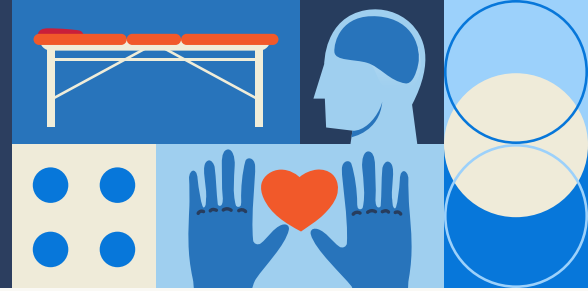


Self-Compassion as a Healing Practice



Profile & Background

Name: Akofa

Age: 53 years

Sex: Female

Country of Origin: Togo

Does not need an English-language interpreter

Displacement Context and Trauma History

Akofa grew up in a stable family. Her grandparents owned a farm, and her parents traveled for seasonal employment. Her family supported her in earning a technical degree in cosmetology, and she worked in a well-established salon for more than fifteen years. Several of her customers were associated with the opposition party. During the elections, police came to the salon, beat her, and shot several

employees. She sustained injuries to her right ear that had long-term impacts on her hearing and the appearance of her ear. Several days later, she was taken from her home and detained in an unknown location for two weeks, where she experienced beatings, rape, and deprivation of food and water. She escaped and learned that her boyfriend and father had been killed. She fled the country and arrived in the U.S. in 2022.

Initial Presentation at Clinic

Akofa presented at the clinic as closed off and guarded. She walked slowly and cautiously and slouched forward. When discussing trauma and related pain and suffering, she was stoic, would refer to her faith, and often responded, *"I'm okay, I trust in God."* One of her clinicians noted Akofa's hardiness and deep survival spirit; this clinician also noted her struggle to verbalize her needs beyond having to push forward. She had trauma-relevant problems, including ear pain and hearing impairment, back and leg pain that made movement difficult, and a PTSD diagnosis. She spoke English well enough for daily communication. She was referred to massage for chronic full-body pain.



Key Themes & Clinical Significance

- Akofa experienced dramatic relief from pain after her first massage.
- At intake, Akofa was tired, and she slept during many of the initial sessions. Over the course of treatment, her sleep improved, and she presented during massage sessions as much more alert and awake. She reported that improvement in sleep was the most significant benefit of massage.
- Physical tools and resources were helpful to Akofa in bringing massage practice and somatic education into her everyday life. These tools included tennis balls, an eye pillow, and massage cream.
- Akofa described massage as welcome relief from the emotionally challenging work of psychotherapy. She said massage felt like a time to be cared for and nurtured.
- Akofa also noted that enduring torture-related pain caused her emotional distress. Massage helped reduce that pain, which reduced her emotional response to that pain.
- Coordinated care was important for the massage therapist to help Akofa access needed medical resources.
- Akofa immediately saw the benefit of massage and began to share informal massage with friends and family.

Initial Presentation for Massage Therapy

At the first massage session, Akofa described back, leg, and abdominal pain, which interfered with sleep. She said, *"It's always there in the bones."* She had received professional massage before the torture experiences and was familiar and comfortable with it. She noted that she managed pain with Icy Hot and over-the-counter medications. Pain was worse when she stood, walked, or lifted. Her stated goal for massage was *"My body is so tense. I hope to have calmness and to feel relieved. I am just stiff and I want to have this flexible movement in my body."*

“ My body is so tense. I hope to have calmness and to feel relieved. I am just stiff and I want to have this flexible movement in my body.”

