

Touching the Core

The Heart and Intelligence of Mayan Abdominal Massage

By Diane McDonald

In 1983, Chicago native Rosita Arvigo, a doctor of naprapathy (D.N.) began an intensive 12-year apprenticeship with one of the last living Maya shamans in Central America. Don Eljio Panti was already 90 years old when Arvigo began to study with him in his tiny, remote village of San Antonio in Western Belize, not far from the Guatemalan border. She learned about native healing plants, the Maya prayers, herbal bathing for physical and spiritual healing and the ancient technique of Maya abdominal massage, known simply as "la sobada" - the massage.

Arvigo watched her mentor's deft and wrinkled hands massage thousands of abdomens with incredibly impressive results. Maya women often arrived on the doorstep of this humble clinic in groves and gaggles to have the old bush doctor massage their abdomens for relief of painful menstrual periods, headaches, tired legs, infertility and digestive upsets.

So impressed with the technique and its deeply healing results, Arvigo spent a decade researching the how's and why's of this Maya massage system. She applied her knowledge of anatomy, physiology, herbology and her naprapathic training in damaged ligaments to establish a credible explanation of causes, signs, symptoms and successful treatments for both men and women. "Eventually," she says, "I specialized in ailments of women using these time-honored bodywork techniques that alleviate and prevent some of our very common complaints. The best part, though, is that it shows there really is an accessible alternative to surgery and drugs for abdominal and pelvic complaints."

The Wisdom of Ancients

The Maya abdominal massage Arvigo learned from Eljio is performed in a slow, deep, penetrating manner which releases deep muscle tissue spasms in the entire abdominal area, prevents and corrects the fallen, tilted uterus and swollen prostate, and facilitates the normal flow of blood, lymph, nerves and chi throughout the entire body. These ancient massage techniques correct poor hemodynamics of the abdomen and its many organs so vital to digestion, assimilation, elimination, secretions and reproduction in men and women. It is an external, non-invasive massage treatment on the abdomen and back that works to soften musculature, align the pelvic bones, adjust the uterus to its proper position, release muscular armoring in the trunk and enhance circulation of blood and lymphatic fluids, elimination, secretion of hormones and prevent swelling and congestion of the prostate.

Arvigo says 90% of women will have a misplaced or tipped uterus at some point in their lives. The causes include difficult labor and delivery with prolonged periods of pushing; poor professional care during pregnancy, labor and delivery; repeated pregnancies close together; falls to the sacrum; a career in aerobics or high impact sports and dancing; wearing high heel shoes; poor alignment of the pelvic bones with the spinal column; chronic muscle spasms around the hips, low back and sacrum; carrying young children on the hip for prolonged periods of time; rape, sexual abuse or incest at any time in life; chronic constipation; running or working on cement surfaces with improper foot support; and errors committed during surgery that cut through uterine ligaments.

Any of these can damage, tear or overstretch uterine ligaments, thereby prohibiting them from properly supporting the uterus and causing it to eventually fall down (inferior), backward (retro), forward (antero), or causing it to shift either to the left or right side of the pelvic floor.

A retro uterus leans against the colon; an antero uterus leans on top of the bladder; and a uterus leaning to the right or left puts undue pressure on the lymphatic and venous return, arterial supply and the flow of chi, as do any of the other malpositions. Even though the uterus can be returned to

its normal position in the pelvis, it still has the potential to wander if any of the above occur during a woman's lifetime. This is why, Arvigo says, teaching women to take care of their own uterus is so important. "If she knows these easily learned techniques, she can adjust her own uterus after a fall or when carrying heavy burdens. And she learns how to avoid the common causes as well, thereby preventing many symptoms of a misplaced uterus."

From the Center

Elijio taught that a woman's uterus is her center; if it is out of balance, then her entire life will be imbalanced. Arvigo says the uterus is a woman's "second brain" and comprises the spiritual center of her being. Unfortunately, for many of us, this area of the body has been largely ignored in classical massage training in the United States and Europe. How many women have experienced menstrual pain and reproductive difficulties for years, or have been to a gynecologist and been told in an offhand fashion that she has a "tipped" or "retro" uterus, yet is not offered options to help this vital organ restore itself to optimal health, positioning and function? Arvigo calls her apprentices "the womb savers." She has now trained nearly 200 practitioners in the United States, Italy, Belize and Barbados. This core of students, made up mostly of women, are creating for themselves an entirely new profession based on these healing modalities of the ancient Maya. Their abdominal and uterine massage addresses some of our most stubborn pelvic and abdominal complaints, typically treated by drugs and surgery, or sometimes not at all.

