

The importance of massage in aged care

Massage & Myotherapy Australia Director Charlotte Keane details her experiences working in aged care.



and see people aging, dying, lost within the world of dementia or alone. You also see wonderful, caring staff and family advocating for the people they care for and it can be a pleasure to see the joy people can enjoy by remaining connected to others through various programs that the lifestyle teams run to improve resident's quality of life.

I have met many memorable people over the years that my business has been offering this service. The picture accompanying this article is of Mavis and I, years ago during one of our massage therapy sessions. Mavis lived with Motor Neurone's disease, and I met her at the very first home I worked at and continued to work with her for seven years. I watched as Mavis lost her ability to speak, when she stopped being able to email me about how she felt about her massage session to when she could only blink to communicate with me. All the while my team and I massaged her body as it became more contracted, providing comfort, care, respect, and friendship to improve her quality of life. Mavis was a client I will never forget. She was tenacious and could find happiness even though her body was slowly declining. Her love of dark chocolate was legendary, and I learnt quickly to understand her signals that she wanted another piece. Her eyes would sparkle, and I marvelled at her ability to find happiness in small things.

I regularly massaged a middle-aged man who had unsuccessfully attempted suicide 20 years prior, which resulted in brain damage and an inability to move. It was difficult to witness the aftermath of such an act. I tried to give him comfort and respect with our regular massage sessions.

My 100-year-old client who had received a card from the queen enthusiastically pointed to where it was proudly displayed and I shared in her delight and marvelled at her milestone birthday. She was truly amazing, a walking history book.

A fond memory I have is of an elderly

After 17 years in practice, my work in nursing homes has been some of my most rewarding. I, like all new graduates started out with shiny qualifications and a dream of helping many people feel better with my new skills. I was focused on reducing pain and helping people move again.

My work in a nursing home environment occurred by chance when I responded to a notification from a retiring therapist who was looking for a therapist to take over her clients at a local nursing home. As any therapist in the early years of their career, I was looking to establish myself and build my business and I jumped at the chance to work with aged care residents. I met with that retiring therapist who did a handover with me of her clients and introduced me to the nursing home management and so began my experience working in nursing homes.

The hardest thing for a new therapist with hope to use their skills to improve everyone they work with, is that nursing home work can be quite confronting when you realise that much of your work is managing symptoms and providing comfort, when you have been used to helping people work towards their goal of running their first marathon or returning to the field after a sporting injury. Many people in aged care may be wheelchair bound, have dementia, are young with a serious diagnosis such as multiple sclerosis, Huntington's Disease or are close to death.

I remember feeling thrilled to work alongside other aged care staff when I started working in a nursing home. How wonderful, I thought, that I was being considered a health professional and that massage was being respected as an important intervention.

Working within aged care facilities can be confronting at the start as you walk past rooms



Permission was sought from Mavis's family to mention Mavis and use her picture in this article. May she rest in peace.

woman smiling as I entered the room exclaiming 'I love when you girls come in to see us'. She saw our service being about health and well-being and loved feeling empowered with our exercise suggestions to loosen her tense shoulders.

I've also worked in high care homes with psychiatric patients which further challenged my skills. One man I met in this environment had Lewy body dementia, regularly hallucinating, and had previously been very agitated. His manner had calmed by the time I came to work with him, and he found joy in speaking a little French to me and, being both well-travelled, we would discuss our travel stories. Working with people with dementia can be tricky. Professional boundaries are of course paramount. I massaged him during palliative care when he was being administered morphine and I provided gentle oncology hand holds to support his ailing body. I left with misty eyes as you can get close to these lovely folk with so much life lived and stories to tell.

Research suggests that massage is a helpful intervention for nursing home residents reducing pain, improving quality of life, improving sleep and alleviating stress and anxiety^{1,2,3}. What does it take to successfully provide massage therapy to aged care residents? Professionalism, first and foremost. The power balance tips in the therapist's favour as many aged care clients are weak and require support so it is imperative to show respect and maintain professional standards. Wearing an identifiable uniform that staff and residents associate with your service is recommended. Providing evidence of your qualifications and insurance

to the management and building a relationship with them is important, as is working within your scope of practice and being respectful of other aged care staff and providing your service alongside theirs. A willingness to be vaccinated for COVID-19 as well as the seasonal flu is necessary to protect the people you care for. A commitment to excellent hygiene standards and protocols is paramount as many aged care clients are immunocompromised.

Aged care work requires patience as your sessions may not run to time so flexibility is important. Excellent clinical record keeping – taking time to detail each treatment provided to residents – helps communication with nursing home staff, visiting doctors and allied health staff. My team and I detailed our sessions in the progress notes for each patient.

One of my clinics is based at Mercy Place Parkville so we have a location within a nursing home facility and since the COVID-19 pandemic, we now only offer services to that one location.

Nursing home work can be extremely rewarding but also challenging. I work in clinic with members of the public regularly as well as visiting nursing home residents. I find my work with aged care helps me be more adaptable and responsive to my regular clinic clients, particularly if someone books in with a more challenging presentation. I am not so daunted by complex medical backgrounds and needs because I have experienced these working in aged care.

I am truly blessed to have met so many beautiful souls and their stories and smiles will stay with me forever.

Charlotte is a myotherapist and owns City Haven Massage Therapy with two clinic locations in Parkville and Doncaster East, Victoria. She is about to complete a Bachelor of Health Science, Myotherapy.

References

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