

Better Than a Coffee Break



Stress and work seem inextricably linked. But thanks to a growing trend of offering massage therapy in the workplace, employees of some companies are able to soothe away the effects of stress.

"More and more companies offer massage therapy not only as a perk, but also to increase their employees' productivity and morale," said E. Houston LeBrun, president-elect of the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA). "You get immediate results — the employees experience stress reduction and greater satisfaction with their jobs." Indeed, research on workplace massage backs up what individual employees report. A study by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami found that after five weeks, a group of 26 employees who had twice-weekly, 15-minute massages in the office fared better than a control group of 24 employees who were just told to close their eyes and relax. The massaged group experienced reduced stress and improved performance, while the control group did not. Using electroencephalograms (EEG), researchers measured alpha and beta waves in both groups, and found massage recipients to be more alert.

Stress hormones in the saliva of the massaged group were lower than in the control group. The massaged workers completed math problems in half the time as normal and with half the errors they had before they were massaged. The math skills of the control group did not improve. The massage recipients also said they were less fatigued and more clear-headed. That's significant, considering job stress is estimated to cost the economy \$200 billion every year in lowered productivity, compensation claims, absenteeism, health insurance and direct medical expenses, according to the International Labour Organization's 1993 *World Labour Report*.

Every year, more companies are heeding the call. There are no statistics on the number of companies that offer massage therapy onsite, but those that have offered it include law firms, hospitals, manufacturers and major corporations, such as Boeing, Apple Computer, PepsiCo, Sony Music and United Airlines.

"It's increasing in popularity," said Matthew Guidry, senior advisor to the director of the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "It's become a definite part of disease prevention and health promotion programs in the workplace."

Most companies contract with massage therapists who schedule appointments with employees during breaks. Fully clothed, the employee sits on a specially designed massage chair, while the therapist uses a variety of gliding, kneading and finger pressure techniques adapted from Swedish, shiatsu and acupressure movements.

A typical workplace massage lasts 15 minutes and costs \$15 to \$20, according to Elliot Greene, past-president and current communications committee chair of AMTA. While the company sometimes pays the full fee, most often it either subsidizes the cost or the employee pays the entire amount. Companies are often receptive to implementing a program that is such an employee-pleaser, but it's helpful to provide information to get the ball rolling.

AMTA provides free informational brochures to consumers, and will help consumers or professionals locate massage therapists. Contact AMTA at 820 Davis St., Suite 100, Evanston, IL 60201-4444; phone (847) 864-0123; fax (847) 864-1178; or via the Web at www.amtamassage.org.