When reproductive organs shift out of proper position, they can constrict normal flow of blood, lymph and nerve connections. Just a few extra ounces sitting on delicate blood and lymph vessels can cause havoc throughout the different systems of the body. A wandering uterus, weighing in at a normal, non-menstruating 4 ounces (8 ounces during menstruation), has the potential to grow during pregnancy from the size of a small pear to that of a watermelon. This weight pressing on arteries, veins, nerves and lymph vessels can be the cause of chronic varicose veins of the legs, constipation, headaches with menstruation, infertility and difficult labor and delivery, as well as a host of other symptoms seemingly unrelated. By gently shifting the uterus back into place, homeostasis (or the natural internal balance of the body) is brought back to the pelvic area and surrounding organs. Toxins are flushed and nutrients that help to tone tissue and balance hormones are restored to normal order. This is essential for healthy pregnancy, labor, delivery and, of course, conception. Old adhesions from invasive treatments to the pelvic and abdominal area, including scars from hysterectomies and Cesarean sections, are diminished gradually and safely when addressed by uterine massage.

Anne Marie, age 36, had been trying to become pregnant since she married at the age of 18. In desperation and with an inherent fear of medical procedures, she came to see Arvigo as a client. Anne Marie had been a ballerina from the age of 6 until her late 20s. "Her uterus was extremely low and had fallen over to the left side which I determined was the cause of her painful periods, PMS and infertility," says Arvigo. "Unfortunately, a career in high-impact dancing can damage the uterine ligaments and cause them to lose elasticity and then be unable to support the uterus which normally hangs within the pelvis as though it were a hammock separating the anterior and posterior portions of the pelvis."

After several treatments and doing the self-care uterine massage at home, Anne Marie happily became pregnant and delivered a healthy 8-pound baby boy that year. "We are finding that about 30% of female infertility is due to a misplaced uterus which can be corrected," says Arvigo. "It is certainly worth a try before resorting to invasive and expensive medical procedures. My teacher used to say it is only natural for people to seek out the help of medical doctors, after natural remedies have not been able to alleviate their suffering. So for heaven's sake, why not try a natural, non-invasive, inexpensive and safe treatment before resorting to drastic measures like in vitro fertilization or surgery. It just makes so much more sense to me.

"It is just not necessary to have painful periods, painful ovulation and irregular menses for a lifetime," says Arvigo. "Once the uterus is gently and gradually coaxed back to a normal position by strengthening the elasticity of the uterine ligaments that hold it in place, the uterus is able to clean

itself out more efficiently from month to month and the hormones can flow freely through the feedback loop from the pelvis to the hypothalamus. I love this work because it is so effective and changes women's lives on a physical, emotional and spiritual level like no other modality I have ever known."

Arvigo says generally, painful periods diminish with two or three cycles and many women report that for the first time in their lives they can look forward to, rather than dread, their menstrual cycle.

Because sexual or emotional abuse such as rape, incest or painful memories of abortions and surgeries can be one of the causes of the prolapsed uterus or even chronic gastritis, there is an emotional release that occurs when the deep massage is performed over the abdomen or the pelvis because it is an area where most people store a lifetime of negative, repressed emotions. Here is the seat of anxiety, fear, shame and guilt that when continually repressed causes muscular armoring and a consequent decrease in life force and fluid circulation.

Arvigo includes a good breakdown of the seminal work of Wilhelm Reich in her training seminars because she says practitioners must understand and know how to deal with the emotional breakthrough of these previously hidden emotions. Reich was a psychoanalyst in the 1940s who studied with Sigmund Freud in Vienna. Reich eventually gave up all verbal therapy and instead learned to release repressed memories and emotions with a deep muscle tissue type of bodywork that many feel marked the beginning of the popularity of massage in this century. "Their issues are in their tissues," says Arvigo.

