

The role of reflexology in elderly care



Vastly improved life expectancy, one of the great triumphs of the last century, looks set to be one of great challenges of this one.

Between 2015 and 2020, over a period when the general population is expected to rise by 3%, the numbers aged over 65 are expected to increase by 12% (1.1 million); the numbers aged over 85 by 18% (300,000); and the number of centenarians by 40% (7,000).

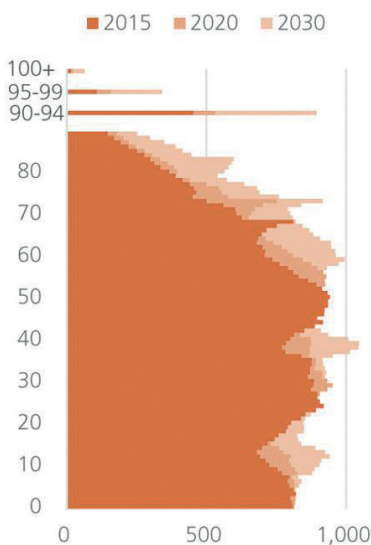


Chart 1: the changing shape of the UK population

Age structure of the UK population in 2015, 2020 and 2030, by single year of age to 89 and bands thereafter, ONS 2012-based principal projections, shown in thousands.

A rise in the elderly population, particularly if not matched by health improvements, will place ever-greater pressure on the public finances, as a relatively smaller working-age population supports growing spending on health, social care and pensions.

Why brain health is HOT right now - issues affecting the brain and mind are widespread

- 1 in 4 suffer with a mental health condition
- 12 million adults see their GP for this; most cases are stress-related anxiety and depression
- 13.3 million working days are lost each year due to stress-related illness
- Cognitive decline and dementia are on the rise
- 1 in 5 older adults suffer with depression and/or dementia
- 7% of over 65s have dementia
- 20% of over 80s have dementia

How the brain controls the body

Your brain and spinal cord work in partnership with your body's peripheral nervous system. This network of nerves not only feeds information to your brain but controls a whole host of conscious and unconscious body functions.

When I was training as a reflexologist in 1997, My Grandad, Leonard, was one of my first reflexology case histories and he said that reflexology made him feel relaxed, was soothing and he enjoyed falling asleep when receiving a treatment. I continued reflexology treatments on Grandad's feet into his late 90's; after that I focused on his hands for relaxation and to help with his hand contractures.

How did my Grandad have a sharp mind, live to 103 and lead a happy and healthy life? My belief is 17 years of reflexology, touch, being

part of a sociable and loving family, keeping mobile, going out, travelling by bus for his twice weekly shopping when not staying with us, reading 2 newspapers every day, engaging with his neighbours, debating with us after Question Time and the news, eating a diet of fresh fruit and vegetables, stews, plenty of oily fish and meat, refusing most processed foods and enjoying a brandy!

Reflexology and Healthy Ageing in a group environment

As a reflexologist, I specialise in elderly care for clients, in private care homes and private nursing homes. When I visit care home residents, they are often interested in watching me lighting candles and turning on soothing music. Working with a group of residents, I demonstrate on a carer who is relaxed in a seated position and perform a number of circulation boosting exercises and breathing techniques, focusing on their feet, legs, arms and hands, with the aim of achieving relaxation and helping with heavy leg syndrome, swollen ankles and pins and needles in the legs. Working on a staff member's hands and feet builds up trust and confidence and it makes the residents laugh. I ask who would like a mini reflexology hand treatment in the group; on every occasion all the residents' hands have raised and they have all enjoyed receiving reflexology. Carers frequently inform me that reflexology produces a calming and relaxing environment not just for the residents, but for the staff members and themselves.

