We've all heard the grim statistic that more than half of the U.S. population is overweight or obese. Although massage therapists, as a whole, are probably much more health conscious than the general population, the stress of running a busy practice and having to grab meals between sessions can lead even this type of health-care professional down the road to overweight—or worse, metabolic syndrome.

Metabolic syndrome occurs when a constellation of risk factors are present that significantly increase the likelihood of developing type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The risk factors include insulin resistance, hypertension, elevated triglycerides, low HDL (good cholesterol) and abdominal obesity. Depending on the diagnostic criteria followed, having any three of the five risk factors earns a diagnosis of metabolic syndrome.

The cause? Poor eating habits and a sedentary lifestyle. While those are the most recognizable culprits, I would add to the list a maladaptive stress response that, if left unchecked over time, triggers a cascade of hormonal imbalances. The good news: A therapeutic lifestyle changes program that includes diet, exercise and stress management can be very effective for reversing metabolic syndrome.

The low-glycemic food plan

The most important risk factors for metabolic syndrome are insulin resistance and abdominal obesity, both of which can be positively impacted by a low-glycemic food plan. The standard American diet (acronym: SAD) is packed with high-glycemic foods that elevate blood sugar and can lead to insulin resistance. I advise clients to gravitate toward a whole-foods diet with vegetables, legumes and lean protein. This often has immediate, positive effects on blood glucose levels.

I also suggest you learn how to read ingredient lists on processed foods and eliminate foods with refined sugars. You might be surprised at the prevalence of sugar in our food supply, and it's likely you will experience profound decreases in carbohydrate cravings once you eliminate refined sugars.
The power of exercise

The benefits of regular exercise are irrefutable, and most people understand the connection between optimal health and physical activity. But, for some, embracing it is still not an easy task. For many people obesity has already taken its toll, and they suffer from hip, knee and foot problems that make exercise difficult.

Notably, massage and other forms of physical medicine can be extremely beneficial for those who have mobility issues. I also encourage clients to think outside the box and embrace creative forms of exercise like interpretive dance, yoga, Pilates—or anything else that makes movement enjoyable.

The stress connection

Operating in a state of chronic stress inevitably leads to adrenal fatigue and hormone imbalances, and can be a major contributor to metabolic syndrome. For many people, the first step toward improved health is practicing good self-care—which can include anything that triggers the relaxation response, such as a warm bath, conscious deep breathing, a facial or a massage.

Metabolic syndrome is the direct result of self-neglect and must be addressed using a holistic approach. As health professionals, it is important we make therapeutic lifestyle choices in our own lives that model for our clients a picture of lasting, optimal health.


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Your Organs, Emotions and Optimal Health

by Jean-Pierre Barral

We were given a natural health capital at birth. When we take good care of ourselves—through lifestyle, nutrition, sleep and maintaining a healthy weight—our organs and metabolism function properly. We feel at ease in our body, which allows us to feel at ease in our mind. Our physical and psychological beings are in harmony.

In a world permeated with stress and an environment saturated with chemicals, we need to take special care of our health capital. We need to supply it with the best possible ingredients to achieve physical balance and emotional stability.

Our brain records all the emotions and tensions we encounter. It redistributes them in our body according to their intensity, setting off superficial or deeper reactions that range from dysfunction to actual illness. Our organs have an ongoing dialogue with our brain. The brain receives an emotion and sends it on to specific organs depending on the type of emotion. Sometimes—in the case of extreme fear or shock—the nervous system (sympathetic) reacts before the brain, and you can have an instant effect on an organ (stomach spasm, gallbladder contraction, etc.).

When we feel an emotion, it is our organs reacting. We express this in everyday language, with expressions like “gut feeling,” “left me breathless” and “butterflies in my stomach.” Stressors accumulate, and when we’ve undergone one stress too many, however insignificant the most recent one may seem, the result is somatization, or the expression of psychological or emotional stress through physical symptoms. This is often in the form of pain or disease. We have reached our