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Warmth and hope

The children's spontaneous smiles, relaxed faces and happy exclamations gave us all a sense of warmth and hope.

The teachers and parents said such radiant smiles raised their own morale and gave them the energy to cope with the challenges ahead. The children told us that the massage made them feel "warm inside", "happy" and "special". Several children were keen to take the massage home to share with their families.

In Japanese culture, physical contact is not usual and parents do not often hug or cuddle their children. Nor do the Japanese people express their emotions, being conditioned by their culture to remain patient and hide their feelings behind a brave face. The story massage offers a simple way of connecting and comforting each other through the natural power of touch – a way of sharing intimacy and empathy when it is too difficult to find the words to express your feelings.

Kerstin Uvnas-Moberg, a Swedish researcher and author of *The Oxytocin Factor* believes that the feel-good effect of touch is linked with the release of oxytocin and other mood-enhancing chemicals during gentle massage. Although research is still on-going, Kerstin suggests that this release of oxytocin into the bodies of those giving and receiving gentle touch could be one of the reasons why touch has such a positive impact on countering the detrimental effects of stress and anxiety on our physical, emotional and mental health and well-being. And some exciting developments in Kerstin's research show that those watching gentle massage also experience the feelings of peace and harmony associated >

HEALING TOUCH

Healing touch is helping bring smiles to the faces of Japanese children affected by the tsunami. **Lucy Corkhill** meets therapist **Mary Atkinson**

HOLISTIC THERAPIST, MARY Atkinson, recently returned from tsunami-destroyed Rikuzentakata in Japan where families have found that using a combination of story telling with simple massage movements has helped in their recovery from trauma.

'I met Takiko Ando, a Japanese aromatherapist from Tokyo by chance in London. Takiko had been a victim of the Kobe Earthquake in 1995 and from her own personal experiences, she knew that mental health would be a real cause for concern in the aftermath of the disaster – and she was determined to do all she could to help. A few months after the tsunami, she set up a small Japanese charity called Cocoro (which means "mind" in Japanese) to provide aromatherapy and positive touch in the area.

I joined the team of Cocoro

therapists and volunteers on their third visit to the area in April last year. Together, Takiko and I created a story massage based on the healing power of nature, written especially for the children of the tsunami, inspired by the *Massage in Schools Programme*. An image of the sun rising, for example, accompanies a circular movement on the back while the wind is a rubbing action.

Over three days, we introduced the story massage to over 100 children in a mother and toddler group and three kindergartens in Rikuzentakata. Since our visit, the 'Cocoro' have returned to share the story with more children in different kindergartens.

Healing through touch

The Cocoro team has developed a simple "aroma and touch class" to help explain how aromatherapy and touch

can help with relaxation. It is a new concept in this area on the North East coast of Japan. Firstly, we introduce the idea of aromatherapy to the children through a story about how the scent of plants, leaves and flowers can bring calmness and help to heal people and animals. Then we play a game with identifying different aromas such as orange, lavender and lemon.

The next step is to introduce a group massage session using our story, "Smiling Flowers". The children massage each other through their clothes on their backs and heads following our directions. While Takiko and I demonstrated the moves, Keiko, a local social worker, read the story and showed the illustrations to the children.

'THE STORY MASSAGE OFFERS A SIMPLE WAY OF COMFORTING THROUGH THE NATURAL POWER OF TOUCH'



and drawings to show that the people of Rikuzentakata were not forgotten. This was much appreciated and it would be wonderful to send colourful drawings from the children of The Green Parent readers.

The need for mental health care continues for both adults and children. Many people have left to live elsewhere and those that remain can feel isolated and depressed. The charity offers aromatherapy treatments to adults as well as 'aroma and touch' classes to

the children. As time goes by, there becomes an even greater need to help people relax and offer time and space to help heal their emotional wounds.'

Find out more

- Send a picture for the children of Rikuzentakata to us (see p4).
- To donate, you can send a cheque to 'Cocoro', by contacting Mary at maryatkinson.com.
- Mary runs classes on Positive Touch for children at various venues. See maryatkinson.org.uk and storymassage.co.uk

> with the release of oxytocin. So everyone can benefit!

The local people told us that although many charities visit the area, few work with children. The joy of our story massage project is that it is so simple, with no preparation involved, and this means that it is being continued by the kindergartens

Witness wounds

Until we were actually there, it was impossible to visualize the scale of the disaster and the devastating impact on people's lives and the toll it takes on mental health.

For both children and adults, the depth of emotional wounds depends largely on whether they actually witnessed the tsunami. Those who saw it or were swept along in the wave are suffering the most and are haunted with recurring nightmares and sleep problems. These seem to get worse as time goes by. In one place, only one high school girl survived whilst one hundred of her schoolmates were killed. She saw everything and she could not forget. She questioned why she was still alive and began suffering such bad nightmares and panic attacks that she is now being treated in a mental hospital.

One three year old who had lost five friends and seen her teachers swept away, developed a deep fear of unusual sounds

and was highly sensitized to the aftershocks. Her mother said that her daughter did not want to talk about the tsunami or hear the word mentioned.

Sharing memories

If I had to choose one favourite memory of my time there then I think it was "talking" to one of the assistants in the mother and toddler group. She did not speak any English so we communicated by smiling, hand gestures and some interpretation from Takiko.

There was such sadness and tiredness beneath her smile and the skin on her hands was covered in stress-induced eczema. I gave her a 10 minute hand massage with shea butter and she relaxed and dozed. She said it was like having a night's sleep and her hands felt so much better. She joined in the story massage session and her enthusiasm and obvious delight brought tears to my eyes.

One of the most uplifting memories was meeting local people who say they are no longer "victims" of the tsunami and are determined to rebuild their own lives and those of the community.

Providing support

After any tragedy, it's important that the survivors feel supported and remembered by people all over the world. When we visited the area, we took letters

HEALING STORY MASSAGE

Practice at home using the movements to soothe children when needed

The round, round sun rises in the sky

(Large circular movements on back with the palm of hand)

And the flowers grow – one, two, three.

(Place palms of hands either side of spine then stroke upwards to the shoulders. Do this move three times)

But one little flower is very tired

(Small circle on middle of back with finger pads)

So the sun brings rays of light and hope

(Generous stroking movements with palms of hands, fingers facing inwards. Use alternate hands to stroke from top of shoulders to mid back)

The wind sings songs of courage

(Zig-zag movements across the back with palms of hands)

The rain sprinkles the little flower with strength

(Pitter-patter movements with pads of fingers on head and back)

Every night, the moon watches over the little flower

(Shape of new moon, semi-circle, with pads of fingers on back)

And the stars twinkle brightly in the darkness

(Plucking movement over head, back and arms)

So the little flower can sleep very peacefully

(Hold both hands on head)

Slowly, slowly the little flower gets taller and stronger

(Place hands either side of spine and make fan shapes with palms, getting larger and using a little more pressure)

It grows and grows in a field of colourful flowers

(Lots of small circles over back with pads of fingers)

And if you stop and look very carefully and carefully,

(Hold hands on shoulders)

You can see that all flowers are smiling. Smile and smile.

The flowers are very happy

(Make shape of smile on back with hands moving from one shoulder to the other).