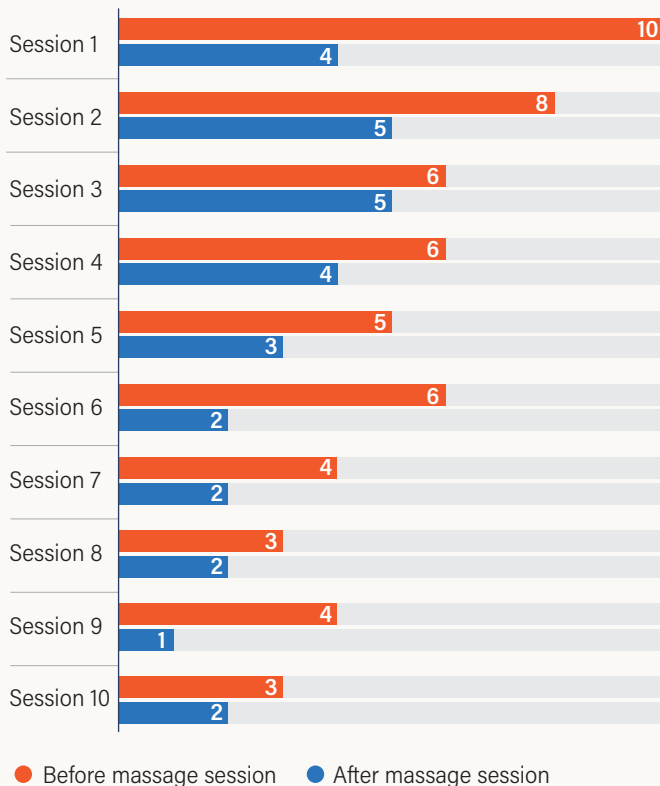
Baseline Study Scores:

- ⚠ Chronic Pain Score: 7.7**
More than 4 indicates chronic pain.
- ⚠ Sleep Quality Score: 12**
More than 5 indicates poor sleep quality.
- ⚠ Hours of Sleep per Night: 5**
Fewer than 7 hours indicates short sleep.
- ⚠ Depression Score: 3.25**
More than 1.75 is diagnostic of depression.
- ⚠ PTSD Score: 50.7**
More than 28 is diagnostic of PTSD.

Massage Session Progression

FIGURE 1. Pain endorsement before and after massage sessions

Total Number of Massages: 10



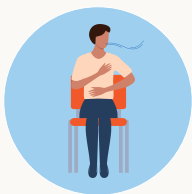
First Session

In the first session, Akofa and the massage therapist practiced noticing breath. The massage therapist described breathing into painful areas as “massage from the inside.” The massage therapist also noted that it was important with Akofa, as with many other study participants, to *show and tell* before touching; the massage therapist demonstrated techniques, such as tapotement, on herself first, then showed them on the table so Akofa could see and hear them before experiencing them. Akofa was tired and fell

“ I feel good. I feel relaxed. Relieved from the leg pain. I love the feet massage, too. I just feel relaxed and pain relief, feeling sleepy.”

asleep twice during the massage session. Afterward, Akofa said, *"I feel good. I feel relaxed. Relieved from the leg pain. I love the feet massage, too. I just feel relaxed and pain relief, feeling sleepy."* The massage therapist provided guidance on an at-home exercise to feel her breath by placing one hand on her belly and the other on her chest before bed.





Early Sessions (Awareness of Breath)

At the second session, Akofa described her pain relief as dramatic after the first session: *"I am better now. The back pain, I don't even feel it that much. After massage, I felt relief from the pain."* She also shared that she got a job

“ I am better now. The back pain, I don't even feel it that much. After massage, I felt relief from the pain.

at a salon in her neighborhood and planned to go to work directly after the massage session. Again, Akofa fell asleep during the massage session but was able to engage in the breath exercises while awake. The massage therapist noted that Akofa's breathing became slower and deeper during the massage. After the session, Akofa reported, *"I feel so relaxed, so relaxed, so calm. The back pain, I don't feel it anymore. And the neck, too, I like it."* When asked about the breathing practice during the massage, she said, *"I feel rest. It makes me feel like I am sleeping."* It was clear from early in the sessions that rest and sleep were necessary components of treatment for Akofa. At the end of the session, the massage therapist showed Akofa how to use a tennis ball against the wall for her back and on her feet for self-massage.



