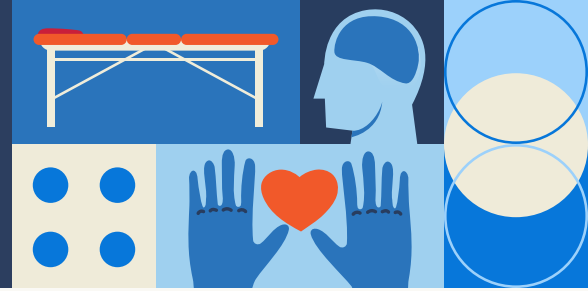


Massage for Severe Trauma and Moments of Crisis



Profile & Background

Name: Kossi Jean

Age: 35 years

Sex: Male

Country of Origin: Togo

Needs an English-language interpreter

Displacement Context and Trauma History

Kossi Jean experienced persecution for his political views in Togo. He was detained by the police multiple times, once for more than six months. During his detention, he was tortured through beating, burning, and death threats. He sustained painful, visible burn scarring on his neck and hands, which causes him physical, emotional, and social distress. In early 2022, he fled to the U.S., forced to leave his wife and four

children with family in Togo. The physical torture caused enduring harm, including severe pain and the loss of several toes.

Initial Presentation at Clinic

When he first arrived at the clinic, Kossi Jean reported feeling fear and startling easily whenever he experienced unexpected movements or noises. He said he feels uncomfortable with new people and in public. In his intake meeting, he sat forward in his chair, breathed rapidly, and scanned the room. Kossi Jean was diagnosed with PTSD and major depressive disorder. Early on in his psychological treatment at the clinic, Kossi Jean was hospitalized for suicidality. He reported that he often could not sleep or eat because he worried about his family in Togo and had nightmares about the torture experience. His sleep was further disrupted because he shared a room with noisy roommates, the room was too cold, and the mattress on the floor was uncomfortable. After several years of unemployment and searching for a job, Kossi Jean recently found work at a factory outside of the city.

Kossi Jean was referred to massage therapy due to significant torture-related pain. He did not initially qualify for the study because he did not want to discuss the extent to which pain interfered with his daily functioning. His treating clinician referred him to the study again after learning more about the extent of his physical trauma and pain. The clinician worked with him on gaining confidence to talk about pain. During the second screening, Kossi Jean shared his experience openly and was determined to be eligible for the study. One of the clinicians working with Kossi Jean shared that she did not believe that, due to severe symptomatology, he would have been able to access massage therapy outside of the clinic's trauma-informed setting.



Key Themes & Clinical Significance

- Kossi Jean hesitated to admit the extent of his physical pain and its interference in his daily life. This points to the risk of underreporting pain for forced migrants and survivors in clinical contexts.
- Due to trauma, Kossi Jean had a strong startle response. This required the massage therapist to move slowly and communicate her movements. Kossi Jean also responded well to long holds with deep breathing. Over time, the startle response disappeared.
- Kossi Jean experienced immediate pain relief after massage that was so effective that he compared it to the pain relief associated with taking pain medication.
- Auxiliary resources, especially the tennis ball, helped Kossi Jean with self-massage and pain management.
- A turning point in sustained pain management for Kossi Jean was integrating stretching into the massage and during home exercises.
- The other aspect of pain management for Kossi Jean was a reduction in catastrophizing and an increase in acceptance of physical discomfort.
- Collaborative care was important to Kossi Jean's massage and psychotherapeutic treatment after a crisis.

Initial Presentation for Massage Therapy

Kossi Jean arrived at the first massage session with a tender, guarded gait, a withdrawn affect, and pained facial expressions. He would touch and rub his legs when sitting. He described injuries due to torture: pain in his legs and feet due to severe and repeated beatings, injuries to his shoulders from his arms being tied behind his back, and extensive scarring on his hands and neck due to burns. The pain in his legs extended from the ankle joint to the top of the hip and was constant. The shoulder pain was less intense, intermittent, and felt like it “came from the inside.” The burn scars were uncomfortable, but this discomfort was mostly due to remembering the torture and embarrassment in social situations. His pain was worse after being on his feet for a long time, which he needs to do all day at his factory job. He shared that pain keeps him from sleeping, makes it difficult to walk, and prevents him from lifting anything over his head. He uses hot compresses and icy-hot for relief, which only helped a little.

