National Capacity Building Project: Technical Assistance of the Survivor of Torture Programs

Massage Therapy for Survivors of Torture: A Pain and Mental Health Treatment Approach for Trauma Rehabilitation

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The CENTER for VICTIMS of TORTURE

VE RI TAS Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma

NATIONAL CONSORTIUM OF TORTURE TREATMENT PROGRAMS

Attendee Controls

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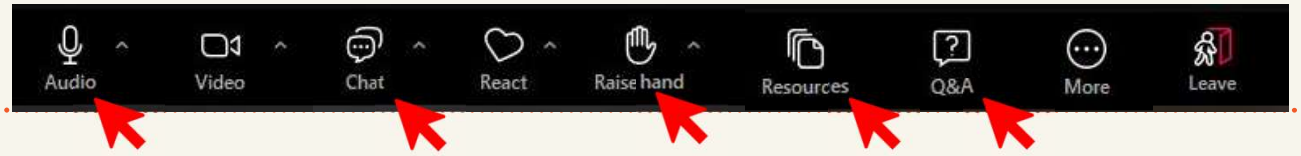

Presenters

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Zoom Poll

- Is pain a significant issue for SOT clients at your program? Yes / No / IDK
- Does your SOT program offer pain treatment modality? Yes / No / IDK If yes, what types?
- Does your SOT program offer massage therapy? Yes / No / IDK

Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is pain that persists or recurs for more than three months.

- Traumatized refugee samples chronic pain range 66% to 98% (Keene et al 2024)
- Chronic pain is associated with:
  - Cardiovascular Disease (Lurie et al 2025)
  - Sleep disturbance (Whale 2022, Lies et al., 2019)
  - Mental Health Disorders and Psychological Stress (Keene et al 2024, Whale 2022, Lurie et al 2025)
  - Daily functioning and QOL (Whale 2022, Keene et al 2024)

Massage for Survivors?

- Chronic pain
- Mental health
- Culturally resonant approach
- Passive treatment modality
- Complement to psychotherapy

Research on Massage for Survivors

- A Lack of Research
- Risks of Severe Trauma
- Cultural & Communication Barriers
- Interprofessional Coordination

Rich, G. J. (2025). Mental health and massage therapy for refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers. IJTMB, 18(3).

Primary Study Aim

Examine the effectiveness of TCI-Massage to reduce symptomatic distress in a culturally and linguistically diverse refugee population.

Study Sample

Forced Migrants

41.5%	< High school degree
93.8%	Survivor of torture
38.5%	Survivor of sexual assault
81.5%	Family separation
55.4%	Family members killed or disappeared
52.3%	Does not speak English

Symptomology

Chronic Pain	89.2%
Depression	87.5%
PTSD	74.6%
Anxiety	64.6%
Poor Sleep	92.3%
Sleep Duration	4.61 hours

Intervention Context: The Center for Victims of Torture

Integrated Care

- Psychotherapy
- Social Work
- Medical

TCI-Massage

Overall Massage Intervention

- 10 one-hour sessions based on Swedish Massage techniques
- Integrated Care: delivered at clinic where client receives psychosocial services.
- Trauma Informed
- Culturally Responsive: interpreters available.
- Somatic Education – integrated into massage sessions.
- Self Massage as take-home practice

TCI-Massage

Three key somatic education components integrated into massage, in a staged manner:

- Body literacy (sessions 1-3)
- Breath attention (sessions 4-6)
- Self-compassion (sessions 7-9)

All sessions start include:

-Intake to discuss well-being, take home practice, and goal of the session. This time builds rapport and trust.

- Session review to discuss how feeling post-session and identify a take-home practice related to the session focus.

