

REFLEX-IONS ON REFLEXOLOGY

Don't call it massage

BY ANDREA KENNEDY

My living room is dark and tranquil as I settle into a recliner – surprised at how comfortable I am considering 10 minutes earlier the chair was collapsed like a beach lounge.

“What I’m doing to start is letting your feet and more importantly letting your body know that I’m here,” says Lisa Freemantle of Solefood Reflexology, settling in herself on a stool situated at my toes, which were elevated contentedly at her chest level.

She closes her eyes.

“Do you carry the tension in your shoulders?” she asks, her fingers getting to know the padding below my pinkie toe.

I do, I tell her, though frankly I don’t find her inquiry all that inspired. Doesn’t everyone? Not as much as I do, I later discovered along with more intriguing information during my first session of reflexology.

THE INTRODUCTION

“The idea is the relaxed body is more likely to function well if there are no restrictions or tensions in the body,” Lisa says.

She lives in Westchester with a client base predominantly in Connecticut. Though she works from yoga studios and spas, she’s also 100-percent mobile and self-contained, which is how she arrived at my fifth floor apartment in White Plains – her folded recliner in one hand and in the other, her stool, also folded, resting atop a pretty duffel containing a pillow, towel and blanket plus other helpful goods like creams and wipes.

“People are coming from work, from sport,” she says. “I come prepared with everything from spray to gloves if necessary.”

I stumble over myself with apologies for not sprucing up my pedicure before our session. Her feet look practically perfect with toes painted the color of wisteria, but with my 5-month-old and full-time job, such frills fall through the cracks. I assure her I did just lather my feet in the shower (so much so the suds had me slipping all over the porcelain) and she in turn reassures me to not be silly.

“That’s probably the most common thing people say to me,” says Lisa. “I truly mean this when I say it: I work on feet all the time – men, women, children – and (a pedicure) is the last thing I expect anyone to do. I’m used to a million and one pairs of feet.”

I feel instantly comfortable and thoroughly vindicated when I hear her explanation of why gussied-up tootsies aren’t necessarily best for the cause.

“I like to see feet in their natural state,” she says. “I like to see where people lay down extra layers of skin. Is that protecting a particular reflex? Is there a reason why there’s a hard spot there?”

Lisa asks if I have any medical conditions she ought to know about, and I love to hear her speak since she has the most delightful British accent and uses words like “ought.” I don’t have any, so she starts some soothing music (also from her Mary Poppins-deep duffel) as I dim the lights, glide into the recliner



Photograph by Katherine Cook.

and prepare for – well, I wasn’t quite sure what.

“There’s absolutely nothing for you to do except tell me if something doesn’t feel right,” she says. That sounds good to me.

THE SESSION

We both close our eyes, and both stayed closed for the entire 45-minute session. She works only on my feet, since they are the largest canvas in reflexology which also includes hands and ears.

“You should feel pressure, and if there is discomfort that may be an indication that that’s a place where there’s some stress or tension in the body,” Lisa says, my feet now lathered with cream and feeling simply

divine. “You might notice changes in texture – parts of the feet that are hard, crunchy, tight, grainy. Those are the kinds of indications I look for that there might be tension.”

By the time she completes her explanation, I’m already in a state of bliss simply from her soothing tones and gentle touch. I notice a band of tingling between my temples that strikes me as interesting.

“You might feel things traveling through the body,” she says. “Sometimes people describe it as energy or electrical stimulation or you might just find yourself drifting away in a sleep-like state.”

Lisa works her way around the soles of my feet, sometimes simply touching or holding, which she

likens to “connecting circuits.” At times, she rubs as well, which may lead some to equate reflexology with massage. Be ye not so naïve: Massage and reflexology are wholly different methods and require entirely different training. While masseuses manipulate muscle and the connective tissue of the body, reflexologists focus on reflexes found only in the feet, hands and ears to identify and release tensions, promote balance and stimulate circulation from head to toe, front to back. Though reflexology may feel like a glorified foot rub, the benefit to the foot is secondary.

Lisa hits a tender part of my left arch, and – though she’s already indicated that reflexologists are by no means diagnosticians or offer any medical treatment at all – I’m curious what it means. She’s way ahead of me.

“Right here you have the reflexes to the kidney and the whole of the urinary system, so the area of the body linked with hydration,” she says. A breastfeeding mother, I’m shamefully poor at keeping hydrated.

“In Chinese theory of medicine, they understand that emotions are literally held in different area of the body,” continues Lisa, who began her reflexology training in Hong Kong while working there as a French and German teacher. “They will tell you that the kidney is associated with the emotion of anxiety.”

Ding ding ding: Lisa’s three for three. Apparently, I wear my foot on my sleeve.

“Does it affect your digestion when you’re stressed?” she asks.

Four for four.

She posed the question upon noticing that my reflex associated with the large and small intestine

is particularly tight, and she warns of another area around my ankle related to hormones with reflexes secondary to digestion that may be holding tension as well. She’s right.

“One of the most common physical reasons that people come to me is because they hear reflexology can help with digestive issues like IBS, colitis and those kind of issues,” she says.

In fact, I’d been conscious that something’s been going on in my stomach throughout our session.

“When the body moves out of the stress mode into a more relaxed mode you often hear or notice or feel someone’s stomach grumble,” she says. “If you feel that happening, it’s actually a very good sign that the body is moving from a fight-and-flight state to one of rest and digest.”

Victory!

By the time we finish, I have completely dozed off – she says it often happens during work on the toes, which hold the reflex connected to the brain – and awoken feeling the best kind of noodle-y.

She sprays my feet with refreshing aloe mint and somehow they feel more special to me now – softer, certainly, and like some mystical missives that communicate my every ill with Lisa playing translator. She’s a compassionate facilitator in identifying and relieving tension and stress and also a remarkable complement to doctors of Western medicine. She’s worked with cancer patients plus other hospital patients and their families at places like Greenwich Hospital and Maria Fareri Children’s Hospital at Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla.

“It’s great when someone’s attached to a monitor

and you can see their blood pressure drop,” she says.

While Lisa advises that reflexology is not considered a medical treatment – though nations like China and Denmark have adopted the practice to such ends – her clients testify that she can identify a health problem before it manifests. She even correctly identified that one client was having a problem with her right eye, though there were no outward physical symptoms.

“The feet don’t lie,” Lisa says.

THE AFTERMATH

Days later, I’ve been better aware of improving hydration and my belly seems to be – for lack of a better word – working. I even find myself handling stressors better and wonder if it has anything to do with Lisa calming the reflex connected to my adrenal gland, which she says may encourage the body to reduce the output of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol.

The science of reflexology is still uncertain, Lisa says, but in a world of evidence-based conventions, her happier, healthier clients are compelling proof of its many benefits.

“Somehow if it were only proven that it is only relaxation and stress relief that is already such a huge health benefit,” she says. “I believe there’s probably a lot more to it than that, but even if that’s the only health benefit, it’s a big only.”

I, for one, am a believer.

To book an appointment with Lisa or to learn more about reflexology and how to find a qualified practitioner, visit mysolefood.com. ■

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