A guide to reflexology and healthy ageing when working with residents in care homes/nursing homes

- Work closely and build up trust and confidence with the family, senior carers, staff members and GPs to understand the needs of the resident, their health concerns/ conditions, their personality and prescribed medications to help you develop an individual care plan.
- Research and record each medication they are taking on the confidential case history form, to ensure there are no contra-indications. Many elderly individual



Anti oxidant phyto nutrients

- residents have a host of different disorders and they are often on a cocktail of different drugs to help support symptoms which include dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, heart problems and depression.
 - Listening, a caring approach and a sense of humour are essential. Once I have built up trust with my client, I give them a hug at the end of the treatment. They all have responded well to touch and it encourages family members to be more tactile.
 - Have a family member(s), carer or friend watch the reflexology treatments to experience how the client's breathing changes and how the client relaxes, and how their facial features soften through the emotionally positive experience they receive through touch.
 - After a reflexology treatment, ask if you can demonstrate on family members and suggest that they could give a mini hand or foot massage on their relative in between treatments to continue the sense of relaxation and wellbeing.
 - Ask family members/friends to take their relative out into daylight for at least 20 minutes, as this enhances dementia patients' lives – this is related to when natural light/wavelengths penetrate the eyes and go directly to the brain – it gives a calming effect, helping to stop anxiety and 'sundowning'.
- Use the AoR advice service as they have amazing research. Tracey's reflexology support at the end of the phone has been a huge benefit for me and my elderly clients, especially in the arena of dementia and Parkinson's disease. Research is at your fingertips, AoR seminars and online recordings can also be helpful (there is going to be one next year on treating older clients). Camexpo 2015's world-class education programme dedicated to complementary and natural health has just taken place at Olympia and had a wealth of seminars and workshops including Tracey Smith's workshop on Reflexology and Healthy Ageing.
 - Nutrition and a healthy diet – Check with family members/carers on what types of foods individuals are eating and how often. Are they eating a Mediterranean diet of lots of healthy, brightly coloured fresh fruit and vegetables, omega rich oily fish, eggs, wholegrain and unprocessed meats? Are they hydrated and drinking enough water? If not, you can work with the chef/ family/carers to include these in their diet. If they have difficulty eating or swallowing, fresh soups, stews, yogurts and nutritional supplements can be included.
 - Since working in elderly care, I have become more interested in how food directly influences brain function, mood and mental performance; the link between brain, behaviour and immunity. Nutrition

plays a vital role in maintaining brain health throughout life, including brain ageing; for example, omega-3s and micronutrients play a role in preventing structural deterioration, reducing risk factors such as homocysteine and optimising cognitive function, brain cell communication and reducing oxidative stress.

- If you are treating older people who are incapable of providing consent for treatment as they have dementia, you will need to obtain a proxy signature of consent for the treatment. It can come from a family member, GP, carer or care manager.
- If possible, speak with family members and carers between reflexology treatments and record any relevant improvements in patients' wellbeing, mood, communication and movements.

Reflexology relaxation techniques and reflex points in elderly care

Reflexologists treat the whole body and not individual symptoms. When working in elderly care I have found that it calms the client's mind to spend more time on foot relaxation exercises at the beginning of the treatment – especially relaxing the diaphragm, kneading the metatarsals and foot rocking – and combine this with breathing exercises. I go back to the brain, head, master gland (the pituitary and all glands), 12 cranial nerves (the nerves that emerge directly from the brain and exchange information between the brain and parts of the body, primarily to and from regions of the head and neck, which helps induce a state of deep relaxation. Attending Dr Martine Faure-Alderson's two-day AoR Reflexology seminar in 2000 on cranial nerves was enlightening. The spine, solar plexus, diaphragm, kidneys, spleen and nervous system help support a feeling of peace and tranquillity, especially in clients who become anxious and develop 'sundowning', which is a symptom of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. 'Sundowning' is where confusion and agitation worsen in the late afternoon and evening; this can happen in mid-stage and advanced dementia. Senior carers have approached me and asked me to work on residents with these symptoms;



Omega 3 rich foods

we have worked on their hands and feet in a seated position, and they have drifted off to sleep.