Study Results: No differences at baseline

	Control Group			Treatment Group		
	n	Mean (SD)	Median (IQR)	n	Mean (SD)	Median (IQR)
Pain Score	23	6.32 (2.50)	6.67 (3.0)	32	6.61(2.35)	6.67(3.33)
Anxiety	23	2.00 (0.61)	1.80 (0.90)	32	2.23 (.65)	2.20 (1.05)
Depression	23	2.67 (0.86)	2.77 (1.38)	32	2.83 (.63)	3.00 (0.92)
PTSD	20	37.47 (19.18)	41.33 (33.67)	30	44.3 (18.05)	45.33 (27.33)
Sleep Disturbance	23	12.52 (3.45)	13.00 (4.0)	32	12.41 (4.13)	13.00 (5.00)
Age	23	40.83 (12.36)	40 (17)	32	38.09 (9.06)	37.00 (11)
BMI	23	28.29 (5.63)	26.5 (9.82)	26	27.44 (4.26)	26.26 (6.7)

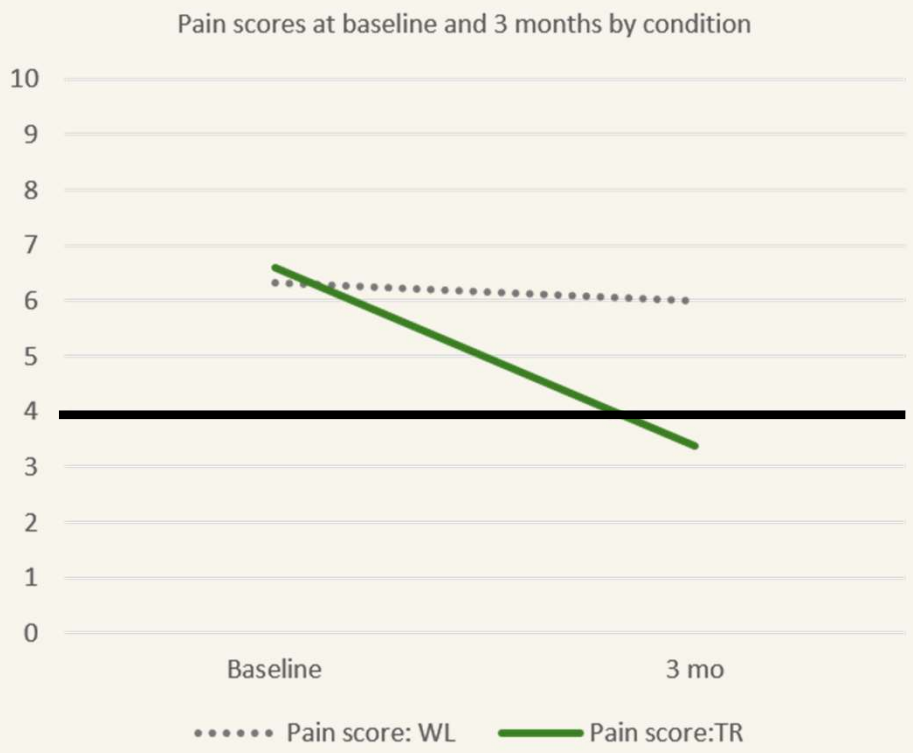
Study Results: **Massage Dosage**

Massage descriptive statistics

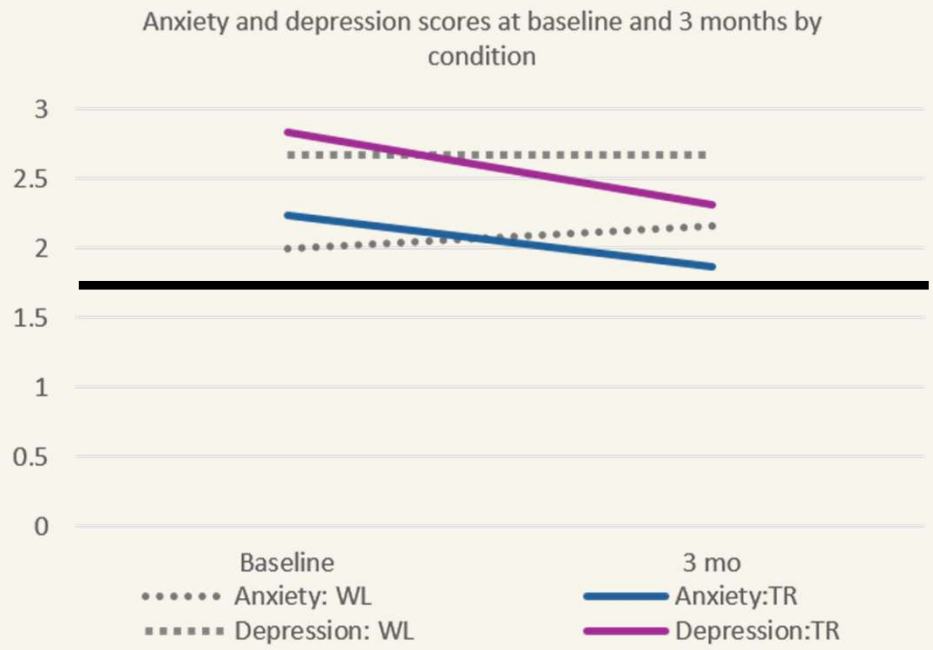
	Control Group			Treatment Group		
	n	Mean (SD)	Median (IQR)	n	Mean (SD)	Median (IQR)
	23	8.09 (2.5)	9 (2)	32	7.84 (2.5)	8 (3)

Massages completed	n (%)	n (%)
1	1 (4.3)	2 (6.3)
2	1 (4.3)	0
3	0	1 (3.1)
4	1 (4.3)	1 (3.1)
5	0	1 (3.1)
6	---	---
7	2 (8.7)	3 (9.4)
8	4 (17.4)	10 (31.3)
9	7 (30.4)	4 (12.5)
10	7 (30.4)	10 (31.3)

