

Benefits of Watsu® For People With Orthopedic, Neurologic And Rheumatologic Special Needs

By Peggy Schoedinger, PT

Watsu is a passive form of aquatic bodywork/therapy that supports and gently moves a person through warm water in graceful, fluid movements. Watsu promotes a deep state of relaxation with dramatic changes in the autonomic nervous system. Through quieting the sympathetic and enhancing the parasympathetic nervous systems, Watsu has profound effects on the neuromuscular system. These changes benefit clients with a wide variety of special needs.

The sympatholytic effects of Watsu lead to enhancement of the parasympathetic nervous system. Physiological changes then occur throughout the body. These changes may include:

1. Decreased heart rate
2. Decreased rate of respiration
3. Increased depth of respiration
4. Increased peripheral vasodilatation
5. Increased smooth muscle activity (digestion)
6. Decreased activation of striated muscles (skeletal)
7. Decreased spasticity
8. Decreased muscle spasm
9. Decreased Reticular Activating System activity
10. Enhanced immune system response

Orthopedic and Rheumatologic Special Needs:

Watsu helps decrease muscle tension and increase range of motion. The support of the water provides relief from compression forces in the joints. The movements through the water provide gentle stretching into all ranges for the spine and extremities while these joints are unloaded. Soft tissue and joint mobilization techniques may also be incorporated into a Watsu session.

Clients report decreased pain as Watsu decreases their muscle spasm and muscle guarding, increases their range of motion, and promotes profound relaxation. Many clients also report a decrease in their emotional pain.

Neurological Special Needs:

Watsu helps decrease hyper tonicity, including spasticity and rigidity. The rhythmical, gentle rocking motions in warm water coupled with the repeated trunk rotation and trunk elongation are helpful in decreasing abnormal muscle tone.

Benefits of Watsu:

Therapists utilizing Watsu as part of their aquatic therapy treatment programs report the following improvements in their clients:

1. Immediate Benefits With First Session
 - a. increased range of motion
 - b. increased muscle relaxation
 - c. decreased muscle spasm
 - d. decreased spasticity
 - e. decreased pain

2. Long-term Benefits After Multiple Sessions
 - a. improved sleep patterns
 - b. improved digestion
 - c. improved healing and immune system response
 - d. greater decreases in pain
 - e. decreased anxiety
 - f. many clients report a decrease in their emotional pain

Any healthcare professional who utilizes bodywork as part of his/her practice will benefit from learning Watsu. Some professionals will utilize Watsu as the primary intervention in their treatment programs. Others will find their clients benefit the most when Watsu is used as just a portion of the treatment program or as part of each treatment session. Therapists find Watsu to be especially beneficial for clients who are having difficulty with functional, daily life skills secondary to pain, stiffness, muscle spasm or spasticity.

Watsu is being incorporated into aquatic therapy treatment programs in hospitals, clinics and rehabilitation centers around the world. Therapists are impressed by the benefits for so many of their clients. Some of the many populations who have benefited include those with traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, strokes, Parkinson's Disease, arthritis, cerebral palsy, chronic pain, Fibromyalgia, ankylosing spondylitis, post mastectomy, post thoracic surgery, and post traumatic stress disorder.

Many clients report that nothing else is as effective in decreasing their pain and improving their ability to move.