

Working with Autoimmune Disorders

- What is an autoimmune disorder and how common are they?
- What are the symptoms of common disorders and do they do well with massage therapy?
- “Fixing” vs “Supporting” – How to adjust your language when working with autoimmune clients
- Which techniques pair well with which disorders

Note: these reference slides are available in the online course page

Working with Autoimmune Disorders

- What is an autoimmune disorder and how common are they?

So, what is an Autoimmune Disorder specifically?

- **Autoimmune disorders arise due to a genetic predisposition.**
- **This makes the immune system misidentify and attack the body's own tissues as if they are foreign invaders.**
- **This predisposition is usually triggered by an over response to external stimuli such as bacteria, viruses, stress, hormones, and others.**
- **Autoimmune diseases are not infectious or contagious to others.**

So, what is an Autoimmune Disorder specifically?

- **Of the over 100 types (and growing), they can cause a wide range of symptoms.**
- **The symptoms largely depend on which tissues the body is misidentifying and attacking.**
- **Severity of the symptoms can range from “mildly disruptive” to “life-threatening.”**
- **In many cases, these disorders will cause permanent and irreversible tissue damage over time if left untreated.**

So, what is an Autoimmune Disorder specifically?

- **By current estimates, about 1 in 5 Americans have one (or more) autoimmune disorder.**
- **There are over 100 known disorders and the list is growing as new ones are being studied and classified.**
- **Often, getting a diagnosis helps clients to explain a lot of their prior symptoms and gives them access to immunosuppressant medications.**
- **Medications can control both their symptoms and more importantly significantly lower the risk of permanent tissue damage and loss of function in the body.**

So, what is an Autoimmune Disorder specifically?

- Obviously, listing all of the 100 plus disorders would take up several pages. And be out of date within a few years!
- So instead, I think it's best to start learning about the most common disorders you'll run into that either find massage to be really helpful or that find massage tends to make things worse.
- And while the more common ones are starting to have a growing body of research on how massage affects them, in general, the research is still scant.

So, what is an Autoimmune Disorder specifically?

- You'll often need to make treatment decisions based on both anecdotal data on client results and the feedback from your actual clients to help decide whether massage itself is a good treatment or not in general, and what specific techniques to use.
- Keep in mind that none of these diseases currently have a “cure” and that all treatment, including medication, massage, and others, is about managing symptoms and preventing long term tissue damage.

So, what is an Autoimmune Disorder specifically?

- **Some of these disorders (such as psoriatic arthritis) directly cause symptoms that massage therapists are known for dealing with such as neck pain, back pain, shoulder pain, etc.**
- **Others attack more internal systems (such as Crohn's disease) but the long term stress of these attacks pile up and can cause the general musculoskeletal pains massage is known for helping out with.**
- **You'll often get clients coming in to you for more general pains and simply need to determine whether massage is contraindicated for any reason due to their autoimmune disorder.**

Working with Autoimmune Disorders

- What are the symptoms of common disorders and do they do well with massage therapy?

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

Here are several of the most common autoimmune disorders and their abbreviations:

- Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)
- Psoriatic arthritis (PsA)
- Ehlers Danlos Syndromes (EDS)
- Multiple Sclerosis (MS)
- Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD, Crohn's, Ulcerative Colitis)
- Sarcoidosis
- Systemic lupus erythematosus (Lupus)
- Hashimoto's
- Type 1 Diabetes
- Grave's

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

In order to help determine how massage can help with any of these, we can break down the various disorders in terms of what types of tissues they attack when triggered:

- **Musculoskeletal & Connective Tissue Systems:** RA, PsA, Ehlers Danlos
- **Nervous System:** MS and related
- **Endocrine System:** Type 1 diabetes, Grave's disease, Hashimoto's
- **Digestive System:** IBD, Crohn's, Celiac
- **Skin:** Psoriasis, Vitiligo, Scleroderma
- **Cross System Cases:** Lupus, Sarcoidosis

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

- We likely can have the most direct (and positive) effect as MTs on conditions of the musculoskeletal and connective tissue systems.
- Autoimmune disorders that affect other systems can still benefit from massage therapy but in a less direct way.
- Some of these conditions generally work well with deeper tissue approaches and others generally do not.
- This also varies from client to client with some clients really feeling benefits from deeper tissue work and others not even with the same condition.
- In the next series of slides, we'll go through each of the common conditions one by one to give you a general understanding of each and how massage can benefit them.