Middle Sessions (Noticing Sensation)

Physical tools and resources were helpful to Akofa in the noticing sensation sessions. They also helped Akofa bring massage practice and somatic education into her everyday life. Akofa reported using a tennis ball for pain and doing the breath exercises before going to sleep. In

the body awareness session, the massage therapist gave Akofa an eye pillow to use for relaxing at night and as a proprioceptive tool to practice breathing when noticing discomfort. Akofa also reported using the eye pillow under her neck before bed. During a virtual interview that took place after the intervention finished, Akofa explained, *"I have this little pillow that's always on the bed with me, this one right here [lifting pillow to the camera]."* The concrete tools and resources resonated strongly with Akofa.

As the sessions went on, Akofa noted, *"I am able to sleep well, don't struggle, don't wake up in the middle of the night, stay longer in bed and feel rested."* Likewise, the massage therapist noticed that Akofa was not falling asleep during sessions

“ I am able to sleep well, don't struggle, don't wake up in the middle of the night, stay longer in bed and feel rested.

At the next session, Akofa reported that she slept well after the massage. However, she also reported having back pain a few days later. She said, *"The other day (while waking), it was so severe I felt like I was going to give birth."* So, she called a friend to come over and rub her back, which helped. When the massage therapist asked more about the pain, Akofa shared that she had helped a colleague at the salon fix their broken sink, which caused a resurgence of pain. The massage therapist talked about the importance of not overdoing it and allowing the body time to recover, even though it was hard to rest when she wanted to be helpful at work. They practiced breathing exercises again during the massage, and the massage therapist noted a discharge of heat from Akofa's back when inviting breath into that area. After the session, Akofa said, *"The areas we breathed into felt softer. I feel so relaxed, I feel good... [The] breath made me feel at peace. It made me feel comfortable."*

“ The areas we breathed into felt softer. I feel so relaxed, I feel good... [The] breath made me feel at peace. It made me feel comfortable.

as much. When the massage therapist asked what massage had helped most, she said, *"the number one thing is being sleepy, I sleep quickly, not waking up in the middle of the night. Since massage, I have slept well."* Akofa noted that she needed to go to work after some massage sessions, but she really wanted more sleep because she felt relaxed. The massage therapist noted that tapotement is a good option for clients who need deep rest during sessions but also need to be alert afterward.

As rapport built between Akofa and the massage therapist, she shared more about her broader health concerns. For instance, she shared that she experienced hot flashes. However, after massage, Akofa described *"feeling cool. I feel so relaxed, feeling sleepy and no stress."* She also mentioned that she had run out of medication to treat menopause symptoms, and the massage therapist was able to coordinate care with the clinic nurse to make sure she received a medication refill. Likewise, Akofa noted that she needed support with medical insurance renewal, and the massage therapist was able to coordinate care with a clinic social worker to support that process. The strong rapport built over time in the context of a clinical care environment allowed the massage therapist to support Akofa in ways that would not otherwise have been possible.



Later Sessions (Self-Compassion)

Akofa responded especially well to the self-compassion sessions. The massage therapist invited Akofa to notice an area of her body and breathe self-compassion into that area. After this first self-compassion session, Akofa said that “it made me feel relaxed and feel loved

and cared for.” Later, during one of the final massage sessions, the massage therapist held Akofa’s shoulders and heart area and invited her to breathe compassion into this area and then spread compassion throughout the whole body. Akofa shared that this practice “makes me feel loving myself, care for myself and people around me. Helps me accept myself, not self-blame.”

