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# DO YOU WATSU?

Aquatic bodywork for the mind, body and soul. BY TOBY OSBORNE

As an active fitness instructor, the daily stresses and pressures of vigorous workouts can take a toll on your body. Watsu, a profound development in bodywork, is a water-based therapy ideal for relaxing muscles and easing exercise-related aches and pains. By combining hydrotherapy and shiatsu massage ("wa" from water, "tsu" from shiatsu), this gentle and soothing underwater treatment is conducted in heated pools in order to provide a massage unhindered by the constraints of gravity.

#### HOW TO WATSU

During Watsu, a sequence of acupressure movements and long strokes are applied over the body's energy fields, all while floating in a pool at a temperate 96 degrees Fahrenheit. Capitalizing on the natural buoyancy of water and the tranquility of being submerged, the practitioner is able to perform special stretches and muscle manipulations that wouldn't normally be possible during a conventional massage.

Aquatic bodywork is gaining popularity in spas and health resorts across North America and around the

world. For example, at Two Bunch Palms Resort and Spa in Desert Hot Springs, Calif., visitors are offered a range of water therapies including Watsu, aqua reflexology and Wassertanzen (an expanded form of Watsu that incorporates bodywork below the water with the aid of nose clips). More and more people are diving into Watsu in their search for relaxation and therapy.

#### WHAT CAN WATSU DO FOR YOU?

Since its conception in 1980, Harold Dull, developer of Watsu and president of the Worldwide Aquatic Bodywork Association (WABA), has trained more than 500 practitioners at his massage therapy school at the Harbin Hot Springs Retreat in Middletown, Calif. He began incorporating ancient techniques such as zen shiatsu, which focuses on releasing blockages to the body's "chi" (a vital life force in the body believed to be an electromagnetic field and the energy of the soul).

Thomas Thacker, who trained with Dull and runs Watsunami, his own water therapy practice in Austin, Texas, says Watsu's shiatsu-aquatic massage can be

particularly beneficial to fitness professionals. "Watsu can relieve activity pain 300 percent quicker than without Watsu treatment," says Thacker. And, in contrast to conventional massage, Thacker says Watsu soothes aches quicker and is more relaxing. "The warm water helps the muscles to relax while being worked on, keeping the client completely comfortable without sheets and blankets," explains Thacker. "Clinically, Watsu and massage achieve the same things, but I think Watsu does it more easily and more quickly than massage."

Keo Opton, a registered Watsu practitioner, certified personal trainer and assistant general manager of Loggerhead Fitness in Juno Beach, Fla., says that athletes and yoga practitioners love Watsu. "Most athletes are in touch with their bodies and know where they hold tension," Opton says. "If they have an exercise-related injury and know where their flexibility challenges are, all they need to do is tell their Watsu practitioner. Then they can work that specific part of the body."

Opton has seen an increase in range of motion for athletes following Watsu sessions, and notes that the freedom of movement in water simultaneously relieves stress. "It reduces the pressure and stress of gravity from aerobic and strength training activities," says Opton, who has 25 years of experience in the fitness industry.

"There are some very basic movements in Watsu that open up the hips and other major joint areas, including the neck and

head," says Opton. Because the freeing of the spine is essential to each Watsu session, Opton focuses on those key areas. "I've even received referrals from chiropractors because they just can't progress," she says.

#### WHY WATSU?

Watsu is recommended for recovering accident victims and those suffering from degenerative spine problems, arthritis, fibromyalgia and sciatica, but anyone can benefit from the healing properties of this water-based therapy. Whether you choose to visit a high-end resort or a mineral hot spring for your bodywork, be sure to look for this unique service on the menu. "Most people, when they receive a Watsu session, have never experienced anything like it," Opton says.

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To find out more about Watsu, visit [www.waba.edu](http://www.waba.edu), [www.watsunami.com](http://www.watsunami.com) and [www.starwaterwatsu.com](http://www.starwaterwatsu.com).

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