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

Musculoskeletal & Connective Tissue Systems

- Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)
- Psoriatic Arthritis (PsA)
- Ehlers Danlos Syndromes (EDS)

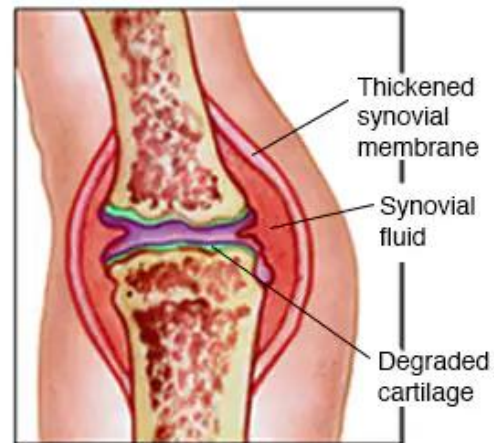
Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

RA is a chronic inflammatory condition that generally affects the lining of the joints, but can also affect a wide variety of tissues including the skin, eyes, lungs, heart and blood vessels.

Signs and symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis may include:

- **Tender, warm, swollen joints (leading to deformed joints like pictured in next slide)**
- **Joint stiffness that is usually worse in the mornings and after inactivity**
- **Fatigue, fever and loss of appetite**

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)



Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

- Earlier in life this disorder tends to affect the smallest joints including fingers and toes but later can progress into the larger joints.
- RA is different than typical osteoarthritis (caused by wear and tear) in that it is more systemic and when the disorder has a flare up, all joints might be affected
- New medication treatments can help keep flare ups from occurring but don't work for everyone
- Severe cases will cause physical disabilities

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

- While RA is an autoimmune disorder that affect the musculoskeletal system which “should” mean that massage would help, in practice, a *majority of RA sufferers* find that deep massage does not provide long term relief and can exacerbate symptoms
- Massage treatments should include some ROM work on joints as well as stretching
- Other forms of treatments may work better for these clients such as acupuncture and/or cryotherapy
- Communication with the client is very important and they should be made aware that massage might not be a good fit for them
- It is important for clients with these conditions (and really any autoimmune or systemic condition) to experiment with a variety of treatments to find what works best for them and under what conditions

Psoriatic Arthritis (PsA)

PsA is a chronic inflammatory condition (I have this!) that generally affects the lining of the joints, but can also affect a wide variety of tissues including the skin, eyes, lungs, heart and blood vessels. PsA and RA have many common symptoms but some notable differences as follows.

Signs and symptoms of psoriatic arthritis may include:

- **Painful joints (but not usually warm and swollen like with RA)**
- **Joint stiffness that is usually worse in the mornings and after inactivity**
- **Foot and low back pain**
- **Plaque psoriasis (patchy flaky skin pictured in next slide)**

Psoriatic Arthritis (PsA)



Psoriatic Arthritis (PsA)

- Earlier in life this disorder tends to affect the skin first, however, some clients don't experience skin conditions and only experience the joint pain during flare ups (which can get misdiagnosed as RA)
- PsA is different than typical osteoarthritis (caused by wear and tear) in that it is more systemic and when the disorder has a flare up, all joints might be affected
- New medication treatments can help keep flare ups from occurring but don't work for everyone
- Severe cases will cause physical disabilities

Psoriatic Arthritis (PsA)

- PsA is an autoimmune disorder that affects the musculoskeletal system and unlike RA, a *majority of PsA sufferers* find that deep massage *does* provide long term relief and relieves symptoms
- Massage treatments should include some ROM work on joints as well as stretching
- For the minority of clients that don't get great results with massage therapy, other forms of treatments may work better for these clients such as acupuncture, chiropractic adjustments, and physical therapy
- Communication with the client is very important and they should be made aware that massage should be but might not be a good fit for them
- It is important for clients with these conditions (and really any autoimmune or systemic condition) to experiment with a variety of treatments to find what works best for them and under what conditions

Ehlers Danlos Syndromes

Ehlers Danlos Syndromes are a group of connective tissue disorders that now are categorized in over 20 types. In general, clients with these syndromes have overly flexible connective tissue (hypermobility) which can cause a range of symptoms and long term issues.

