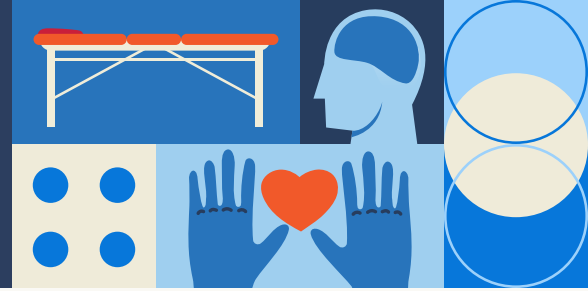


Learning to Talk to Your Body



Profile & Background

Name: Tumaini

Age: 30 years

Sex: Female

Country of Origin: East Africa

Does not need an English-language interpreter

Displacement Context and Trauma History

Tumaini is the middle child of nine children. She describes her family as "traditional." Tumaini earned a bachelor's degree in writing and taught classes at a local college in her home country. Tumaini's family forced her into marriage with a man 25 years her senior. The man held a powerful political position. After they married, he physically abused her and threatened her with forced female genital mutilation. Because of

his powerful position, she had to flee or face forced female genital mutilation. Tumaini arrived in the U.S. in late 2023.

Initial Presentation at Clinic

When she first arrived at the clinic, she reported pain in her back and shoulder related to intimate partner violence. She was diagnosed with PTSD and major depressive disorder. She reported that she slept on the couch of a friend from her home country, but she was uncertain how long she could stay and feared they would ask her to leave. Tumaini was eager to engage in services and learn as much as possible to help herself heal. She was referred to massage to help with pain management.



Key Themes & Clinical Significance

- Tumaini's fluency in English and educational background supported her engagement with the somatic education components of TCI-Massage.
- As she became more aware of her body, Tumaini was better able to consciously relax her muscles. Tactile tools, such as the tennis ball, were especially helpful in this learning process.
- Tumaini identified a connection between depression and pain, noting that they reinforced each other.
- A critical turning point for Tumaini was integrating more movement into daily life. She reported that this helped with both pain and depression.
- Tumaini reported improved sleep as a major benefit of massage.
- Tumaini was eager to talk about her body with a healthcare professional. Massage provided a natural context for these conversations.

Initial Presentation for Massage Therapy

Tumaini was reserved and visibly tired at her first massage session, with her eyes blinking slowly, drooping, and occasionally closing. Despite her fatigued affect, she was dressed sharply in a colorful shirt and crisp jeans. She spoke English fluently and in a way that reflected a high level of education. At the first massage session,

“I feel pain every day, I don't remember a day I have been without pain.”

Tumaini explained, “I feel pain every day, I don't remember a day I have been without pain.” She reported a constant ache in her neck and numbness in her

arms. She also shared that the pain was worse at night and when she bent forward. To manage the pain, she stretched and used an ointment. She had never had a professional massage but shared that she had received massage from friends and family. Her stated goals for the massage sessions were: “Physical pain relief and mental stress relief. I feel that my physical pain is related to my mental stress.” From the beginning, she understood the study to be about understanding pain. She said, “[I think the study is about] the connection of trauma and body pain.... I wasn't sure about what was causing my pain, so I said, let me just go through the study and understand what's causing me having this problem.”

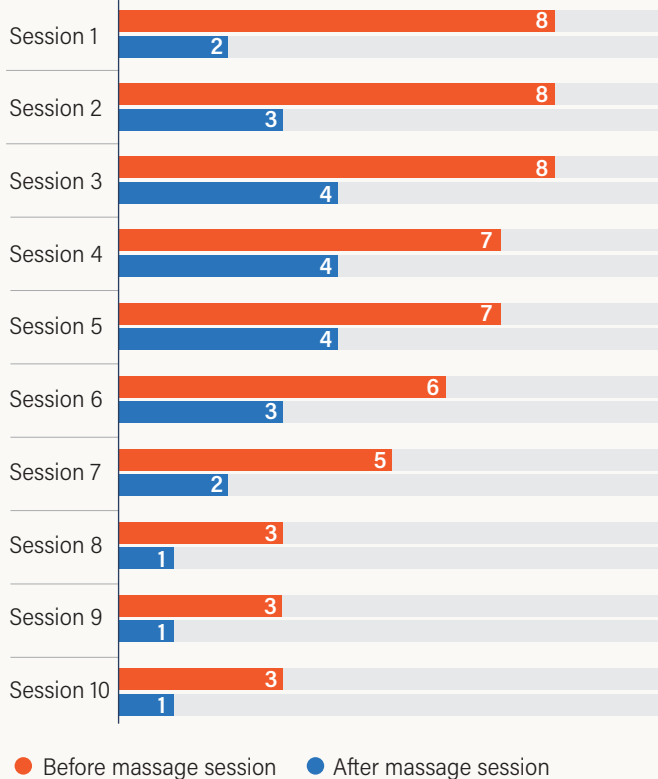
Baseline Study Scores:

- ⚠️ **Chronic Pain Score: 8.7**
More than 4 indicates chronic pain.
- ⚠️ **Sleep Quality Score: 13**
More than 5 indicates poor sleep quality.
- ⚠️ **Hours of Sleep per Night: 6**
Fewer than 7 hours indicates short sleep.
- ⚠️ **Depression Score: 3.0**
More than 1.75 is diagnostic of depression.
- ⚠️ **Anxiety Score: 2.7**
More than 1.75 is diagnostic of anxiety.
- ⚠️ **PTSD Score: 53.3**
More than 28 is diagnostic of PTSD.

