desk or table, or an athlete sitting on a bench or bleachers. Practitioners are more likely to access the upper body in the seated position during clinical applications of massage.

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The unending possibilities for seated massage continue to be explored. An old practice has been retrieved from the past, and adapted for today’s reality. It is our future and our heritage.

Bibliography


