

# The power of massage

Alistair Hall talks to a canine masseuse about how our dogs can benefit from regular massage

**W**e all love a good massage. Shoulders rubbed and squeezed, our backs pummelled and legs stretched and caressed – our pent up stresses, aches and pains just seem to melt away. The biggest trouble with massage is in convincing someone to give us one.

But it's not just people that enjoy being massaged. According to canine massage therapist and director of Karma K9 Dog Massage, Beth Parton, our pets love it as well and all the benefits humans get from a massage, dogs can get too.

"From the animal's point of view it increases flexibility and muscle tone, range of movement and increases oxygen supply to the cells," explains Parton, who gives daily massages to her canine clients.

So great is the power of massage, says Parton, that it can be used on dogs in rescue centres to make otherwise aggressive and fearful dogs more calm and accepting of people, thus increasing their chance of being put up for adoption and finding a new home.

Imagine, then, what it can do for well-cared for and loved family pets?

"Massage releases endorphins; it just keeps the dog feeling really well, really relaxed and it gives a feeling of well being," says Parton. "A lot of dogs, normal dogs, go into boarding kennels and to vets and they might be a bit worried about those visits but if you give your dog a massage prior to any of those activities, the dog will actually calm down and will accept that this is OK."

Parton took up canine massage from an early age, giving massages to her family dogs as a young girl. As she got older she would offer to massage her friends' dogs. "It's something instinctive in me to give massage," she says. "I think it's important that as their guardians we keep our dogs healthy, happy and well-balanced and make them as involved in our lives as they are amongst themselves."

For the past two years, Parton has been giving wellness massages to dogs at the Auckland branch of the SPCA to gain her qualification in canine myofunctional therapy massage which she began in 2009. To gain her qualification, she had to complete 200 case studies and found the ready supply of dogs at the SPCA the perfect place to demonstrate how massage can help traumatised dogs find a new home.

"I know the calming effect massage has on the dogs – it can actually change their whole behavioural aspect and trust. Because it's a hands on thing, they need to trust somebody to be hands on again," explains Parton.

She points to the success she has had with her own rescue dog Colson, who she demonstrates massage technique on to those who attend her wellness massage courses – an offshoot of her Karma K9 business – as proof of the wonders that massage can work.

Like many dogs that wind up in rescue centres, Colson had been abused by his owner. He had been beaten around the face, kept chained up for 24 hours a day and had never been for a walk. When Parton saw him, he genuinely feared for his life and was aggressive towards people and other dogs. There was little hope that he could ever be rehomed.

Parton began by focussing on Colson's face to teach him that it was OK for someone to be right up close to this abused part of his body. "I spent a lot of time just holding his jaw bone where he kept a lot of stress and bad memories," Parton says. "I gave him massage twice a day and slowly touched every part of his body while always being very close to his face. I've had him now for six months and he turned around within the first four months."

"I nearly burst into tears when I think about where Colson has come from and where he is now. He is a real example of what massage can do – he just loves people and he loves other dogs. All he needed from me was total honesty and trust and the massage to help him."

But it's not just about calming our dogs and getting them to trust us. Massage has practical benefits in relieving sore muscles and boosting the immune system. According to Parton, many dogs these days are carrying slight injuries in their muscles caused by everyday activities.

"A lot of dogs go bursting onto beaches



*Beth runs courses where she demonstrates the techniques for canine massage. She says all the benefits people get from massage, dogs get too*



How to give a canine wellness massage



Massaging the ears calms, relaxes and gives a boost to the immune system



Massaging the rump relaxes, warms tissue and muscle fibres.



A gentle, passive assist stretch of the front limbs helps to elongate tight muscles.



Gently bending the paw back and forth can help prevent RSI. It also helps create trust in handling paws.



Rolling and kneading the shoulder area softens tissues, releases tight muscles and helps lubricate the fascia.

“Massage releases endorphins. It keeps the dog feeling really well, really relaxed and gives a feeling of well being.”

and around parks and people think it's great when they leap out and grab the Frisbee and the balls, but a lot of dogs do have this common injury where they might have over-extended the muscle or the tendon,” Parton explains. “So even though a dog may look happy, it doesn't mean it's not in pain or discomfort.”