Massage also provided a physically safe space supportive of psychotherapeutic work. Akofa noted that psychotherapy can feel difficult, explaining that “I was here to see my therapist [psychotherapy], which makes me remember stuff, makes me cry, makes me sad,” and that massage was a place to get comfort and care. One of the clinicians also noted that Akofa started using self-massage during group trauma processing, which may have helped her manage the difficult emotions that arise in these types of therapeutic environments. Her therapist also noted that Akofa shared that she had felt nervous to talk about past trauma, but she proceeded to talk about her experience with sexual assault in detail for the first time. Another clinician reflected that developing this mind-body connection through massage was significant for Akofa, given her history of sexual violence and torture-related injuries.

When asked in the end-of-study interview about how massage impacted her mood, Akofa said, “Both my mood and emotions, yeah, because when I move and I feel pain, I’ll be like, oh, this is what caused the pain. When I move now, I don’t feel much pain in my knees and I don’t remember my past, so the massage has helped me not to remember my past because the pain is no more there.” For Akofa, addressing physical pain and injury was an important step toward trauma healing.

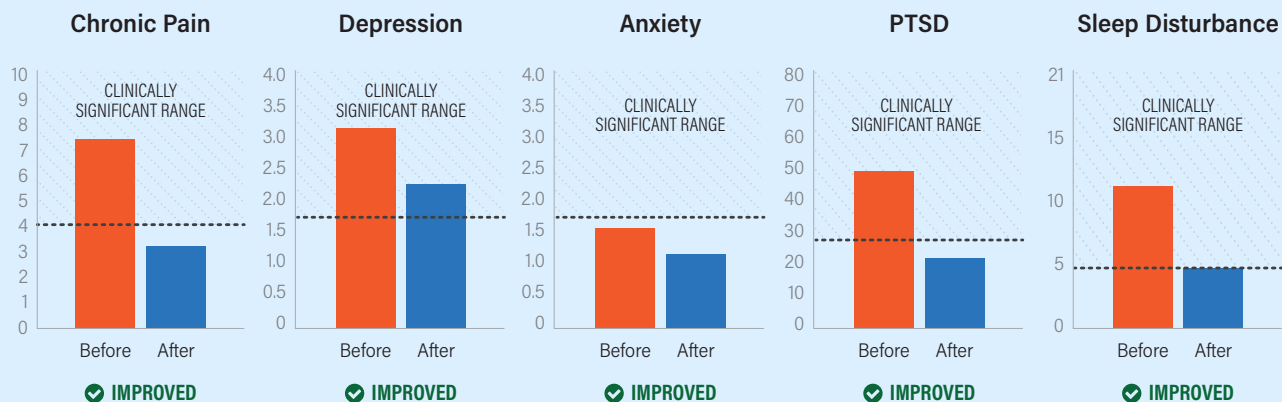
In their final massage session, the massage therapist complimented Akofa on her shirt, which had a pattern with mushroom designs. Akofa shared how mushrooms grow in dead palm trees in Africa, how new life grows from things that have died, and how good things can grow from difficult things. During the exit interview from the study, Akofa shared, “During the massage session [the massage therapist] made me feel like I could fall asleep... I feel there is trust, I trust them.... They are kind, always ready to listen to you, ... they create room for you to feel accepted, to feel loved and then to love massage.”

“...when I move and I feel pain, I’ll be like, oh, this is what caused the pain. When I move now, I don’t feel much pain in my knees and I don’t remember my past, so the massage has helped me not to remember my past because the pain is no more there.”

Outcomes

Based on study data, Akofa demonstrated clinically significant symptomatology (above the clinical threshold) for chronic pain, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and sleep quality (see Figure 2). After massage therapy, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression were below clinical thresholds; sleep was at the clinical threshold; and PTSD was slightly above the clinical threshold. Akofa had clinically meaningful reductions in all symptom areas after the massage intervention.

FIGURE 2. Scores above and below the clinical threshold pre & post massage series



➔ [Learn more about the research: cvt.org/what-we-do/advancing-research/](https://cvt.org/what-we-do/advancing-research/)