Signs and symptoms of EDS may include:

- **Painful joints that easily dislocate**
- **Overly stretchy and sometimes fragile skin (which needs to be taken into account for massage treatments)**

Ehlers Danlos Syndromes (EDS)

- **Early indications of the disorder tend to be joint dislocations and hypermobility issues (can lead to other related issues such as scoliosis)**
- **Clients with EDS should chose activities that are low impact to prevent potential joint damage - avoid contact sports and heavy weight training (light strength training can help to stabilize the joints)**
- **Pain medications can help but there are no medications that affect the underlying disorder that seem to help currently**
- **Severe cases will cause physical disabilities**

Ehlers Danlos Syndromes (EDS)

- Whether massage therapy helps specific EDS clients is basically a coin toss but any treatment should work mainly on muscle bellies and avoid ROM/stretching of joint spaces
- For the clients that don't get great results with massage therapy, other forms of treatments may work better for these clients such as physical therapy
- Communication with the client is very important and they should be made aware that massage can be but might not be a good fit for them
- It is important for clients with these conditions (and really any autoimmune or systemic condition) to experiment with a variety of treatments to find what works best for them and under what conditions

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

Nervous System

- Multiple Sclerosis (MS)
- Related nervous system disorders such as fibromyalgia, muscular dystrophy, ALS, and others which mimic MS in symptoms

Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is an autoimmune disorder that attacks the myelin sheath of the nerves and can cause long term damage of nerve tissues including lesions in the brain. It causes breakdowns in communication that result in deterioration of movement and abilities over time.

Signs and symptoms of MS may include:

- **Numbness, tingling, neuropathy**
- **Loss of motor functions**
- **Loss of sensory functions**
- **Cognitive issues**

Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

- Early indications of the disorder tend to be losses in motor function (generally bilateral vs only on one side but not always)
- Clients with MS may need to make lifestyle changes that lower flare up triggers such as extreme heat, or high stress (also true of other autoimmune disorders)
- Before modern medications were created that helped prevent flare ups, clients with MS could expect slow but steady deterioration of functions that were both disabling, and life shortening (think Stephen Hawking).
- Newer medications are now allowing many folks diagnosed with MS to lead fairly full lives with potentially little restrictions
- Severe cases will cause physical disabilities, especially if not treated with medications

Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

- In general, massage therapy works well with MS sufferers, especially to help improve loss of motor functions and undo compensation patterns that arise after flare ups
- For the clients that don't get great results with massage therapy, other forms of treatments may work better for these clients such as physical therapy
- Communication with the client is very important and they should be made aware that massage should be but might not be a good fit for them
- It is important for clients with these conditions (and really any autoimmune or systemic condition) to experiment with a variety of treatments to find what works best for them and under what conditions

Related nervous system disorders

There are many less common disorders that mimic and can be confused with MS such as fibromyalgia, muscular dystrophy, ALS, and others.

- In general, from an MTs perspective, massage treatments for these will work along the same lines as MS
- With all of these clients, massage will have no direct affect on the underlying disorder but can be valuable to improve motor function, undo compensatory patterning, relieve stress, and provide more general support for clients with these conditions
- Helping clients to re-engage their parasympathetic nervous systems can lessen symptoms

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

Endocrine System

- Type 1 Diabetes
- Grave's Disease
- Hashimoto's Disease

Endocrine system disorders

- In general, from an MTs perspective, massage treatments for these disorders are helpful with most clients albeit indirectly
- With all of these clients, massage will have no direct affect on the underlying disorder but can be valuable to lessen symptoms, undo compensatory patterning, relieve stress, and provide more general support for clients with these conditions
- Helping clients to re-engage their parasympathetic nervous systems can lessen symptoms

