

## Specialized Career Path Keeps Dogs Happy, Healthy

# Canine Massage

by Ann Tarvin, C.M.T., H.T.P.

**I**t was a beautiful spring day for the Humane Society Dog Walk and Adoption Event at the local park, but the little red chow mix, Misty, cowered fearfully in the back of her cage, growling under her breath whenever people approached. The other adoptable dogs were on leashes enjoying their day away from the shelter, hoping to meet their new families.

Misty was going nowhere until one of the volunteers asked if a massage might help her relax. She stood passively on my table, head and tail both drooping. I began very slowly, just holding her quietly and letting her feel friendly energy. Gradually, I began long, soft strokes, and she began to relax.

As I carefully moved to more detailed massage strokes, her head raised and she began to look around. Her tail rose into a chow-like puff. I worked on her for about 20 minutes. The last time I saw Misty, she was headed down a park trail with her companion, sniffing, wagging and off to find her new family.

### Canine clients

Regular massage benefits dogs in the same ways it benefits people. We share the same basic anatomy and physiology and the need for touch. As in people, massage triggers a relaxation response that releases endorphins and increases circulation, which helps speed healing of injuries and regulates body functions through homeostasis. And, just as in humans, endorphin release gives the animal a sense of well-being and safety.

Many of my canine clients are older dogs, often with chronic hip or back problems. While a single session may



make them more comfortable, only regular attention will yield the full benefits of bodywork in chronic conditions. To make this care more accessible and help people reduce the overall cost of caring for their aging companions, I teach a basic course with techniques anyone can use with their dogs at home. We cover the distinction between massage and petting, a brief introduction to how animals respond to our energy, and a basic relaxation routine that can be used with any basically healthy dog.

Sometimes, the work is very specific. Adriane, an elderly husky, had hurt her back at doggy day care and was still in pain after two trips to the veterinarian. Some detailed work on her spine located an irritated nerve that was relieved by some forward pressure on a vertebra. I showed her worried owner how to gently hold this position when the pain returned, and the problem gradually subsided.

### Four-legged athletes

Bongo, a Jack Russell terrier, had traveled halfway across the country to compete in the international flyball event, a relay race for teams of four dogs. He was normally a good competitor, but in the practice runs, he kept veering left, confusing the dog who followed him and slowing the whole team. After checking Bongo's left

side and finding no problems, I was finally able to locate a tight muscle in his right shoulder. He was veering left because his loose left stride was longer than his tight right one. After a quick positional release, he was back with the team, running straight and as fast as ever.

Athletic dogs participate in many competitive sports, including agility, Frisbee, flyball, dock diving, and line coursing. Like their human counterparts, they train regularly for their chosen sport and are in excellent physical shape. They are prone to the same athletic injuries as humans—sprains, strains, trigger points, overuse injuries and broken bones.

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Canine massage is a broad field. Almost any technique of human massage can be adapted for our furry friends: Swedish, relaxation, positional release, energy work, craniosacral, trigger-point and water therapy are all in my toolbox. Acupressure is also a helpful skill for canine work. Trained vet technicians can get additional schooling in physical therapy and rehabilitation for animals.

### Specialized focus

Canine massage is the perfect arena for me. I have loved dogs since I was a toddler, but did not want to be a veterinarian. In fact, canine massage changed my life. Ten years ago, I was on my third career as an accounting clerk and had no experience with massage in any form. One Sunday, the local paper ran a human interest article on canine massage with a photo of a Dachshund mix receiving a massage to help her recover from a stroke. The little dog had a smile of pure bliss on her face and my immediate thought was, "If I can make a dog that happy, I finally know what I want to do when I grow up." That is still the motivation in each session—to return the comfort and happiness dogs have given me.



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With no massage background, I enrolled in the PetMassage Training and Research Institute in Toledo, Ohio. There, Jonathan Rudinger, R.N., L.M.T., one of the pioneers of canine massage, opened a gate that has led me through canine massage and energy work to eventually include human massage. Still, I find the canine work to be the most rewarding.

However, interest alone is not enough. While a love of dogs is the obvious starting point, those interested in canine massage also need to be comfortable with all types of dogs. Experience as a rescue volunteer and dog training or animal behaviorist experience is a definite plus. In addition, you need to be in good physical shape, because you will be lifting heavy animals onto your table and will inevitably find yourself working on the floor with some of the larger animals.

Quick reflexes are helpful to hold a dog who startles when you hit a tender spot. Of course, you still need people skills, because no dog comes to you without a human attached. You need to be able to explain what you are doing and why you think it will help the dog. (It is often harder to communicate with the person than with the dog.) You need to have confidence in your work and a good sense of the boundaries of your knowledge.

Because dogs don't describe their symptoms to you verbally, I often ask the client to consult a veterinarian to have confirmation of my assessment before I work. It is also good to develop a list of vets who are interested in holistic work such as acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine or chiropractic. With experience, you can often develop a referral network with them so that each animal can receive the most effective treatment possible.

As a caution, you should also be aware that laws for animal massage practice are not as uniform from one state to another as they are for humans. You can check on your state's laws at the International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork/Association of Canine Water Therapy website ([iaamb.org/laws-by-state.php](http://iaamb.org/laws-by-state.php)).

The same site also has a listing of schools and workshops you can attend.

This specialty career path can be financially rewarding, as a growing number of Americans choose to have dogs in their homes. The Humane Society of the United States estimates there are almost 80 million pet dogs in the U.S., and statistics from surveys conducted by the American Pet Products Association (APPA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association indicate that 63 percent of U.S. pet owners consider their pet to be a family member; 36 percent consider them to be companions. (Just 1 percent considers pets to be property.) Further, the APPA estimates that \$15.73 billion will be spent during 2015 on veterinary care for pets, and \$5.24 billion spent for grooming and boarding services. Various sources show that pet ownership—especially of dogs—is projected to continue to increase by about 3.4 percent each year, through 2018.

### Deep-belly sighs

Over the years, I have worked on young, athletic dogs and old, stiff dogs. I have worked on injured dogs and abused dogs. I have worked on dogs confused by changes in their home or family and dogs afraid of thunder and fireworks. Never once has a dog read my brochure and said, "I don't think that will help me." The most rewarding moment is always the deep-belly sigh that simply conveys the sentiment, "Oh, my, that feels good."

Ann Tarvin, C.M.T., H.T.P., of Balanced Paws Canine Massage ([balancedpaws.com](http://balancedpaws.com)), holds an Instructor Level Certificate from PetMassage® Training and Research Institute in Toledo, Ohio. She graduated from Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis's Therapeutic Massage Program, in Indianapolis, Indiana. She has both human and canine clients and teaches basic canine massage for dog owners. She lives with four wonderful dogs. 