Community support and elderly care - A heart-warming short story

Angel Court was a day-care centre in Hadleigh, Suffolk which was being shut down, meaning that the elderly day-care residents would have to travel a 20-mile return journey every day to access day-care services. As I worked in a private care home in Hadleigh treating individual residents, I approached the management team to see if the day-care centre could use a large ground floor space and separate kitchen which was not always in use. I organised and sat in on a couple of meetings to introduce the relevant bodies in the community and I am delighted to report that 18 months ago, a day-care centre opened on the ground floor of Magdalen House private care home and is thriving.

Reflexology and elderly care in a private care home

Theresa Wright talks about the reflexology care that her mother and father received:

'Darrell first treated my mum with reflexology in January 2014 at the care home where she was a resident. My mum had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2008 and she was in the later stages of the disease when we met Darrell. My mum passed away a year later in a nursing home.

Initially, Darrell concentrated on my mum's hands and feet. Mum's hands had begun forming into claw-like fists some months before. The left hand was more severe than the right. However, after just one treatment of hand reflexology, the right hand had opened up significantly. Darrell continued to treat my mum weekly for the next few weeks and then monthly. We noticed a considerable change in Mum's hands, but also in her general wellbeing after treatments. She seemed to respond facially and her body relaxed during treatments.

Although my mum had lost most vocal communication, she would say words such as 'yes' or 'no' and we knew that she enjoyed the treatments. She was able to respond to Darrell's voice (by saying 'yes') when Darrell asked her if that felt good (when massaging her feet for example). My mum would also open her eyes more and look at Darrell during the treatment, especially in the early months of treatments. It wasn't just the treatment my mum responded to, but the music. We used the same relaxation music each session in the hope that it might prepare Mum by associating this particular music to the treatment (Mum always had music/radio on at other times). This seemed to be backed up by one of the senior carers who told us that when they played the same music in the lounge, Mum turned her head to where the music was coming from.

For my dad it gave him pleasure, assurance and also comforted him when he could see how his wife responded during the reflexology treatments, as my mum's Alzheimer's had deteriorated to the extent that she was



completely dependent on others. He enjoyed watching the treatments as he could see Mum was responding in her own way and sometimes when he asked her if she was alright, she would answer 'yes.'

The reflexology treatments were very important to us because Alzheimer's had taken everything from my mum, but we felt we were still able to provide a good quality of life by giving her these reflexology treatments. They not only helped her physically – this was one of the few times that my mum was able to experience gentle and comforting tactile experiences, as opposed to the necessary but functional personal care she received most of

the time. Apart from the physical stimulus, it also gave Mum an emotionally positive experience too – combining comforting touch, soothing sounds, aromatherapy smells from candles and the visual colour of stones and powerful crystals. I believe that this complete holistic approach is vital to those who are suffering from dementia as it is a disease that so often cuts people off; whilst reflexology can be a positive way of still reaching out to sufferers and allowing them to enjoy sensory experiences.

As a consequence of watching my mum having reflexology and seeing the positive results, my dad started to have reflexology

sessions. At first he was a little sceptical, as he said he had ticklish feet and he didn't like them being touched. However, he had enjoyed monthly aromatherapy massages in recent years since hurting his hip in a fall, so he wasn't a complete novice to the benefits of aromatherapy and massage. His first trial treatment was in a chair in my mum's room. Although not ideal because he was sitting up rather than lying down, he must have been relaxed because he fell asleep! After the treatment, he said that his feet hadn't felt ticklish and that he felt very relaxed. After this treatment, he began to have further treatments at home where he could lie down. He always enjoys the reflexology, which relaxes him and enables him to have a deep, relaxing sleep. Although reflexology hasn't helped with the soreness in his hip, the treatments enable him to benefit from the holistic sensory approach. I think they help to lift his mood, allow him to relax (especially in his neck and shoulders, which can get very tense as he has to use a mobility aid to help him walk) and get good quality sleep.'

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