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

Digestive System

- IBD
- Crohn's
- Celiac

Digestive system disorders

- In general, from an MTs perspective, massage treatments for these disorders are helpful with most clients albeit indirectly
- With all of these clients, massage will have no direct affect on the underlying disorder but can be valuable to lessen symptoms, undo compensatory patterning, relieve stress, and provide more general support for clients with these conditions
- Helping clients to re-engage their parasympathetic nervous systems can lessen symptoms

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

Skin System

- Psoriasis
- Vitiligo
- Scleroderma

Skin system disorders

- In general, from an MTs perspective, massage treatments for these disorders are helpful with most clients albeit indirectly
- With all of these clients, massage will have no direct affect on the underlying disorder but can be valuable to lessen symptoms, undo compensatory patterning, relieve stress, and provide more general support for clients with these conditions
- However, with some skin conditions, massage directly on the area may be contraindicated if the skin is broken through (techniques like compression, trigger point therapy, and stretching may still be used)

What are the most common disorders + symptoms?

Cross System Disorders

- Lupus
- Sarcoidosis

Cross system disorders

- In general, from an MTs perspective, massage treatments for these disorders can be helpful with some clients albeit indirectly
- With all of these clients, massage will have no direct affect on the underlying disorder but can be valuable to lessen symptoms, undo compensatory patterning, relieve stress, and provide more general support for clients with these conditions
- These conditions, especially Lupus, may cause extreme fatigue and clients may find that massage helps greatly some days and not at all on others, and may even worsen symptoms

“Fixing” vs “Supporting”

- Adjust your language when working with autoimmune clients

There is currently no “cure” for autoimmunity

- **Each condition has its own set of triggers and symptoms and can vary widely from client to client**
- **Massage therapy and other treatments are meant to manage symptoms and cannot directly affect the underlying conditions**
- **Some newer medications such as biologics and other immunosuppressants can control both their symptoms and more importantly significantly lower and prevent flare ups, preventing permanent tissue damage and loss of function in the body.**

There is currently no “cure” for autoimmunity

- It is vital that we set aside any anti-medication biases we may have as alternative medicine practitioners and acknowledge that our opinions on medication are not relevant and outside our scope of practice
- Leading clients to believe that they can avoid medications that help control flare ups can be detrimental to the client's long term health
- Our language should be clear on how massage therapy may (or may not) help with these conditions and that we are providing support in addition to helping with the more common aches and pains that all clients have and that autoimmune sufferers may have more of

Intake Considerations

- **If a client arrives and tells you about a condition that you have never heard of before, it's worth taking a moment to do some on the spot online research to gain a basic understanding of it.**
- **Stick to well known and respected sources such as the NIH or a renowned non-profit foundation that is focused on their specific condition such as the Arthritis Foundation.**
- **You certainly don't need to find out every known detail about the condition but it helps a lot to understand the main symptoms and the types of body tissue(s) that the condition attacks during flare ups.**

Intake Considerations

- It's also worth noting any secondary symptoms that go along with the condition such as headaches, fatigue, anxiety, etc.
- These clients are used to doctors doing this and you don't need to try to pretend you know everything about all conditions.
- The rarer the condition the more likely that the client themselves has done their own reading and discussed massage therapy with their medical care team.

Intake Considerations

- **Ask clients if they have previous experience getting massage and what sorts of techniques they know will bring them relief. And if there are any techniques that have aggravated their symptoms.**
- **Knowing their prior experience will help you craft a treatment that is most likely to help them and least likely to harm them.**
- **If it's a condition that you are already familiar with, be transparent about whether massage (and your style specifically) has helped your other clients with that condition and what sort of approaches you've developed based on your experience.**

Intake Considerations

- **And ask them to be honest with themselves and you about the results after a first session to help you better craft their future sessions**
- **They may still choose to try out a deeper tissue session to find out for themselves if they are in the subset of clients that do get good results from it for their condition.**
- **Or they may choose to opt to start with lighter work with me. *I let them make the choice about where to start.***
- **Most of these clients are in the middle of the process of learning about their condition and are willing to experiment with different treatments to see what works best for them.**

Intake Considerations

- You will likely run into clients with active flare ups and symptoms profiles that haven't had their autoimmune conditions formally diagnosed.
- These symptom profiles can sometimes look similar to our other clients such as back pain, neck pain, headaches, etc.
- While we are not qualified to diagnose clients under our licensure, you will help a lot more people by getting more familiar with assessing possible autoimmune disorders and getting more comfortable referring clients to a rheumatologist.
- And providing encouragement and support to help them follow through and get a real diagnosis.