Massage Session Progression

FIGURE 1. Pain endorsement before and after massage sessions

Total Number of Massages: 10



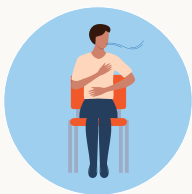
First Session

The massage therapist gave Tumaini a full-body massage with a focus on the neck, shoulder, and upper back. The massage therapist noticed tenderness and a tight band of muscle in Tumaini's neck and shoulder. The massage therapist also noticed that Tumaini's left arm was dense and stiff compared with the right. After the massage, Tumaini reported, “I can breathe very

“I can breathe very comfortably, the tension in my neck is all gone now, I can see relief and I'm really sleepy, I'm also relaxed. I even noticed I was just lost; my mind was just lost.”

comfortably, the tension in my neck is all gone now, I can see relief and I'm really sleepy, I'm also relaxed. I even noticed I was just lost; my mind was just lost.” The client reported pain moving from 8 out of 10 before massage to 2 after massage (see figure 1). The massage therapist provided Tumaini with a heat pack and gave guidance on self-massage.





Early Sessions (Awareness of Breath)

In the second session, Tumaini reported feeling less pain overall and said that she slept well the night after the massage. She also said that she could not wait to come in for the second session. Tumaini used the heat pack provided by the massage therapist, but it did not help because *"sometimes it's hard to locate where the pain is."* After the second session, Tumaini shared that the massage helped her identify where the pain was. She also shared that the pain had greatly reduced, from an 8 out of 10 to a 3 out of 10.

Tumaini responded well to the breathing exercises. In the third session, the massage therapist led Tumaini through a breathing exercise before starting massage: tracing the fingers, inhaling up each finger and exhaling down each finger. Then, during the massage, they practiced slow breathing while the massage therapist massaged Tumaini's upper trapezius muscles and scapulae. After the session, Tumaini said, *"Deep breaths really help me. When I do this, it's relief."* Again, she reported significant pain relief, from an 8 out of 10 to a 4 after massage. She said, *"I was very tense and tired. Now I can feel the relief. The tension is off and I can move easily."*

“ Deep breaths really help me. When I do this, it's relief.”



Middle Sessions (Noticing Sensation)

The noticing-sensation sessions were particularly helpful for Tumaini. These practices helped her pinpoint and name different physical sensations, which was difficult for her. During the first noticing sensation session, the massage therapist noted that Tumaini was holding her muscles tense and struggled to relax them. She gave Tumaini a tennis ball and showed her how to use it for self-massage. The tennis ball and heat pack turned out to be important tactile tools for Tumaini to identify the precise location of her pain and then relax those muscles. Tumaini reported using the tennis ball as a "stress ball." Tumaini said, *"[Before massage] I was never relaxed I don't really notice that I am holding my shoulders [tense]. The massage taught me how to relax my shoulders, you know, she was also teaching me exercises on how I can relax myself, and that has helped me ... I used to feel so much weight on my shoulder, but after, I don't feel that anymore."* The massage therapist noted that Tumaini developed a practice of talking to and connecting with her body. Tumaini said, *"I feel hopeful. I see, wow, ... I know my body. It helps you to know your body. I know some areas that I've never thought that if I massage them, they could help me with releasing tensions. I know my body better than I used to."*

“ I know my body better than I used to.”

During these sessions, Tumaini also identified a connection between her emotions and physical pain. She became aware that when she felt depressed, her pain increased. She discovered that managing depression helped with pain, and managing pain helped with depression. Starting in session six, she reported improvements

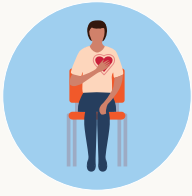
The massage therapist noted that Tumaini took their work together seriously. Tumaini was highly engaged with the somatic education and asked additional questions, for example, about recommendations for sleeping positions, pillows, and other self-care practices. Tumaini said, *"I took massage therapy very serious, and because I wanted the healing, and I wanted to feel better, and I also wanted to see if this is going to work.... [The massage therapist] was teaching me the relaxation exercises, the breathing, so everything that she was teaching me I was always practicing at home ... and the areas where I can reach with my hands, I can always massage myself."* The massage therapist also noted that Tumaini was excited to share updates about her body at every session. These sessions provided a space for Tumaini to talk openly about and focus on her physical well-being.

