



Yowell, Miss, Reis and Markert work out the author's kinks. Photo: Julie Dreelin

TOUCHY FEELY

Are you stressed, injured or old? Even if the answer's "no" you're still overdue for a massage.

Touch yourself. Go ahead, no one's looking. Set the mood, dull your inhibitions and rub that aching shoulder. Squeeze that sore butt cheek. It feels good at first, but after about five seconds it ain't all that, is it? That's because you're doing it wrong. You don't know your body as well as you thought. You're not trained in the art of the tactile. And, moreover, you're not relaxed. Not completely.

In 22 years of surf travel, I've gotten massages all over the world: *Hammam* in Morocco, *Pijat* in Indonesia, painful ones in Samoa, mellow ones in Central and South America... If the wind was up and the sign said 25 bucks, I was down. But oddly, I've never received one

in the States, dismissing it as a luxury — a decadent indulgence for fat, pasty tourists. The irony is: vacations don't generate stress, life does. *Work* does. *Home* does. Lucky for me, I've been living in a Shangri La of massage therapy this whole time.

"The Outer Banks isn't the place for 'fast food' massage," says Heidi Markert, a therapist of eight years who moved here from Virginia Beach. "The whole vibe is about relaxation, unlike the hustle and bustle of the city, where people fit a massage into their hour lunch break."

Heidi works primarily out of Aqua Spa in Duck, but still services some clients back in VB while lending her hands at local

surfing events. She prefers giving a more sedative massage and works with many prenatal women. However, no matter which therapist you see, that sedation should begin before anyone lays a hand on you.

"It's all psychosomatic, so the atmosphere, energy and setting are all very important," says Outer Banks native Brandi Miss. "You want music that will calm the nervous system, colors and visuals that are soothing and a comfortable environment that doesn't promote too much of one dogma or is too masculine or feminine. I use unscented, organic laundry soap and natural products that are neutral in smell and only use very specific pure oils (fractionated coconut oil and ajoba are popular) regarding people's allergies. Basically, try to bring the outside in — lots of plants, rocks and feathers. All this promotes relaxation."

Brandi actually re-routed a degree in Philosophy to work on an herb farm in Seattle, where she found herself drawn to Asian techniques like *Ashiatsu* and *Shiatsu*, inspiring a move back East for formal schooling. After working in Chapel Hill for five years, and then the Sanderling Inn, she's settled into a more liberating and intimate role as Mother Nurture Massage.

"I don't cater to the visitor trade," Brandi says. "I get calls from out-of-towners but refer most of them on. I have a very local clientele, with regular business hours, and do therapeutic work for people who've sustained an injury and are rehabilitating, or athletes like marathon runners or triathletes. I can give a nice relaxing massage, but that's not really the work I do."

If that's what you seek, Liza Yowell might be more your speed. A licensed therapist of 14 years with 60% local clientele, her boutique-style Bodywork By Liza space reeks of good chi; and though her business model is focused equally on skin care and other holistic remedies, Yowell knows how to address trauma — and how to prevent it.

"I'm a big believer that people should get a massage at least once a month for maintenance," she says. "People come to unwind for their vacation, but then some

people will throw out their back, let it go for a month, then say, 'Fix me.' It's not always that simple; you might have to come in a few times. But sometimes I can get that knot out in one visit. And it's cool when you see someone a month later, like, 'Where ya been?' And they say, 'Oh, I haven't needed a massage since I saw you, because you got rid of the pain.'"

And with that, this guy's ears perk up. In a desperate attempt to pull the E-brake on middle age, I've embraced the ugly truth: before 40, bodywork is pleasure. After 40, it's damage control. And seeing as I spend half my life hunched over a desk and the other half getting detonated in the ocean — plus new arthritis creeping in every season — it's almost imperative I start incorporating professional massage into my ritual. Be it Liza's preferred *Lomilomi* technique or *Psoas* treatment, or something a little harder.

"I'm good with people who have chronic pain or skeletal issues," says Christina Reis, who brings eight years experience to Outer Banks Massage Therapy in Corolla. "I specialize in neuromuscular therapy, myofascial release, Swedish deep tissue... But I won't tell somebody they need intense work if they can't handle it. We'll communicate. And I never do the same massage twice, expecting the same results. That's the definition of insanity [laughs], so I change it up, tailoring my massage to the client. And you'd be surprised at the variety of clients I get: as young as seven and as old as 98."

But buyer beware: the residual effects of getting a full-body massage from any of these four attractive, good-natured young ladies go far beyond relaxation

and pain management. In fact, the comedown can be quite... psychedelic.

"As soon as a client walks out of the room, you can see it in their face," says Liza. "It's like they're meditating. They think they need a taxi to get home [laughs], because they've experienced something pretty intense that's at least made a difference in their day."

"I've seen people walk out in the wrong direction, leave their keys or credit cards," laughs Christina. "A lot of people prefer doing in-home massage specifically for that reason. They feel so relaxed they don't even want to drive afterwards."

Many of Brandi's clients who deal with specific injuries report that massages have helped them sleep better and feel better overall — while athletes report performance improvements the very next time after getting a massage. For Heidi, however, it's all about the connection.

"I had this sweet elderly lady who had just lost her husband," she remembers, "and at the end, she had me crying with, 'God bless you, sweetheart. You made me feel better than I've felt in a long time.' Sometimes they just want someone to talk to. And I love people. That's why I do what I do."

When you get right down to it, that's what we all seek in life: Interconnectivity with something good. And beyond the myriad physiological benefits of massage — being touched just feels good.

"I didn't think I'd like touching half naked people [laughs]," finishes Liza. "But I used to work for a military contractor in Washington D.C. I just hated being chained to that desk in that environment. Then I fell in love with massage. It isn't just about going into a room and getting touched. Massage integrates everything: mind, body, spirit, and how you feel about yourself. At the end of the day, seeing the difference I've made in the well-being of a person is really gratifying." — Matt Pruett

VACATIONS
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STRESS,
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WORK
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HOME
DOES.