Some things that can indicate that a referral is warranted

- **Symptoms that seem systemic and affect most joints in the body**
- **Symptoms that don't seem to respond to massage in the same way as with the majority of your clients or don't get any better after a few sessions**
- **Bilateral symptoms that affect the feet and hands such as neuropathy, tingling, itching, pain, swelling, etc.**

Medication Classes & Overview

- **Some autoimmune conditions have newer medications that actually suppress the attacks and therefore prevent flare ups...when available these are important parts of a client's treatment as they provide the strongest support for long term health.**
 - **Biologics such as Enbrel, Humara, Rinvoq, Cosentyx, Otezla and others each of which suppress various parts of the immune system are examples of these**
 - **In general these medications need to be taken for the rest of a client's life**
 - **Sometimes the body stops reacting to one form of these medications and a client will need to switch to another type**
 - **MS, RA, PsA, Crohn's, and IBD are all conditions which tend to respond well to these types of medications**

Medication Classes & Overview

- **Other autoimmune conditions do not currently have medications that can affect the underlying conditions and the only treatments are more common pain and anti-inflammatories**
 - **Over the counter and prescribed Nsaids**
 - **Steroids such as prednisone**
 - **Some of these conditions affect blood vessels and medications that reduce blood pressure are helpful**
 - **Lupus, Sarcoidosis, and Ehlers Danlos are examples of conditions that currently don't have treatments that directly affect the underlying issues**

Medication Classes & Overview

- **Some autoimmune conditions can be controlled and managed through hormone replacement medications**
 - **Medications that either boost or control thyroid hormones**
 - **Medications that help to control adrenal hormones**
 - **Grave's, Hashimoto's, and Addison's diseases are examples of these**

A Couple of Personal Stories About Working with Clients

Which techniques pair well with which disorders

- An overview based on experience, anecdotal studies, and some actual science studies

Unfortunately, there is scant scientific study on massage therapy and these conditions

- **Due to the fact that many of these conditions are only recently being classified and discovered, science on whether massage can help with them is largely non-existent**
- **Figuring out what works and doesn't is going to be on a case by case basis with some broad guidelines that can help provide direction**

In General if a client is healthy enough to exercise, massage will be a good fit

- **Conditions that are well managed through medication and allow a client to engage in normal activities such as exercise or physical therapy are usually a good match for massage therapy**
- **Disorders that cause high fatigue or abnormal inflammation may not pair well with massage during an active flare up but may be helped by massage between flare ups**

Conditions that attack the musculoskeletal system tend to work well with massage with some exceptions

- **Deep tissue work doesn't pair as well with RA, while ROM and stretching work with and are important for RA**
- **ROM on joints does not pair well with Ehlers Danlos Syndromes but deep tissue on muscle bellies does**
- **PsA tends to accept most techniques well**

Conditions that cause extreme fatigue tend to not work so well with massage

- **Conditions like Lupus and Fibromyalgia that cause fatigue tend to find that massage simply exacerbates symptoms, without a feeling relief**
- **Lighter techniques such as Traeger, energy work, Reiki, and similar styles can avoid this while still helping clients to engage their parasympathetic nervous systems and relax**

Conditions that affect the digestive system pair well with massage between flare ups

- **Conditions like IBD and Crohn's can find relief with massage therapy as a support for general relaxation and stress reduction**
- **During a flare up massage is contraindicated like it would be during any digestive episode**

Working with Autoimmune Disorders

- Q & A
- How to download slides, get your certificates,
when video will be available