

# CAN NATURAL THERAPIES HELP YOU SLEEP?

Complementary therapies have long been used to help people cope with long-term health conditions. But can they make a difference when it comes to sleep disorders? **Karen Young** explores the options...

The use of essential oils in body scrubs, pillow sprays or aromatherapy massages is a great way to wind down for a good night's sleep

For many people, massage and other therapies are still seen as a form of pampering – an occasional treat to be enjoyed as part of a spa day. Yet an increasing number of people are turning to complementary therapies to help improve their health and wellbeing.

A recent survey of professional therapists showed that nearly two thirds of them are treating clients who have a long-term health condition. Further still, 82% reported they regularly support clients with stress and anxiety, 65% with lower back pain, 55% with joint and mobility issues, and 35% with a diagnosed mental health condition. These sorts of things can have a huge impact on our sleep but the question is, can complementary therapies help?

In terms of hard evidence, there's obviously more research available for conventional medical treatments than for complementary therapies. But there are a good number of studies that suggest certain therapies may also benefit different groups of people, conditions and symptoms. Many of these studies include at least one measurement of sleep, to try to identify whether the therapy helped improve this. Very often the answers are 'yes' and 'significantly'.

Most complementary therapies take a holistic or whole-person approach, rather than target a specific problem. As such, an overall effect of the treatment might be that it helps to relax a person and reduce their level of anxiety or pain, and if it's the anxiety or pain that's been affecting their sleep, then their sleep should improve. Or to look at it from another angle, unlike a sleeping pill, it means the therapy has helped address the underlying cause as well as the symptom, and without any unwanted side effects.

It's also important to note that it might not be the therapy alone that helps improve sleep, but a combination of different factors that make up the whole treatment experience. This might include having the time to talk through your health concerns with a therapist, the essential oils being diffused in the room, the relaxing background music, the dimmed lighting, or the chance to simply stop, lie back and take a deep breath...

While we might not be able to pick out exactly which elements of the treatment made a difference, the fact that the therapy made a difference can be what counts most. ▶





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## AROMATHERAPY

Aromatherapy uses plant-based essential oils to promote health and wellbeing

Aromatherapy can help induce sleep safely and naturally through the therapeutic use of different essential oils, which are pure essences extracted from flowers, berries, grasses, roots, seeds, bark, fruits and herbs.

“All essential oils have their own character and aroma, along with specific therapeutic properties, which in themselves can help to promote sleep,” says Mary Dalglish, an aromatherapist and a vice president of the Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT). “For example, clary sage and marjoram have sedative qualities, so these might be the ideal choice for some people struggling to sleep.

“Different oils can also be used to tackle any underlying problems that might be hindering a good night’s sleep. Lavender, chamomile and neroli are calming and soothing oils, so they are great for relieving anxiety, while marjoram can be used to soothe away muscular tension. Where depression is linked to poor sleep, an uplifting oil, such as bergamot, could be beneficial.

“Essential oils can be used in massage or bath blends and vaporisers, with their tiny but powerful molecules being absorbed into the bloodstream via the skin and lungs. Aromatherapy massage – which combines essential oils with soft tissue work – is a particularly excellent way to soothe aching muscles and promote relaxation and sleep.”



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## MASSAGE

Massage involves manipulating soft tissue to relieve tension and improve wellbeing

Massage comes in a variety of forms and can be applied to the whole body or target specific areas, such as the head, face, back or feet. It’s particularly effective at relieving tension that’s built up in the muscle and other soft tissue, which, if left unchecked, can take its toll on our general health and wellbeing and, of course, our sleep.

“If a client is stressed and having trouble sleeping, then a key aim of any massage treatment will be to get them into a relaxed state as soon as possible,” says Maria Mason, award-winning salon owner and a vice president of the FHT. “Slow, fluid massage movements are likely to be more beneficial than deep or invigorating techniques, and will help slow the breathing, calm the mind and relax the muscles. Adding some warmth into the treatment, by using heated stones or herbal compresses helps relax the muscles more quickly and also encourage sleep, much in the same way that having a warm bath can.

“On top of benefiting from the treatment itself, ultimately we want the client to learn from their massage session – to take away something useful, which they can use when they feel anxious or restless. We want them to recognise that when they slow their breathing down and relax their muscles, they feel calmer. To reinforce this, we offer our clients aftercare advice at the end of the massage, such as simple breathing exercises or muscle relaxation techniques, that can be used at any time, anywhere, including in bed when trying to get to sleep.”



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## HYPNOTHERAPY

Hypnotherapy focuses our minds, increasing our receptiveness to positive suggestions

Hypnotherapy can help change poor sleep habits into useful ones, and refocus limiting beliefs, such as ‘I always struggle to sleep’ into more flexible beliefs, such as ‘I will take positive steps to sleep well and recognise that some nights it may take a little longer than others’. Different techniques can also be used by hypnotherapists to gain insight into why someone may be having poor sleep, to boost their self-esteem, raise coping strategies and enhance resilience.

