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FOUR-HAND MASSAGE IS POPULAR AT SPAS AND IN PRIVATE PRACTICES

Touch Times Two

When four healing hands work toward the single goal of releasing pain and stress by stroking and kneading tired muscles, deep relaxation is long and lasting.

by Kamala Thiagarajan

Four-hand massage is a simple modality requiring only impeccable teamwork, good timing and a beautiful synchrony. This massage ensures that the rewards are doubled while the effort is halved. The latest trend on the international spa circuit, this therapy will captivate your clientele from the very first session.

As two therapists work in unison, with strokes that sweep across every inch of the body, it is also an ideal way for a spa or a team of private practitioners to offer a quick, efficient session. Four-hand mas-

sage requires no extra equipment or expense and manages to save time for both you and your client.

"[Four-hand massage] has a following at an international scale," says Gabriela Castañeda, spa director at Villa Premiere Hotel & Spa in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. "On average we give five to six of these massages a week; but it is definitely becoming more popular." In the United States, four-hand massage has now grown to become an accepted therapy that complements the spa experience.

Nancy Goodwin, director of the

Urbàna Cityspa & Teabar in Charlotte, North Carolina, put four-hand massage on the spa menu right from the spa's inception. "When someone has a four-hand massage, they often return for another," she says. "It is an indulgence that could be highly addictive."

When four hands are better than two

Massage therapist Yvonne Oliver is the director of Massage by Design, a private massage studio in Dallas, Texas. A specialist in four-hand massage, she describes the therapy as a vital modality that all bodywork professionals should learn. "[Four-hand massage] increases your capacity to assist clients on their journey to health and wellness through massage," she says.

The primary benefit is undoubtedly the way it allows the therapists to continue the rhythm and momentum of the massage throughout the session, she adds. "It gives therapists the ability to maintain constant contact with the client. As one therapist continues [her] strokes, the other can prepare hot stones for back treatment, hot paraffin wax or facials."

In this way, four-hand massage allows you to combine many healing modalities in a single session,

ensuring that the client receives the maximum benefit. This proves especially useful when the client has very little time for multiple sessions.

The health benefits of four-hand massage are many: In addition to intensifying relaxation, this massage really gets the client's blood circulating, so that her body feels more vibrant and energized.

"Four-hand massage works the body in a different way when compared to the traditional two-hand, or single, therapist massage," says Castañeda. "It [doubly] causes an increase in the production of endorphins and dopamines, the chemical substances that relax and stimulate."

Four-hand massage is especially beneficial for those under severe stress. It gives them a chance to cope and reverses the ill effects of their lifestyles. Steve Fortner, 37, runs a scouting service for filmmakers in Gastonia, North Carolina. For five weeks during the Halloween season, he works in a haunted theme park. "My body pays a high price for acting half my age," he says. "For the entire run of the production I enjoy a massage once a week to offset the damage I did the week before."

Fortner's initial experience with four-hand massage was unintentional. "I had booked two therapists for a couple's session. Due to personal scheduling conflicts, at the last minute it went from a couple's session to a single's session. Having booked two therapists the ethical thing to do was pay them both." He decided to

For professional athletes, four-hand massage is an ideal therapy that can help them heal faster from sports injuries, building up stamina and restoring strength.



also utilize both their services, combining them in a four-hand massage. "My therapists had two entirely different techniques. While one was giving me a deep-tissue massage the other was using a softer/soothing touch," he says. "[The effect] was sheer bliss.

"You could ask for a single therapist to do both treatments, one after the other, but it wouldn't hold a candle to the amazing sensation of the four-handed massage," Fortner adds.

This simultaneous stimulation is what has earned four-hand massage its growing popularity.

"Four hands ensure a vital energy-point massage," says Fabienne Farneti, spa director, of Metropole Espa in Monte-Carlo, Monaco. "It is the ultimate therapy for effective tension release, allowing you to deeply relax and regain mental and spiritual bliss. With four hands on their body, the guests lose their point of reference and this disconnects them from reality."