By session four, Tumaini expressed her preferences in massage more openly. She did not feel that massage through clothing was as helpful and decided to wear a sports bra during sessions. She also asked for different levels of pressure and communicated where she wanted the massage therapist to focus or avoid. This was an important development in the sessions, demonstrating her enhanced comfort and willingness to self-advocate during massage sessions.

in mood. The massage therapist noted that Tumaini's pain was complex, involving both physical and psychological components. Likewise, a clinician treating Tumaini said Tumaini's physical pain was deeply connected to her psychological pain and that this type of somatic work was critical for healing at the intersection of physical and psychological distress.

The massage therapist noticed that Tumaini's pain kept returning to baseline between massage sessions. The massage therapist suggested that, in addition to self-massage, Tumaini build more movement into her day. Tumaini took this advice. She started doing more chores, walking, and activities. With this increase in activity, Tumaini noticed less pain. Tumaini described that, previously, she would often lie around during the day because of depression, which made her body hurt; with more physical activity, she experienced better mood and less pain. Within a couple of weeks of this lifestyle change, Tumaini came in with a lower pain rating of 3. The massage therapist and Tumaini both credited the combination of massage and movement. Tumaini explained, *"[The MT] was suggesting, what about you try to be more active? Do this, do that, I said, okay, let me go home and try, so I started being so active, even if I don't have anything to do, I'll just go to start arranging stuff.... I avoid being on the couch a lot, because I was on the couch most of the time and that was causing so much pain. Then after that, I started seeing changes. I remember one day we went to the park, and we took a walk for, like, hours, and I was like, 'wait, wait. I used to have pain, where is it?' Then I realized, oh, she was right!"*

“ I remember one day we went to the park, and we took a walk for, like, hours, and I was like, 'wait, wait. I used to have pain, where is it?' ”



Later Sessions (Self-Compassion)

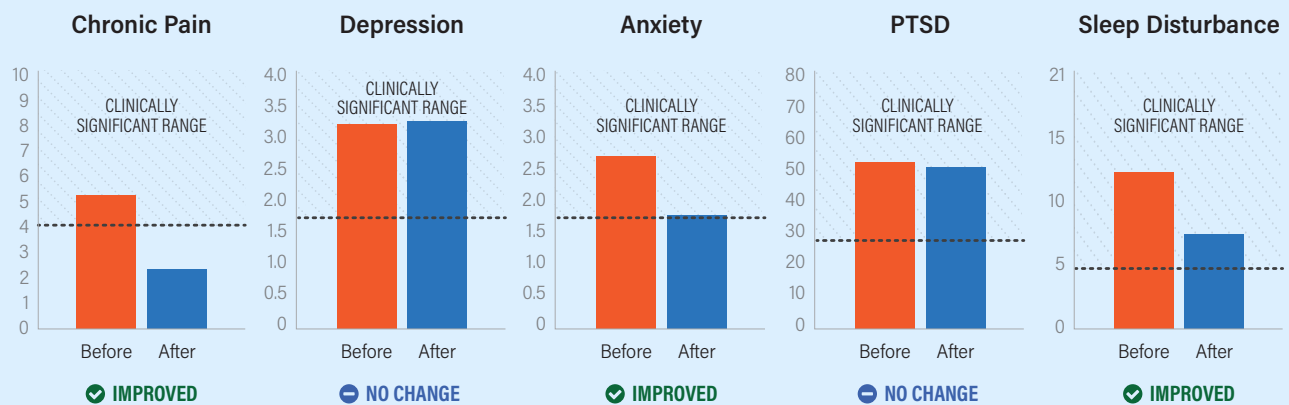
The self-compassion components of the massage sessions were both difficult and important for Tumaini. She said, *"It wasn't the easiest thing, especially talking about my emotions, because I have a trust issue."* She continued, *"[but the massage therapist] gave me a safe place to express myself."* In the self-compassion practice, it was suggested that Tumaini think about a caring word for the area of pain when she was attending to areas of discomfort in her body. Tumaini explained it this way: *"I would name pain with words like comfort and joy. It would change my mind. When I think of that, I don't think of the pain, I think of joy, I'll think of comfort."* This self-compassion practice helped Tumaini transform her relationship to pain.

In the final session, Tumaini expressed that one of the most important things she learned was that how she felt inside emotionally affected how she felt physically. She highlighted the importance of *"learning that I'm not just tense with my body, I'm tense with my mind."* The massage therapist reflected that Tumaini developed a better connection with her body and understanding of her pain. Tumaini shifted from feeling powerless to recognizing that she had control over her healing.

Outcomes

Based on study data collected before massage, Tumaini demonstrated clinically significant symptomatology for chronic pain, depression, PTSD, anxiety, and poor sleep quality (see figure 2). After completing the 10 massage therapy sessions, her chronic pain scores decreased and were below clinical thresholds. Her anxiety and sleep quality scores improved but remained clinically significant. There were no descriptive or clinical improvements in depression or PTSD. Although Tumaini described improvements in depression, these improvements were not reflected in the clinical assessment scores.

FIGURE 2. Change in symptom scores before and after massage therapy



➡ Learn more about the research: cvt.org/what-we-do/advancing-research/