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‘I Thought Watsu Water Therapy Would Help My Joint Pain. I Didn’t Expect It to Have a Profound Impact on My Mental Health’



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I recently attended an incredible week-long wellness retreat at [Rancho La Puerta](#) in Mexico. From daily [sound baths](#) and [pickleball clinics](#) to crochet classes, the ranch had something for everyone. With over 45 different classes to choose from each day, I couldn’t do it all, but I really tried to broaden my horizons and try activities I would never otherwise do.

Each morning at breakfast, my friend and I would look through our schedules and plan out our day. Marked for 1 p.m. on Monday, there was an option for [Watsu water therapy](#)—something I’d never even heard of before. I decided to sign up.

- [Antoine Ratliff](#), a certified Watsu practitioner at [Sanctuary Spa](#) in Scottsdale, Arizona
- [Ben Coolik](#), a certified Watsu and WaterDance practitioner at [Rancho La Puerta](#) in Mexico

During the session, I watched a few others go before me, flowing in the water like graceful, fearless mermaids. Some of them opted to be submerged underwater by the instructor, which led to my big question and worry, *what if I run out of air?*

I carried this sentiment into my own session, but quickly learned that once I let go and gave in to the process, I could've gone five minutes without a breath. Following the session, my body felt better than any massage I've ever had, and I was incredibly emotional—to the point I felt like bursting into tears.

My experience got me thinking about how and why this happened and if it was just some sort of coincidence I felt as good as I did. Here's what two top experts have to say.

What is Watsu therapy and how does it work?

Watsu is a form of aquatic bodywork that combines the principles of warm water immersion with elements of [Zen Shiatsu massage](#), a deep and relaxing acupressure massage. Watsu was [developed](#) in the 1980s by Harold Dull, a Zen Shiatsu teacher from Harbin Springs, California, who started by experimenting with the benefits of his massage techniques with the warm springs water.

My session incorporated a mix of Watsu and [WaterDance](#) therapies, with the difference being Watsu is on top of the water while the latter involves submersion.

“Watsu is a surface-only modality that emphasizes stretching and acupressure similar to Shiatsu,” explains Ben Coolik, a certified Watsu and WaterDance practitioner at Rancho La Puerta. “Other modalities like WaterDance have components that involve submerging the client, allowing nearly limitless possibilities for exploring freedom of movement.”

The benefits of Watsu therapy that'll convince you to give it a try

Never have I ever had any sort of therapeutic massage or therapy where I was able to feel such a shift physically, mentally, and emotionally.

“Physically, water flow therapies can help relieve stiffness and reduce pain associated with tight and sore muscles, can increase joint mobility, and is effective for reducing chronic

tension held in the body,” Coolik says. “Mentally, it tends to be quite calming as it activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which can relieve stress and anxiety. Emotionally, there’s evidence that trauma held in the body can be released in a session.” (Coolik is talking about this small [2016 study](#)¹ in which 15 veterans with PTSD found immense relief through water therapy.)

My Watsu therapy experience

Going into my session, I opted for submersion—but before anything, I had a chat with my instructor about my ailments and how I was doing emotionally. Truth be told, I had joint pain in my hips and neck, and my anxiety had been playing up a lot.

Floats were also attached around my legs, and I was given a nose plug for when we went under. Once I started loosening up and got out of my head, I felt transported to this alternate universe that was like a safe womb.

“It’s common for someone to have a great night’s sleep after a session, and that positive effect on the nervous system can last for a while,” Coolik says. “Some clients make the association with experiences they’ve had with psychedelic therapy and have gone so far as to describe a session as life-changing.”

For me, my body felt so relaxed and nimble, yet my brain felt so emotionally drained and upset. The biggest mistake I made was not sitting with these feelings; rather, I rushed off to a lecture I was already late for. This meant I remained on edge and anxious the remainder of the day because it felt like all these emotions had bubbled up to the surface but I was just trying to push them down.

To be honest, I was going through a lot in my personal life at the time, and prior to the session, I hadn’t dealt with any of it. What I wish I’d done and my advice to others: Spend the next little after your Watsu session doing something mindful, like journaling, stretching, crafting—anything that’ll help you recenter and ground yourself, because things will come up.

Is water therapy for everyone?

Most people can find benefits from water therapy. As someone who struggles with [flexibility](#) and can find traditional massages someone painful, I found this to be a great alternative.

Other groups of people who are great candidates for water therapy include those who have sports injuries, those who are pregnant, and those who have experienced trauma and PTSD, according to Ratliff.

While the benefits are extensive, there are a few people who shouldn’t partake. Those who don’t like being touched by others and/or have aquaphobia (fear of water) may not enjoy the experience. Ratliff also says those who’ve recently had surgery (especially spinal), should stay away until they get clearance from their doctor.

How to find a water therapy practitioner

When looking for a water therapy practitioner, it's important to ensure they're certified in at least one water modality.

“Most Water Flow Therapy certification programs require that practitioners have studied anatomy, physiology, ethics, and even land-based massage techniques in addition to the water curriculum,” Coolik says.

A quick Google search will bring up instructors in your area, and if you're looking specifically for Watsu, you can also go onto their website, which lists their global registry.

And although the benefits seem endless and overwhelmingly positive, accessibility is still an issue.

Coolik adds Watsu is also not typically covered by insurance—but he advises potential clients to check their policy and speak to their doctor to see if it can be covered. Prices for water therapy typically fall between \$80 to \$150 per hour.