Those women who have had hysterectomies report that after receiving this type of massage they feel an increased flow of blood; old aches and pains in the hips, legs and groin diminish; varicosities improve; constipation is relieved; and lymph flow from the legs and feet is greatly enhanced giving an overall sense of subtle awareness of their own hemodynamics previously not felt. These women are even able to come to terms with the sense of grief and loss as a result of their surgeries, because the massage techniques flush out repressed emotions as well.

The blood supply to the pelvis flows downward from the descending thoracic artery that passes through the diaphragm, another hotbed of emotional armoring and a favorite storage area for repressed, painful memories. Arvigo says if there is long-term emotional blockage in the upper abdomen, the flow of blood to the abdominal and pelvic organs is diminished and malfunction will naturally follow sooner or later. "We often hear the phrase, 'my stomach is tied up in knots' or 'my heart jumped into my throat'," says Arvigo. "These are indications of painful emotions we often hold back and tuck away in the muscles and organs. The brain will use the organs of the body as an outlet for its emotions."

The following short case history is an example of this phenomenon: "Aldo was a high-powered international exporter and shipper who came to a self-care workshop in Italy. He was a classical Type A individual who had to succeed and be the best in his profession he could be, unfortunately at the expense of his health. His major complaint was severe gastritis which had plagued him for more than 20 years, even though he had been treated by a variety of specialists in Europe. His digestion was very poor; he was bone thin, pale and exhausted all the time. When I massaged his upper abdomen between the rib cage, I found immediately the cause of his chronic complaints. His abdominal muscles and diaphragm were so tight they stood out like cables of hard cords and felt more like wood than human flesh. The first treatment gave significant relief and he was able to enjoy a normal meal that evening for the first time in decades. On the next visit, I showed him how to perform the massage on himself, which he absolutely loved, because the results were so quick and sure. Within only six weeks, he considered himself completely recovered and was so happy it was all accomplished without drugs."

As evidenced by Aldo, women aren't the only ones to benefit from the Maya work. In men, the massage also addresses and prevents a congested or swollen prostate by maintaining proper blood supply and fluid drainage, thereby preventing swelling and inflammation.

The causes of a swollen prostate are by now well-known and include aging, a diet high in fats and dairy products, xenoestrogens from the environment and the food supply, as well as tight, restrictive clothing. These massage techniques alleviate the pelvic congestion in men who often report they pass milky colored urine for a few days after the massage and enjoy much easier bowel movements.

Symptoms of distress in men include painful urination, frequent urination, prostate swelling, low back ache, infertility, impotence, constipation, varicose veins in legs or feet and hemorrhoids.

Hector, a businessman in Belize who had just turned 50 a few months earlier, visited Arvigo's clinic complaining of poor circulation in his feet. "Look at these ropey veins in my feet," he said. "I've never had anything like this before and my legs are starting to feel heavy as though they have too much fluid in them. Does that make any sense to you?" he asked. Arvigo recognized the symptoms immediately. "Have you also been getting up more often to urinate at night?" He responded affirmatively and Arvigo thought his prostate might have begun to show signs of swelling. After performing the external pelvic massage on him for about 10 minutes, he noticed upon arising from the treatment table, that the varicosities in his feet were much diminished. Arvigo showed him how to do the massage on himself and within two weeks time, the feet and legs were back to normal.

To the Core

The Arvigo techniques are an effective medium to bring clients to an emotional and spiritual center and a great way to release stored emotional tension - for both women and men. These massage techniques are positioned far away from most Western approaches to such problems as low back pain, migraines, prostate swelling, failure to ovulate and painful menstrual cycles, among others, which often suggest that the "problem" can only be fixed internally through surgery or medication. Arvigo suggests otherwise with non-invasive manipulation, which can reposition organs that have moved over time for a number of reasons (nerves, lymph, flow of blood, etc.).

Arvigo has dedicated her professional life to teaching these techniques to laypeople and professional practitioners alike to alleviate unnecessary suffering. As a nurse practitioner, certified massage practitioner and teacher of the Arvigo techniques of Maya Abdominal Massage myself, I believe it is a beautiful thing to observe when clients are able to finally let go of old hurts and resentments and are taught how to assist in this process.