

# Discussing Oncology Massage Research: an Interview with Danielle Gentile, PhD

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**This interview introduces the *Journal's* readers to a new massage therapy researcher, Danielle Gentile, PhD, who is a Health Services Researcher and Assistant Professor of Medicine in the Department of Supportive Oncology at the Levine Cancer Institute for Atrium Health in Charlotte, North Carolina. Dr. Gentile's research focuses on social media in health care, integrative oncology, and the effects of integrative modalities—including massage therapy—on pain in patients with cancer. In the interview, Dr. Gentile describes what excites her about the field of massage therapy and how she integrates massage therapists into her research.**

The massage therapy research field is growing, and this interview introduces the *Journal's* readers to an up-and-coming new researcher. Danielle Gentile, PhD, is Health Services Researcher and Assistant Professor of Medicine in the Department of Supportive Oncology at the Levine Cancer Institute for Atrium Health in Charlotte, North Carolina. Dr. Gentile's most recent research has focused on improving pain outcomes for patients with cancer.<sup>(1)</sup> She is a graduate of the College at Brockport, State University of New York, where she won the Chancellor's Award for Student Excellence, the highest honor for graduating students. She received her PhD in Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior from the University of South Carolina, where her focus included investigations using social media data, program development and evaluation projects, and advocacy for improving health for those in the LGBTQ+ community. Her focus shifted to integrative medicine within an Integrative Oncology health care setting when she began working with the Levine Cancer Institute in 2016. Dr. Gentile gained access to a rich database of massage therapy treatment data gathered by massage therapists at the cancer center and found promising results. Dr. Gentile's latest work,<sup>(2)</sup> which takes her back to her social media data analysis roots, was recently cited by the *New York Times* and other news outlets. Readers can hear more about Dr. Gentile's work in massage therapy research this October at the American Massage Therapy Association National Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she will be part of

the 'Massage Therapy Foundation Research Panel: Cancer and Massage'.

## PLEASE TELL US ABOUT YOUR MASSAGE THERAPY RESEARCH AND HOW YOU FEEL IT HAS IMPACTED THE FIELD OF MASSAGE THERAPY.

My research compares Oncology Massage to Healing Touch on pain outcomes in a diverse sample of cancer patients. At Levine Cancer Institute, our patients complete symptom assessments before and after they experience each therapy. We found that both Oncology Massage and Healing Touch produced clinically significant pain relief (defined as a decrease of at least 2 points from pretherapy to post-therapy on a scale from 0=no pain to 10=worst pain possible.) In the multivariate model, we found that, after controlling for pretherapy pain scores, oncology massage was associated with increased odds of pain improvement compared to Healing Touch. We also performed a subsample analysis of patients with severe pretherapy pain (defined as 7 points or higher) comparing Oncology Massage to Healing Touch and did not find a statistically significant difference. This has impacted the field of massage therapy by providing evidence to support the practice of massage as a nonpharmacologic pain management strategy for cancer outpatients.

## HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN RESEARCHING MASSAGE THERAPY?

I became interested in massage therapy when I learned it was one of the integrative modalities our Department of Supportive Oncology offers to cancer survivors. I'm interested in improving quality of life for cancer patients, and oncology massage fulfills that purpose for many patients. I'm also interested in oncology massage specifically because it requires an advanced level of skill in providing modifications appropriate for cancer patients, such as altering the positioning and taking care to avoid pressure on

surgical sites, tumors, medical devices, and/or other areas that have become sensitive or painful due to the cancer itself or anticancer treatments.

### HOW DO YOU INTEGRATE STAKEHOLDERS (E.G., PRACTICING MASSAGE THERAPISTS, MASSAGE PATIENTS/CLIENTS) INTO YOUR RESEARCH PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION, AND/OR DISSEMINATION?

I'm very fortunate to be able to easily ask our massage therapists for their expertise throughout the research process. Our Oncology Massage and Healing Touch therapists had been collecting symptom assessment data and had amassed an impressive dataset well before I joined the Department of Supportive Oncology and pursued a research project using those data. I learned about the way the data were collected from our massage therapists. We recently updated our symptom assessment instruments, and our massage therapists provided insights on the symptoms that they noticed seemed to improve quickly and which symptoms tend to take multiple therapy sessions to notice an improvement.

In October 2019, I will have the privilege of sharing my research at the American Massage Therapy Association National Convention. I look forward to delivering my presentation to the massage therapists within Levine Cancer Institute beforehand, to receive their feedback on how to improve the presentation and make sure it is tailored to the audience's interests.

### WHERE DO YOU SEE THE MASSAGE THERAPY PROFESSION AND/OR MASSAGE THERAPY RESEARCH IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS?

I'd like to see oncology massage offered at more cancer treatment centers. We are very fortunate at Levine Cancer Institute to have philanthropic support for our massage program, but I recognize the financial and logistic barriers that exist for many other organizations in establishing an oncology massage program. I hope that, over time, more high-quality research is produced that can serve as evidence for the benefits of massage for cancer patients and survivors. It is essential to have empirical evidence to share with decision-makers about the ways massage can improve quality of life.

### HOW DO YOU KEEP UP ON THE LATEST SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE?

I conduct literature searches when writing peer-reviewed journal articles to make sure I'm current on progress in the field. I also subscribe to email messages from professional organizations' listservs like Society of Integrative Oncology, where studies are sometimes mentioned that I can follow up on. Twitter is another great source for seeing quick updates on papers that have recently been published. It's also possible to set research alerts on Google Scholar for queries that relate to your interests but, I must admit, I do not always keep up with mine unless I'm spending time on a literature review.

### WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE MASSAGE THERAPY PROFESSION AND/OR MASSAGE THERAPY RESEARCH THAT EXCITES YOU?

I find it impressive that massage therapy can help people with multiple symptoms at once. I'm interested in pain, but massage may also reduce anxiety, improve sleep quality, and improve overall quality of life with just one intervention. Oftentimes in health services research, there is a reductionist approach that aims to isolate each effect to find the best scientific evidence. However, the interconnectedness of the mind, body, and spirit can all be impacted by massage.

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### REFERENCES

1. Gentile D, Boselli D, O'Neill G, Yaguda S, Bailey-Dorton C, Eaton TA. Cancer pain relief after healing touch and massage. *J Altern Complement Med*. 2018;24(9-10):968-973.
2. Gentile D, Markham MJ, Eaton T. Patients with cancer and social media: harness benefits, avoid drawbacks. *J Oncol Pract*. 2018;14(12):731-736.

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