

MASSAGE MAGAZINE

MASSAGE HELPS BURN SURVIVORS REDISCOVER TOUCH

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[Massage News](#)



As a massage therapist, you may already have an awareness of massage therapy's healing potential when it comes to clients being able to deal with, even overcome, body trauma.

For one very specific clientele—burn survivors—this therapy holds the promise of especially dramatic results.

[HandReach](#), an organization founded by Brecken Chinn, Ph.D., to help burn survivors and amputees worldwide, recently received a community service grant from the Massage Therapy Foundation (MTF), funded in part by massage product manufacturer BIOTONE.

HandReach’s project, “Massage and Burn Scar Therapy for Burn Survivors in the New England Area,” seeks to “provide massage and burn scar therapy to underserved burn survivors in the New England area who might otherwise not be able to afford treatment,” [according to the MTF’s website](#). (The project’s aim is for massage therapists to be reimbursed for providing free services to survivors.)

[Kate Peck, C.M.T., A.T.C.](#), who practices massage in Massachusetts, specializes in addressing burn injuries and training therapists to serve this population, and through her work with HandReach has seen the transformation massage can make in the lives of burn survivors.

Burn Injuries in the U.S.

More than [385,000 non-fatal burn injuries occurred in the United States in 2015](#), the latest year for which data is available, according to the Centers for Disease Control’s Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) online database.

For survivors of burns, recovery is a long, difficult, painful process that often involves multiple skin grafts and other surgeries.

Problems can persist long after the acute phase of the injury has passed and severely impact quality of life; Peck has seen these issues firsthand with many of her burn-survivor clients.

Such problems include skin dryness, nerve damage (neuropathy), stiffness and restricted range of motion due to scar tissue, permanent disfigurement and extreme psychological trauma.

Massage and Physical Impairment

Peck recalls the case of one of her clients, a man who suffered burns over 75 percent of his body, including both legs. He began receiving massage therapy from Peck two years after his injury occurred.

Before undergoing massage, she said, he had neuropathy of his legs from the knees down, with no range of motion in either ankle.

He has to “walk with a cane; he’s on all kinds of meds,” Peck told *MASSAGE Magazine*.

As with most burn survivors, Peck began with light-touch therapy. Part of the challenge with these clients, she said, is overcoming their very reactive nervous systems.

Burn patients, due to many months or years of enduring painful medical and physical therapy treatments, often become highly sensitive to touch and cannot tolerate much pressure.

As scar tissue heals, it also tends to become tighter and more rigid than the skin it has replaced. Light-touch sessions, Peck said, can be helpful in getting the skin “unstuck” from the tissue underneath and gradually make the client more able to handle deeper work.

After a few specialized massage-therapy sessions, Peck’s client began to feel better.

“In between the third and the fourth [session], there was significant improvement in the range of motion in both of his ankles,” she said.

“What we’re addressing is getting the skin unstuck from the underlying tissue, doing myofascial joint mobilization which is gentle, letting his body trust that we’re not going to hurt him.”

In addition to better range of motion, the man’s neuropathy has improved. “Originally even with the light touch he would jump,” said Peck. “We can do much deeper work now. He’s so pleased—and his [physical therapist] is pleased.”

Kevin Fitzgerald, who was burned in a traffic accident in Saugus, Massachusetts, in which a gas tanker truck exploded, can also attest to the efficacy of massage therapy in helping burn survivors overcome neuropathy.

His arms, which received skin grafts from his elbows to his fingertips, were able to feel pressure and temperature again after several years of regular massage therapy.

He also described, in an email to *MASSAGE Magazine*, a dramatic moment in which he realized how massage had decreased neuropathy in his legs.

“Three years after my accident, I turned to my girlfriend and asked her to move her cold feet off my legs. I can’t tell you how gratifying it was for us both,” Fitzgerald said. “The absence of touch is very hard to live with.”



Life Without Touch?

As Fitzgerald's story notes, living without touch is an unfortunate fact for many burn survivors.

Often, "the only time they get touched is when it's a medical professional and it's a procedure; even their loved ones are afraid to touch them," said Peck, who also works with clients who have suffered spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries. "Not only in the hospital, but 10 years later, they're afraid, so they're a really touch-deprived population.

"Massage can help with their physical healing, their emotional healing," Peck added. "If a massage therapist can come in and touch them nonjudgmentally, with love and healing, then there's much more acceptance of their own bodies as well."

Helping burn survivors accept their bodies can be one of the most gratifying outcomes of this specialization for massage therapists, said [David Hammond, L.M.T.](#), a nationally certified massage therapist who practices in Vermont and attended one of Peck's workshops on burn scar therapy.

In addition to professional massage therapists seeking continuing education, several burn survivors also came to the workshop and shared their stories.

People who are severely scarred from their burn injuries, Hammond said, "feel, during the recovery process, almost shunned ... their bodies have been so catastrophically affected."

When beginning massage sessions with people who are disfigured, as many burn survivors are, one challenge therapists face "is establishing their trust that you're there to help them, that you're not there to judge them," he said. Once that trust is achieved, "they

feel like, *OK, I'm in good hands here, I can be open and not ashamed of my body with this person.*

“Once trust is established,” Hammond said, “It opens a door for healing benefits.”

Hammond, who also spends two days a week providing massage for patients and their families at a cancer center, continues to learn burn scar therapy techniques with Peck and plans to become an approved provider within the network of the organization she founded, the [Massage and Burn Scar Therapy Foundation](#); this will allow him to provide free-of-charge services to burn survivors in his local area.

Learn to Work with Burn Survivors

For massage therapists who may be interested in training to work with the burn-survivor population, training does exist, though only in a few places in the U.S.

Peck calls the form of bodywork she teaches Burn Scar Therapy; according to the [Massage and Burn Scar Therapy Foundation](#) website, her approach is a combination of manual lymph drainage, craniosacral therapy, myofascial scar release and therapeutic massage.

“They are all light touch therapies so there is little to no pain to re-traumatize the area or the patient, and it is effective on new scars and old,” states the website.

In addition to Peck’s workshops in Burn Scar Therapy, [Nancy Keeney Smith](#), who was Peck’s inspiration for beginning work with burn-injured clients, offers workshops in scar management.

“[Smith] was doing massage at a burn camp and gathering data, and she’s a previous research grant recipient,” Peck said. “Each child would get a massage a day ... and they would measure their range of motion before and after.”

Massage and the Medical Community

As *MASSAGE Magazine* has reported in other articles, massage therapy has begun to make major inroads into the medical community; more and more hospitals are both recognizing its benefits and implementing standards for its use. These inroads are especially important for those therapists treating clients who have survived burn injuries.

Burn patients “need us to educate the [physical therapists and the [occupational therapists] and the doctors as to what gentle touch can do,” Peck said of herself and fellow therapists in her organization and in the HandReach project.

“Part of what we’re trying to do is bring it into hospitals, [which means] educating the doctors and medical professionals as well as the burn survivors that they *can* be touched,” she added. “I think what doctors and medical people think of as massage, they can’t imagine you would do that on a burn survivor. But in fact, so much of what we do as part

of bodywork is the light touch, craniosacral release work. Light-touch work is completely appropriate for burn survivors.”

About the Author

Allison Payne is a former Online & Associate Editor for *MASSAGE Magazine*, and now a freelance writer and editor based in central Florida. She has written many articles for *MASSAGE Magazine* and massagemag.com, including “Treat Yourself to a Day at the Spa” (October) and “[Massage Therapy Schools: Everything You Need to Know](#).”

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