“Beyond the sleep issues most people think of, such as trouble falling asleep, waking in the night and waking up early, hypnotherapy can help with a range of less common sleep-related problems including sleep talking, bed wetting and even having sex when asleep, known as sexsomnia,” says hypnotherapist and FHT Fellow Dr Kate Beaven-Marks.

“The hypnosis process can be very relaxing, which helps reduce anxiety and enhance suggestibility. This allows the therapist to explore the client’s subconscious emotions and thought processes, and provide post-hypnotic suggestions that will direct the client to new and more beneficial responses. This process can be supported by mental rehearsal, allowing the client to practise their new behaviours and responses.

“Whether their difficulty with sleep is a primary or secondary problem – for example, caused by pain, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder – hypnotherapy is particularly useful for people with sleep issues, because it takes a solution-focused approach to alleviating symptoms and developing positive resources.”



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## REIKI

Reiki involves channelling universal life energy to promote self-healing

Reiki is often described as deeply relaxing and grounding, making it potentially helpful for anyone who is prone to anxiety, racing thoughts or sleep problems.

“Reiki is based on the principle that universal energy or ‘chi’ flows throughout the body,” says Judith Hadley, a reiki master and FHT vice president. “When this energy is free-flowing we’re in optimum health, but when it gets blocked or stagnates this is when we’re likely to experience problems. Reiki practitioners help restore balance and support self-healing by drawing on universal energy and channelling this to the client through visualisation and by gently placing their hands on or just above their body.

“Lots of clients either fall asleep during a reiki session or report an improvement in their sleep at a later date. One particularly memorable client was a lady I’ll call Jane. She had been the main carer for her mum, who had recently passed away after suffering from dementia for 10 years.

“During the consultation, it became clear that Jane was struggling to grieve and let go of a lot of suppressed emotion. She was quite apprehensive at the beginning of the session, but eventually relaxed. When the treatment ended, she was tearful for quite some time but then felt a huge sense of relief. During a follow-up call two days later, Jane said she felt an inner calmness and was sleeping more peacefully and deeply than she had ever remembered.” ▶







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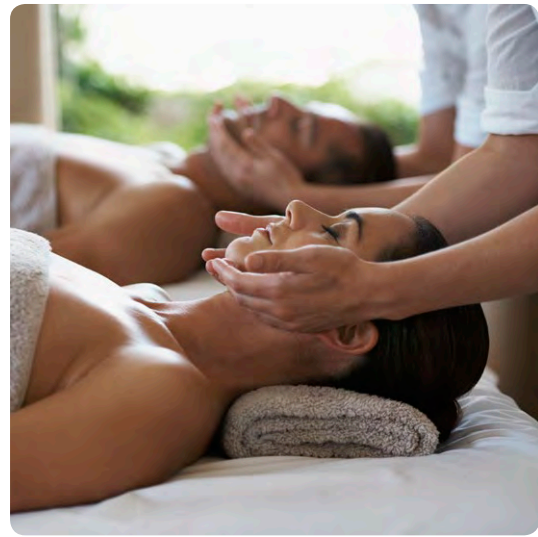
## REFLEXOLOGY

Reflexology works specific points on the feet to help restore balance

Reflexology is based on the principle that specific reflex points found on the feet correspond to different areas of the body. In this way, the feet can be seen as a map of the whole body. By applying specialised massage techniques to these reflex points, the aim is to help restore balance to the whole body and improve general wellbeing, although the reflexologist will return to specific points to help address any issues the client may have, which may include sleep problems.

“As a holistic treatment, reflexology is wonderfully relaxing in its own right,” says reflexologist Maria Mason. “A couple of reflex points I always pay special attention to, on nearly all of my clients, are the diaphragm and solar plexus. These can be found under the ball of each foot and towards the centre, and they help to slow the breathing down, which reduces anxiety, and promote a sense of deep relaxation and inner peace. I would also focus on reflex points linked to areas where a lot of tension is typically stored, such as the eyes, head, neck and shoulders.

“Two other reflexes that are especially useful for sleep problems are the pineal gland, which secretes melatonin and controls our sleep cycle, and the pituitary gland, which regulates other hormone glands in the body.”



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## HOW TO FIND A COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIST

A bit of research before booking will ensure you find the right therapist for you



One of the most common ways people find a therapist is through personal recommendation. But to ensure you receive the best treatment possible, from a therapist you can trust, you should check a few credentials first.

Your therapist should be suitably qualified and insured to practise. It's also important to check they belong to an accredited register or professional association.

Once you've found a therapist, you might like to ask them a few questions before booking a treatment. For example, you may want to know if they have experience working with people who have similar needs to your own. For more guidance on what to look for in a therapist, visit [fht.org.uk/findatherapist](http://fht.org.uk/findatherapist)

### A few final points...



Always use complementary therapies alongside standard medical care and not as an alternative.



If you're currently receiving care from your doctor, midwife or another health professional, tell them which complementary therapies you're using.