Many dogs are also developing a type of RSI caused by walking on wooden floors: “They find it very hard to walk across them because they slip a lot and they are starting to get RSI in their paws which reverberates up their legs to the point they're getting cruciate ligament tears.”

Interested to see how to give a doggy massage and to determine the benefits for myself, I attended one of Parton's wellness massage courses at the Auckland SPCA with seven other people and their dogs. Most of those attending were pet dog owners keen to try the calming and therapeutic effects of massage on their own dogs, but Susie Londer, a professional dog trainer also attended.

“I think it's great to have more tools in your tool box,” she told me of her reasons for attending the course. “Not that I will be giving massages but I think it's great to be able to do on your own dog.”

“I like to learn new things and I like to meet people who do this kind of stuff because I can always refer my clients to Beth if they are interested in dog massage.”

The pet owners I spoke to were mainly concerned with improving their dog's quality of life. Gillean Wayne was there with her aging golden retriever Charlie. Wayne had left her two three-year-old flat coat retrievers at home, determining them to be too “full on” to sit patiently amongst other dogs for the four hour course.

“I just think Charlie deserves a bit more one on one, plus it would be easier for me to learn on a sedate dog,” Wayne says, nodding towards a very relaxed and calm looking Charlie. She adds: “All four of us are benefiting if I can do it with him.”

Wayne is worried that Charlie might be developing tumours and while Parton demonstrates the method for massaging our dog's backs, she notices hotspots on Charlie's back – something Parton says suggests an illness or injury and Wayne confirms Charlie has arthritis in his hips.

Later, I email Gillean to find out if she has been giving all three of her dogs a massage. “Yes, I've been practising on Charlie, Bramble and Sarah,” she replies. “They are all attention and affection-seeking hounds so just adore being massaged – I'm glad I went along.”

Another participant of the course is Margaret Mann who has brought along Mombo, a breeding Labrador from the Foundation of the Blind. Mann is a volunteer puppy walker and has looked after the 18-month-old Mombo since she was eight weeks old. Mann had no great expectations from the course.

“I know that we're just people off the street and there is no way that I would expect us to learn every way to massage [in such a short time],” she says. “To take it home and do it without damaging the dog is what I expect.”

Mann also sees the benefit of regularly touching Mombo and familiarising herself with her dog's body: “It can help you find anything wrong with them by doing this handling.”

Bobbi Hamilton brought her Border collie Jaffa to the course because she likes to try alternative remedies and therapies. “She

has a weakness on her back which I thought massage might help,” she says. “I also have a younger dog at home that I want to do it on, too – partly to calm him down and partly for bonding because he's a bit young and lively.”

Throughout the course, Parton demonstrated various massage techniques. If you've ever wondered why your dog likes to have his ears scratched and fondled so much, Parton has the answer: muscles. There are 30 in a dog's ear and because a lot of blood flows through them, Parton says massaging them can be just as effective as a full body massage in calming and de-stressing your dog. “It's a really good pressure point,” she says.

Another important area to focus on is the fascia – this is a membrane that sits between the skin and the dog's bones and organs. If it is too tight, it will stick to the skin and restrict movement. It can also cause problems when dogs play: “The dog normally grabs this,” Parton explains to me as she grabs a handful of Max's skin around his neck. “If the skin is firm and a dog does bite, it could actually kill them because their teeth can go straight through to the vital organs.”

I'm glad to see Max's skin is very loose, but there is a tightness around his belly and rump that Parton wants me to work on. It's a simple matter of gently massaging the tight area and pulling the skin away from the body.

Parton says you can massage your dog every day – the full suite of techniques she showed us take around 20-minutes.

In the weeks after the course, I practised daily on Max – some techniques he likes and others he doesn't; it's a matter of finding what works. He knows when I'm about to massage him now and his tail thumps back and forth on the floor while I'm getting into position. We've always had a tight bond, so I don't know that we have bonded any more, but we both enjoy the contact.

It's just a shame he can't return the favour. 🐾



Beth shows how to massage a dog's back and rump

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