Study Results: **TCI-Massage Reduces Pain**



Study Results: **TCI-Massage Improves Mental Health**



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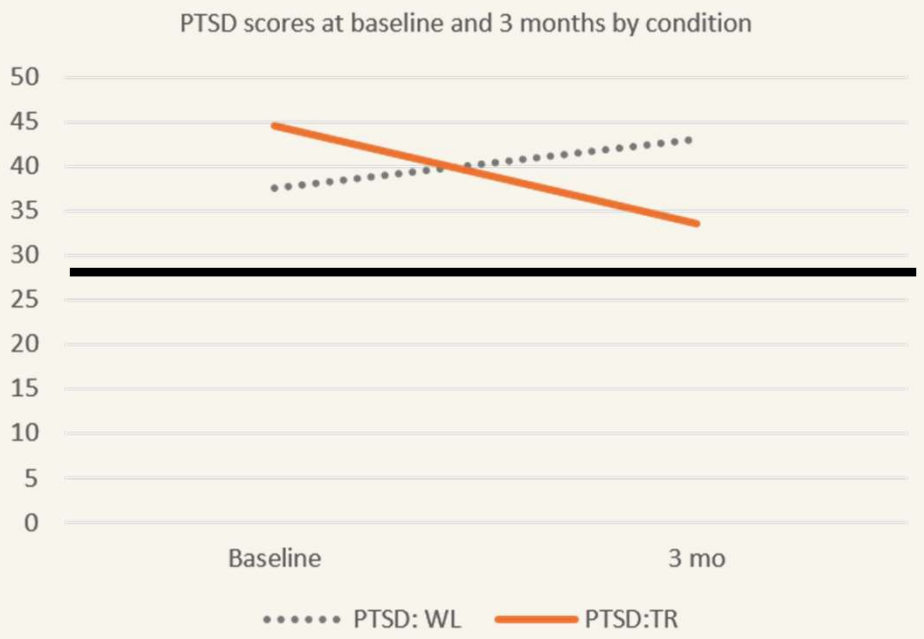
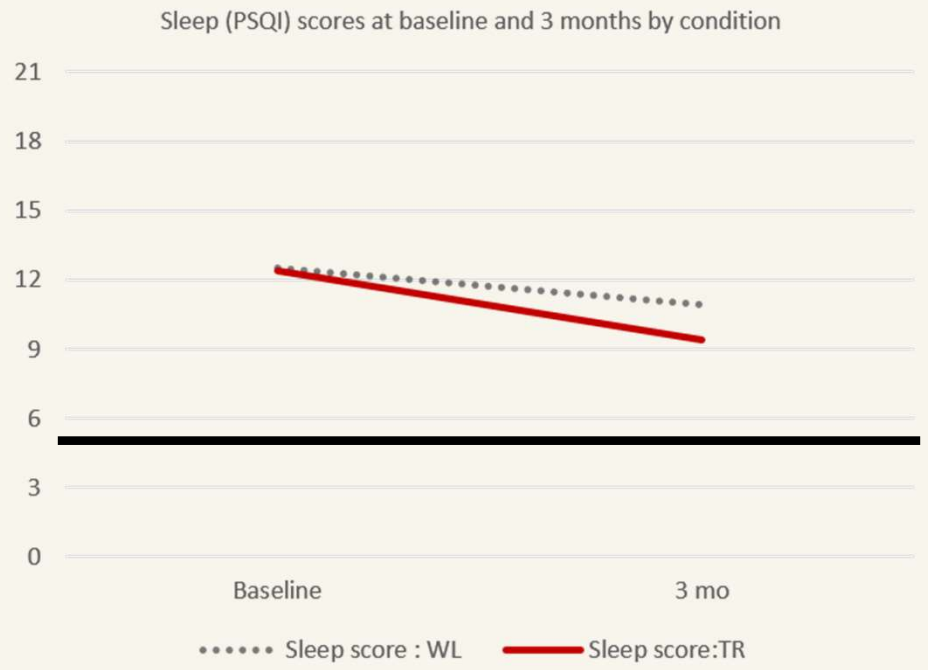
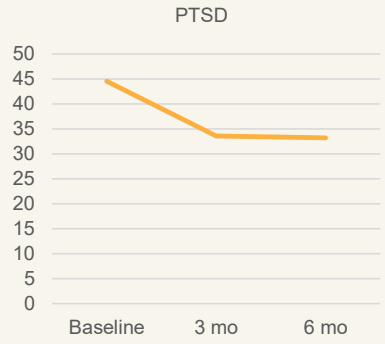
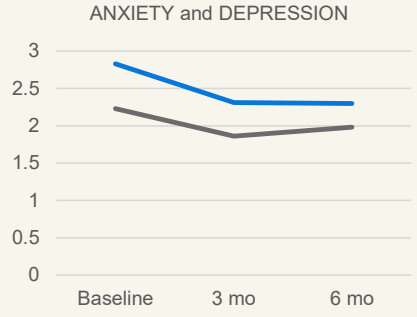


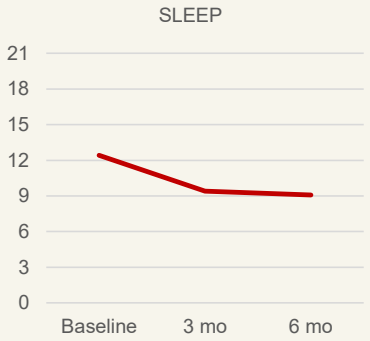
Study Results: **Descriptive Improvements in Sleep**



Study Results: Sustained Treatment Effects







Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation for Massage

- Massage through clothing
- Intake process
- Working with interpreters
- Cultural adaptation
- Consideration of the patient's sex

Trauma-Informed Care Principles for Massage

- Physical and emotional safety
- Consistency and follow-through to build trust over time
- Clients choice and control in all aspects of the massage
- Clear, ongoing communication between clients, massage therapists, and interpreters

