

According to the American Pain Foundation ([www.painfoundation.org](http://www.painfoundation.org)), “an estimated 76.5 million Americans report that they have had a problem with pain of any sort that persisted for more than 24 hours in duration.” The website also states that pain costs Americans \$100 billion annually. We listen to our clients and class participants enumerate their many problems re: their daily activities of daily living which are impacted by pain.

“Pain management is important for ongoing pain control especially if you suffer with long term or chronic pain. After giving a pain assessment, your doctor can prescribe pain medication or other treatments to help you get relief. Sometime psychotherapy is also useful in learning new coping skills to help with chronic pain.” (Web MD Magazine 1-04-09)

So what can I do in my practice, to reduce chronic pain and give relief? Because I am a Watsu® practitioner and have Jahara and Wasserdanzen skills, I can guarantee pain relief for a period of time spent in a warm pool with a willing client. Ready relief which may last for several hours or days occurs consistently.

Watsu® is a passive warm water bodywork technique which combines Shiatsu Massage and water. Breath work is key in the process and the technique, which Harold Dull, a Shiatsu Master, developed in the 70's for relaxation and wellness, has given us an effective tool to reduce pain. Among the advantages found, Dr. Robert C. Scaer MD, PC, a prominent neurologist, determined that the client's heart and respiration rates decrease, depth of respiration increases and muscle tone decreases. He further suggests, “Watsu® has a balancing effect on the autonomic nervous system, causing quieting of sympathetic nervous system and enhancement of the parasympathetic nervous system.”

In Comprehensive Aquatic Therapy, Dr's Becker and Cole state that water immersion has positive effect on pain perception, “A relaxation effect is produced by a central process. It is not understood, is likely multi-factorial, and is likely produced within the reticular activating system deep within the brain.”

A recent study (08) by Chen, Oh, and Shim of Hanyang University Hospital, Seoul, Korea, shows that Watsu® was helpful in controlling spasticity and improving ambulatory function of the patients with hemiparesis. “Other studies report success with Fibromyalgia patients as an effective holistic intervention and with children in reduction of tone and increased convenience of ADL's. More research is needed.

Since Watsu® is predominately muscle re-education, other components of neuro-therapeutic facilitation may be incorporated. Passive techniques combine stretching, soft tissue mobilization, trunk rotation, elongation and profound relaxation. I have found a short session to be beneficial used at the beginning of a treatment period to promote relaxation, reduce tone, and to improve soft tissue mobility.

Practitioner implications include the following: “Training is in non-interference, being present without trying to do something to someone “is one of founder Harold Dull's major premises. The practitioner

must be present and offer unconditional acceptance. Trust is essential. The practitioner responds to what he/she feels is needed at that moment. Dull suggests” the practitioner should be *as one* with the receiver.”

Watsu® is one on one, completely passive and needs to be followed by functional activities. There are specific precautions including shoulder subluxation, osteoporosis and sensitivity to vestibular stimulation.

Luis B. Vargas, PhD, PT, states the following clinical objectives:

- Improvement in circulation
- Increase in range of motion
- Increase in spine or joint flexibility
- Improvement in tidal volume
- Improvement in postural alignment
- Improvement in sleep patterns
- Decrease in muscle fatigue
- Decrease in pain or tenderness
- Decrease in muscle tone
- Resolution of muscle spasms
- Decrease in tension and stress

In addition, I add the following benefits: my experience with cancer and lymphedema patients has shown the importance of reduction of edema and enhancement of the lymphatic system. My own experience reflects increased energy and reduced fatigue coupled with improved body awareness and improved posture. Often a psychological release occurs through the total relaxation and surrender to the water (not surrender to the practitioner....the water is the healing influence here.)

Watsu® serves those who are interested and willing to enter into a session....even a short one. Persons who are well and seek relaxation find it useful as do persons who have chronic pain, neuromuscular disorders, headaches, fibromyalgia, arthritis and more. Not everybody is a candidate....not all persons are interested in allowing their hair and ears to be wet and to place themselves in the arms of another and surrender to the warm water.

In the name of safety, communicate re: medical problems. If in doubt.....don't utilize that movement. I err on the conservative side and that has stood me in good stead for more than a half century. As a

practitioner (giver) move from your center, maintain a neutral spine, protect your partner's neck and back, keep his/her nose out of the water, adopt a wide stance, maintain a natural breath pattern, and use slow, linear movement, avoid rotation with persons sensitive to vestibular stimulation.

Pool precautions are the usual for aquatic therapy (sidebar or box)

- Fever over 100 degrees
- Uncontrolled epilepsy
- Severe cardiac issues
- Open wounds or skin infection
- Respiratory disease or severely reduced vital capacity
- Severe urinary tract, respiratory tract, flood infection or vestibular problems
- Tracheotomy
- Bowel incontinence
- Menstruation w/o internal protection
- Allergy to pool chemicals
- Total hip precautions include avoidance of internal rotation and hip flexion more than 90 degrees
- Avoid extreme flexion with osteoporotic patients
- Spinal fusion contraindication: avoid passive movement which enhances spine mobility \*  
\*Clearance from physician required

Watsu® training is available through sites listed below. The requirements to be a practitioner include 500 plus hours of study and practice. However, the technique may be utilized in part by persons who study and choose to term their work "warm water bodywork" or a technique based on Watsu®. The comfort, ease, and certainty with which a qualified practitioner operates does make a significant difference. However, I have used buddy Watsu® relaxation techniques in groups in order that the surrender to the water may be experienced. For me, it is as pleasant to give a Watsu® as it is to receive. I consider Watsu® as an important CAM (Complimentary and Alternative Medicine for Pain Reduction).

Harold Dull has provided for us a wonderful technique which is truly "Freeing the Body in Water."

In summary:

“Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it.” (Verse 78 of the Tao Te Ching of Lao-tzu)

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#### Resources:

- Aquatic Resources Network: [info@aquaticnet.com](mailto:info@aquaticnet.com) or [www.aquaticnet.com](http://www.aquaticnet.com)
- Aquatic Therapy & Rehab Institute: [Atri@atri.org](mailto:Atri@atri.org) or [www.atri.org](http://www.atri.org).
- Elaine Marie Watsu 100(ph. 707-995-1998): [watsuem@inreach.com](mailto:watsuem@inreach.com)
- Fibromyalgia Partnership: [www.fmpartnership.org](http://www.fmpartnership.org)
- Jahara Technique: [Jahara@juno.com](mailto:Jahara@juno.com)
- National Cancer Institute: [www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/pdg/supportivecare/lymphdema/patient](http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/pdg/supportivecare/lymphdema/patient)
- Watsu® WABA; P.O. 889 Middletown, CA 95461 (Ph. 707-987-3801)(Find Peggy Schoedinger(CO) &Minakshi (FL) [minakshi@bellsouth.net](mailto:minakshi@bellsouth.net), [www.waba.edu](http://www.waba.edu)

Mary Essert, B.A., ATRIC, has instructed in aquatics for a half a century. Her skill is teaching others... health care professionals, exercise instructors, class members, and caregivers. Giving independence and self care techniques which reduce pain to others is her passion. She has been a Watsu® practitioner for 13 years. She teaches and presents internationally and is employed by Conway Regional Health Systems in Conway, AR. Contact her for workshops, publications, information at [www.maryessert.com](http://www.maryessert.com).