

Tiffany Field on Massage Research

Institutions throughout North America are conducting clinical research into the benefits and mechanisms of massage therapy.

This wasn't always the case.

Thirty years ago, when Tiffany Field, Ph.D., was a new mother, she massaged her infant daughter, who was born prematurely. The calming effects she witnessed inspired Field, a professor of pediatrics and psychiatry, to study prematurity and massage.

Field began conducting research into the beneficial effects of healthy touch in 1982, long before massage was even beginning to be accepted by either physicians or the public. In 1992 she established the Touch Research Institutes (TRI) at the University of Miami, School of Medicine, with a start-up grant from Johnson & Johnson. Before TRI, no other organization was focused only on the study of touch.

The research that put Field, and TRI, on the map showed that massage caused premature infants to gain more weight than their non-massaged peers—thereby improving the infants' health and potentially saving millions of dollars each year in health-care costs. That study was published in 1988. Today, more than 100 studies and 350 medical-journal articles later, Field is recognized as the premier expert in, and advocate for, touch research.

Field and her colleagues at TRI have conducted studies on topics including autism, ADHD, anorexia, pregnancy, low-back pain, fibromyalgia, migraine, cerebral palsy, spinal-cord injury, asthma and many more. (For a complete list, visit www6.miami.edu/touch-research.) Physicians are increasingly taking notice of massage, Field said, and are contacting TRI to get advice on setting up massage studies.

Field sat down with MASSAGE Magazine following her keynote address at the Florida State Massage Therapy Association conference in Orlando, Florida, in June, to share her thoughts on the past and future of massage research.

For the massage field to play a role in shaping the future of touch research, Field said, more massage therapists need to earn Ph.D.s in fields that will allow them to conduct research incorporating massage, such as neuroscience, psychology or biology.

"We (TRI) do research not funded as massage research, like [research into] prenatal depression," Field explained. Researchers might add massage to, for example, a psychology study on depressed pregnant women.

"Just adding massage makes such an incredible difference," Field said. "In everything we've done, massage is significantly effective. There's not a single condition we've looked at—including cancer—that hasn't responded positively to massage."

She said that key components of massage's benefit include the decrease in cortisol and increase of dopamine and serotonin affected by massage.

"If people say massage works 'because it makes you feel good' ... excuse me!" Field said.

"Massage works because it changes your whole physiology."

*Karen Menahan
Massage Magazine*