Massage Therapist Trauma Informed Practices

- Client choice and control
- Refusal skills
- Orienting to session
- Moving slowly
- Tell-Show-Do
- Exploring preferences
- Self-regulation/Co-regulation
- Regular check-ins
- Modeling self-care
- Repetition
- Clear, ongoing communication

Supports for Massage Therapists

- Vicarious Trauma & Vicarious Resilience
- Multidisciplinary teams
- Supervision
- Peer consultation

Example Practices

BREATHE

Notice Your Breath

Place one hand on your chest and the other hand on your belly. Notice your breath as you inhale and exhale. Feel the breath moving in and out. Notice the way your hands and belly move.

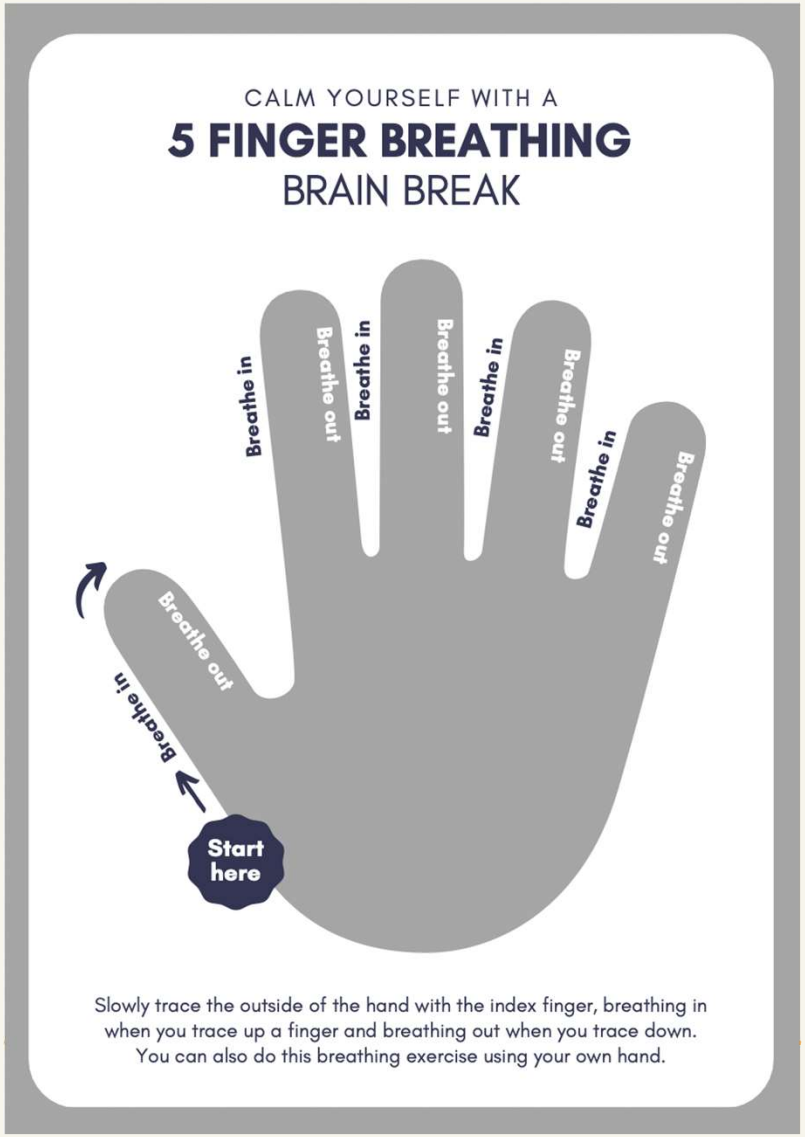
Balloon Breathing

Put your hands on your low belly. Feel your belly expand like a balloon filling up. With exhale, feel your hands return to center.