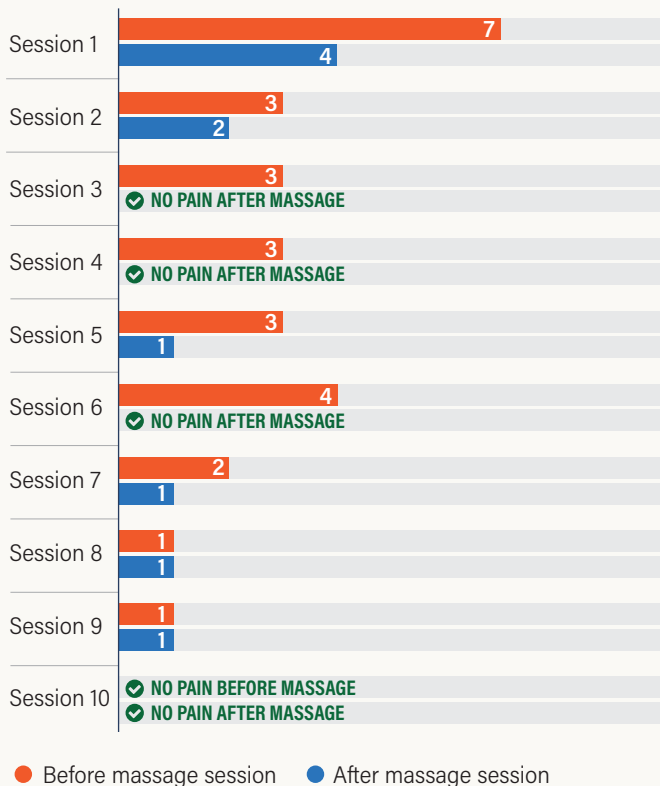
Baseline Study Scores:

-  **Chronic Pain Score: 7**
More than 4 indicates chronic pain.
-  **Sleep Quality Score: 15**
More than 5 indicates poor sleep quality.
-  **Hours of Sleep per Night: 6**
Fewer than 7 hours indicates short sleep.
-  **Depression Score: 3.3**
More than 1.75 is diagnostic of depression.
-  **PTSD Score: 53**
More than 28 is diagnostic of PTSD.

Massage Session Progression

FIGURE 1. Pain endorsement before and after massage sessions

Total Number of Massages: 10



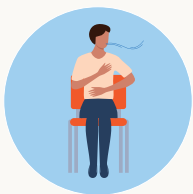
First Session

Kossi Jean's stated goal for the first massage session was: "I want some relief." He asked for music to help him "slow down his thoughts." Despite significant trauma symptoms, he was in good physical condition, tissue quality, and muscle tone. The massage therapist noted that he would jump or flinch when she touched his skin; he had an especially strong startle response when touched on areas of trauma, prompting the massage therapist to adjust her approach to move very slowly and communicate her movements. She primarily used gentle touch and holding while encouraging breathing; only gradually did she introduce light pressure. His right shoulder and upper back were tender and responded well to gentle holds and effleurage. After the first session, Kossi Jean said, "I'm

“ I'm feeling light. [The massage] took something off me. The pain in the shoulder is gone. I noticed that I breathed much deeper. I noticed that it helped lessen my thoughts. Feeling lighter.

feeling light. [The massage] took something off me. The pain in the shoulder is gone. I noticed that I breathed much deeper. I noticed that it helped lessen my thoughts. Feeling lighter.” At the end of the session, the massage therapist showed Kossi Jean a self-massage technique for his legs and suggested he practice noticing breathing at home.





Early Sessions (Awareness of Breath)

At the second session, Kossi Jean shared that, after the last massage session, he felt good all day and his leg hurt less. He reported doing self-massage for his leg twice a day over the past week, and he shared that doing so helped with pain. They were unable to use music

during this session due to the phone interpreter, but Kossi Jean reported no problems with too much thinking during massage. This suggested a level of comfort with massage and relaxation during sessions. Still, the massage therapists noted that his muscles contracted on his upper back and legs with initial touch, then relaxed with gentle effleurage and holds. After the massage, he said, *"My body [is] at ease in my whole body, my whole self. Since the massage I'm not stressing out like before. Before I had so many worries. Massage helps me with the stress, worries and stuff in my head."*

Kossi Jean connected most strongly with the "awareness of breath" component of the somatic education and visibly practiced deep breathing throughout sessions. During massage, the massage

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therapist would hold an area and encourage him to breathe deeply; he reported feeling the *"muscle relaxing, pain is leaving."* Likewise, the massage therapist said her work with Kossi Jean was more related to energetic, internal, and emotional work than soft tissue release.

In the early sessions, the massage therapist noted that Kossi Jean became more comfortable with massage and with her. He made more specific requests, expressing that he felt more comfortable starting prone, requesting deeper and lighter pressure, and asking for more time on his legs and no massage on his middle back. The massage therapist reported some challenges massaging through clothing, which limited some treatment options. One workaround that Kossi Jean introduced early was wearing shorts and a tank top under his clothing for massage sessions.

The massage therapist demonstrated the use of a tennis ball for self-massage, which Kossi Jean said he used for leg self-massage to help the muscles relax, which lessened the pain. He requested a second tennis ball to use on the bus and at work. He explained the benefits of the at-home exercises and tools, *"with the exercises at home, or anywhere, I do them and the pain would lessen. And then, with time, the pain has disappeared in my body and in my leg and in my back."*



Middle Sessions (Noticing Sensation)

Kossi Jean made the most significant progress in the middle sessions, with a focus on noticing sensations. When asked about how noticing sensation benefited him, Kossi Jean described a well-known outcome of body awareness or mindfulness: *"I noticed... the*

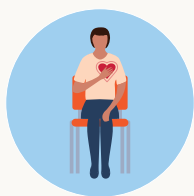
thoughts in my head go away during massage." He also described talking and listening to his body: *"It was my body that was saying what it was feeling."*