The athletic edge

For professional athletes, four-hand massage is an ideal therapy that can help them heal faster from sports in-

Smooth coordination, yet with each therapist able to bring her own style to the session, lies at the heart of the four-hand massage technique.

juries, building up stamina and restoring strength. "I firmly believe that the benefits I've received from a four-hand massage have helped me in my golf game," says Jason Enloe, who won his first tournament on the PGA Nationwide Tour earlier this year (he's ranked number 38 nationally). "I recover from long practice sessions much faster. I also believe that my flexibility is better due to the massage. Wade Smith, a professional football player with the New York Jets, also swears by four-hand massage's effectiveness for athletes. "The longer I play, the more the four-handed massage shows its effectiveness in maintaining my body through almost year-round training, practices, and games.

"My recovery is quicker, which in turn helps me to train harder, and perform better," Smith adds. "I would say that I am hooked [on] the four-handed massage, but only when the two therapists are in sync with each other and really know how to massage an athlete that is my size."

Smooth coordination, yet with each therapist able to bring her own style to the session, lies at the heart of the four-hand massage technique. In that sense, it proves to be a lovely paradox. As the massage progresses, the intense concentration of both therapists working toward a common goal of healing can create an immense amount of energy in the room—an atmosphere that therapists themselves find electric.

Technique and skill

There are many ways in which a four-hand massage can be conducted. Usually, one therapist will work on

Many spas also customize the therapy to suit the client's preference, by including other bodywork options, such as hot-stone massage, acupressure, reiki or Ayurvedic techniques.

the upper half of the body while another works on the lower half. Mid-way through the session, the therapists switch so that the client actually receives a full-body massage from both. Another technique, called mirroring, allows one therapist to take the lead while the other mimics the movements from the opposite side.

“The (particular) skills/techniques/modalities used in a four-hand massage do not differ from those used

in a single massage. It is this combination of styles and techniques from both therapists that leads to an extraordinary massage experience,” says Oliver. Four-hand massage also lends itself to a great deal of versatility and creative influence.

It has certainly evolved from being a regular massage performed by two therapists. Today the massage lasts anywhere between 40 and 90 minutes and is priced at \$120 to \$180. Many spas also customize the therapy to suit the client's preference, by including other bodywork options, such as hot-stone massage, acupressure, reiki or Ayurvedic techniques.

At Metropole Espa Monte Carlo, the four-hand massage is the signature treatment. Therapists use Ayurvedic scented oils and techniques, performing the massage with a series of stretching and rolling movements followed by long, deep strokes. “Our treatment lasts an hour and 50 minutes,” says Farneti. “It starts with a stimulating full-body exfoliation using a salt and an essential-oil scrub followed by a gentle facial cleansing.” The second therapist joins the first at this stage and the four-hand massage is administered. Since it combines Indian Ayurvedic oils, the massage is called the Purva Karma Four-Hand Massage.

At Urbana Spa, the four-hand massage is performed in themed rooms named Mood, Chocolate, Midnight or Zen. Each room has a state-of-the-art sound system, which surrounds the client with music, and a water fea-

ture in the background. “Our four-hand massage combines a little bit of deep-tissue work with a relaxing Swedish massage,” says Goodwin.

Massage By Design also provides a unique touch to the massage by breaking away from side-by-side application. “We like to cover the entire body at once, meaning one therapist works on the upper half of the body, the other on the lower half,” says Oliver. “In our opinion, ‘tandem’ or ‘mirroring’ tends to feel like a regular two-handed massage.”

Training

While there are few, if any, training courses in four-hand massage, private therapists can offer sessions by teaming up with an associate. Synchrony is the challenge here; you need to be alert enough to be aware of the movements of your partner. This requires a great deal of careful observation, at least in the initial sessions. But after just a few practice sessions together, both therapists will be able to intuitively tune into the other’s technique and rhythm without disrupting it, thereby providing a great massage experience.

While some experts believe that the pressure exerted by both the therapists performing the four-hand massage must be uniform in order to provide deeper relaxation to the client (with one therapist taking the lead and the other following the movements exactly), others believe that the massage should showcase the variant styles of the therapists involved, for a more unique experience. The client, of course, will be the ultimate judge of which technique she prefers. Understanding this requires carefully monitoring the client’s reaction during the session.

Even as four-hand massage gains acceptance as an established technique, it could never fully replace the single-therapist massage. However, this therapy, which is designed to restore harmony to the body and spirit, is a special indulgence that has become an attractive service option for spas and private therapists alike.

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