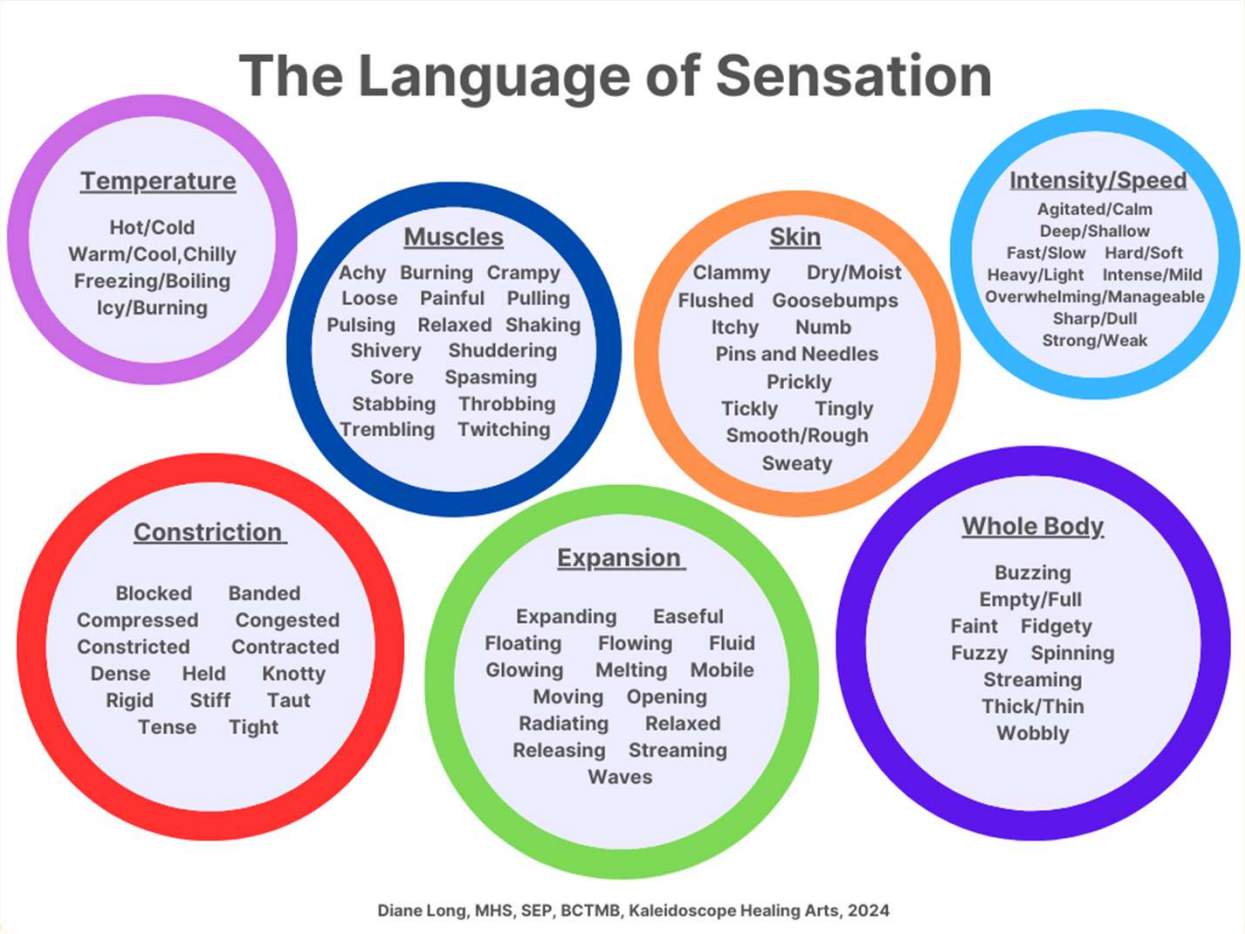
Count Down to Calm

Inhale to a count of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Exxhale 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. If you want to help your body calm down more, you can make your exhale longer.