During the week between the fifth and sixth sessions, Kossi Jean was knocked off a bike by a passing car and hurt his right arm. He explained to the massage therapist that he felt that the pain was more from stress than the actual injury. He reported strong pain reductions post-massage after the sixth session (see Figure 1). He said, *"Massage is doing what medication does: it makes my whole body feel better.... During the massage and afterwards it felt like I had taken pain medication. The pain had calmed."* The clinician who worked with Kossi Jean at this time said that the integration of massage therapy with other clinical services proved highly beneficial for Kossi Jean, especially when the accident happened; she reported immediate communication with the massage therapist, which allowed them to adjust and align their

therapeutic approaches. Kossi Jean shared at the end-of-study interview that he could not imagine how he would have handled the stress after the accident without massage therapy. Kossi Jean continued psychotherapy after completing the massage series. His provider said that he continues to use skills and practices learned in massage for coping and stress management.

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The massage therapist also introduced leg stretches during the massage and taught him how to do the stretches at home. This served as a turning point for Kossi Jean. Until then, he reported improvements in leg pain for the days following massage, but the pain returned to the same level the following week. With the stretching, Kossi Jean was able to better manage the leg pain between sessions. After this, he reported significant and sustained pain reduction (see Figure 1). He said the *"pain is gone, even on the inside... it has gone down so much now that it's almost like I don't have pain anymore."*



Later Sessions (Self-Compassion)

With the start of the self-compassion components, Kossi Jean emphasized the impact of massage on his spirit. He said, *"It helps me with the state of my spirit and my health.... my spirit feels liberated."* He also described feelings of "wholeness" and

"liberation." It seems these sessions helped him to connect massage to more holistic concepts of healing.

By the eighth session, the massage therapist reported that Kossi Jean stopped tensing and flinching with touch, even in the most sensitive and torture-affected areas. He described that his *"whole body felt completely relaxed"* and his *"spirit went away and that's when I almost fell asleep."* He also noted improvements in mental health, saying *"the massage has also strengthened my mood, right after, and even days after, I felt more calm."*

During the final massage session, the massage therapist noted that his leg and back muscles were supple and relaxed, with no tension or contraction with touch, and he breathed deeply throughout

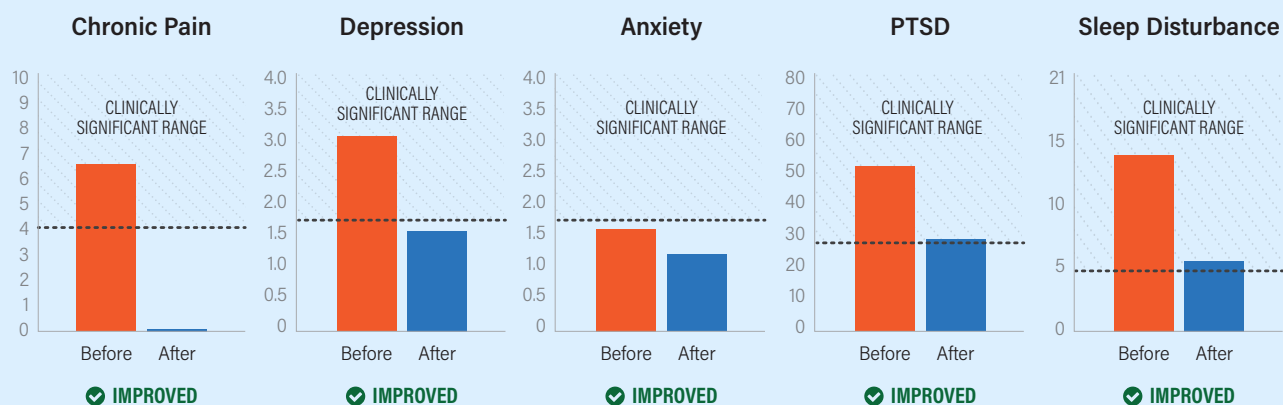
massage. Kossi Jean expressed gratitude for the massage service and shared how much it helped him. He reported that it helped with pain but also with acceptance of pain. He observed that even when the pain is there, it does not bother him as much. When the pain is present, he knows that it will go away. With this change, he said, *"My stress level is going down. Truly going down.... I'm not closed off. I'm not isolated like before. I feel bright... I feel so open, down to my skin."* Evoking healing even down to the skin is particularly powerful for Kossi Jean, who struggled with the burn scarring on his skin and the associated traumatic memories. The massage therapist concurred with Kossi Jean on his healing, saying it was visible how he walked taller with a bright smile and an open face.

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Outcomes

Study data showed that before the TCI-Massage intervention Kossi Jean demonstrated clinically significant symptomatology for chronic pain, depression, PTSD, anxiety, and sleep quality (see Figure 2). After ten weeks of TCI-Massage, chronic pain, depression, and PTSD were below clinical thresholds, while anxiety and sleep quality improved, they remained slightly above those thresholds. Together, these findings illustrate Kossi Jean's clinical improvement and broader healing process over the course of TCI-Massage.

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/)