

fingertips for the client

BY LAURIE CHANCE SMITH



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MASSAGE AND BODY IMAGE



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How much time do you spend thinking about your body? Are the thoughts positive or negative?

Body image can be affected by tangible physical factors. In her book, *Transforming Body Image* (The Crossing Press, 1985), Dr. Marcia Hutchinson suggests body image has little to do with the physical body. “Image and reality are separate,” she says. And if body image is a product of the imagination, Hutchinson proposes that it can also be changed using the imagination.

The way we experience our physical self on the mental plane can become habitual and may generate habitual patterns of muscle tension. Since regularly scheduled massage positively affects body and mind, massage can help us release physical and mental patterns of tension, enhancing our ability to experience our bodies (regardless of their shape or size) in a more positive way.

In *Body Image: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* (The Guilford Press, 2004), massage therapy is named as a somatic (bodily) approach that is helpful in positively affecting body image “by helping the client reconnect to the body in a very concrete manner.”

Regular massage encourages an awareness of the body just as it enhances our ability to relax. During massage, we can experience the sensation of touch in a non-threatening way.

“Our experience of touch forms an important foundation for our sense of self,” writes Thomas Pruzinsky in *Body Images: Development, Deviance, and Change* (The Guilford Press, 1990). Since touch is a powerful method of communication, “a change in one’s sense of self may be facilitated through therapeutic touch.”

Hutchinson suggests an exercise called “imaginal massage,” in which we visualize a massage occurring, with the healing hands of the therapist as a means of accepting our own bodies. This mind exercise can also be utilized during massage sessions. Imagine the affirmative energy in the therapist’s hands transferring to your body.

A comfortable, professional relationship with a massage therapist allows us the opportunity to experience our bodies as acceptable. Caring touch communicates safety and approval, boosting self-esteem and inner peace.

“Healing is about learning, so trust your body’s signals and find out what works for you,” writes Susan Mumford in *Healing Massage* (CICO, 2007). Then ask your massage therapist for what is most helpful to you.

“Your body is ... a wonderfully intricate interaction with everything around you,” writes Dr. Eugene T. Gendlin in *Focusing* (The Guilford Press, 1998). “Your body ‘knows’ the whole of each of your situations—vastly more aspects of it than you can think. There is a kind of bodily awareness that profoundly influences our lives and that can help us reach personal goals.”

Learning to accept the body (and its messages) is a continuous, lifelong journey and regular massage is a way to practice body reverence. Utilize bodywork sessions to nurture the connection between your body and mind and experience complete acceptance of yourself exactly as you are. **m&b**

🕒 Laurie Chance Smith is a Texas-based writer and photographer who works for national and international markets on a plethora of topics. She can be reached at lauriechancesmith@yahoo.com.