Example Practices



Example Practices



Example Practices

3 ASPECTS OF SELF-CARE

BREATHE

Place one hand on your chest and the other hand on your belly. Notice your breath as you inhale and exhale. Feel the breath moving in and out. Notice the way your hands and belly move.

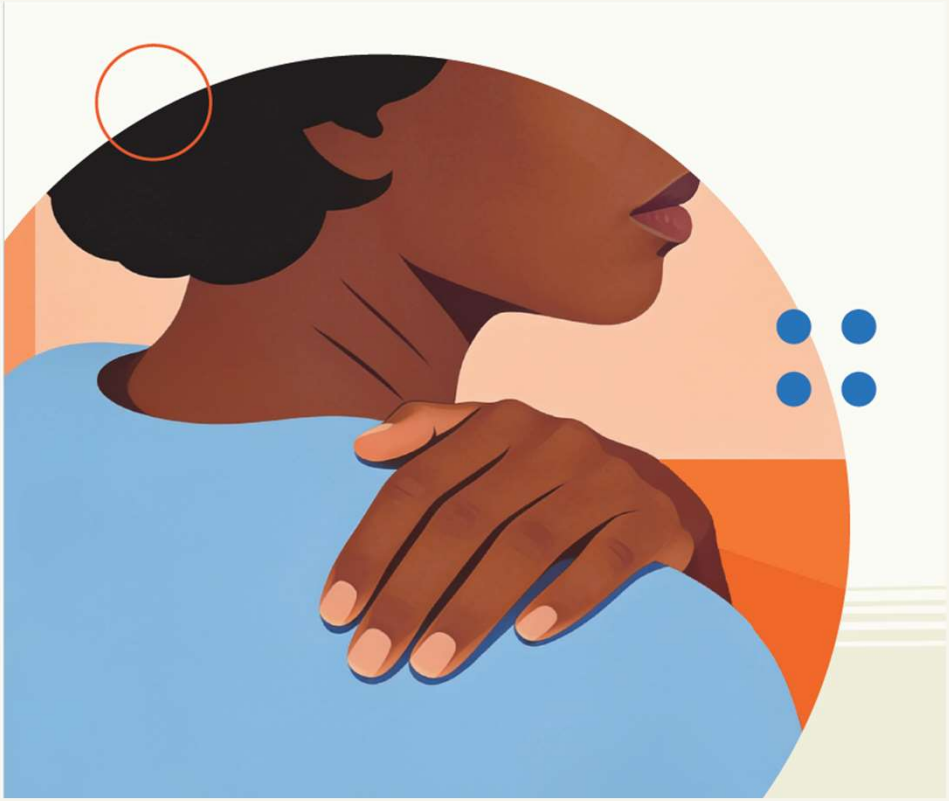
LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

Take the time to turn in and notice what is happening in your body. Notice places of tension. Notice places of ease. What is your body wanting and needing right now?

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

Put both hands on your chest to connect with your heart. Bring the energy of self compassion, in with each breath, inviting love, kindness, patience and care. Breathe deeply and allow this energy to nourish you.

Self-Massage Techniques you can use with SOT



Case Example: Akofa

Final Reflections on TCI-Massage for SOT

- Importance of somatic/body awareness education for trauma recovery
- How these results compare to other touch-based research with similar populations

Questions?

Have a question or something you want to discuss more in-depth? Here are some options for you:

- Type your questions in the Q&A, or
- Type your questions in the chat, or
- Raise your hand using the reaction button.

Have a questions after the presentations? Here is the contact information for the presenters:

- Jennifer Esala: jesala@cvt.org
- Diane Long: dlong@nwhealth.edu
- Cynthia Price: cynthiap@uw.edu

Thank you for attending this VTM!

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July 22, 2026

The National Capacity Building Project is a project of the Center for Victims of Torture in partnership with Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma and the National Consortium of Torture Treatment Programs.

More resources are available at www.healtorture.org.

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