

"A Mix of Tranquility & Energy"

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By Emily Kittle

Imagine a massage so relaxing you want to get up and take on the world. It might sound strange, this mix of tranquility and energy, but plenty of people swear by Thai massage.

Susan Hudek takes Thai massage participants through a yoga-like experience at Body & Soul Wellness Center and Spa in Dubuque. The massage therapist employs the usual tools of the trade - aromatherapy, oil, a dimly lit room, gentle strains of relaxing music.

But it isn't the usual kind of static massage where clients simply take it lying down. Also known as "lazy man's yoga," Thai massage has the therapist moving the client into different yoga stretches on a futon mattress during the spiritual, hour-plus session. "Afterwards, it's the strangest feeling. You feel taller, and you feel energized and you're with one with your body," Hudek said. "I've had people say they almost feel punchy a little bit afterwards, because you just feel so good. "It certainly isn't your typical massage. But maybe that's what appeals to fans of the ancient practice, which appears to be picking up momentum in the tri-states and beyond.

Responding to the growing interest, at least three Dubuque businesses have begun offering the unique treatment - available to yoga experts and novices alike. "I think anymore, people are more open to trying something different," said Hudek, Body & Soul's lead spa therapist. "It's not that we get bored with regular massage, but people are always looking for something new. People want to experience something different."

Since Body & Soul began providing this treatment last year, Samantha Trausch has become a Thai massage convert. The 22-year-old Dubuque woman - a waitress who recently also became a certified personal trainer - was looking for a way to mend her "sluggish" body. "I do a lot of things that take up a lot of energy," she said. "So I'd been feeling really tired lately." Trausch, who plans to begin receiving Thai massage monthly, says the experience is completely different than traditional Swedish massage, which she has received regularly during the past four years. "You feel less groggy. You feel taller and lighter. You get the little bounce back in your step," she said. "It's not like your regular massage where you want to go home and relax all day...With this, I feel like I have too much energy to go lay around. I want to go do something right away."

Hudek encourages her clients to schedule their Thai massage during a time when they can take advantage of the energy boost - before college finals, a marathon or yoga class, for instance. "But I also tell them, 'Don't go out and do all of the things on your list today, because you want to be able to enjoy it a little bit, too,'" she said. The majority of Hudek's Thai massage clients are 30- to 60-year-old women, though they have ranged from 9 to 78. And more men are giving it a try, usually at the suggestion of their significant other, massage therapists say.

While Hudek says she still gets more requests for traditional massage, a growing number of her clients are giving Thai a try. Administering some 30 massages each week, Hudek estimates that between six and 10 of those typically are of the Thai variety.

Another licensed massage therapist, Elisa Eigenberger, estimates that 95 percent of her clients request Thai massage.

"Since I started offering it, I have pretty much converted everybody," said Eigenberger, owner of Dubuque Healing Arts Group, LLC. "I have a few holdouts."

Massage therapists have been met with their share of skeptics. Hudek has heard some interesting comments along the way. "One gentleman said to me, 'I was hoping that you weren't going to have a Judo suit on and come in running across the room,'" she recalled, laughing. But usually once someone has received a Thai massage, Hudek said, "it really sells itself." Unlike with traditional massage, Thai massage participants remain fully dressed - wearing loose, comfortable clothing. That's often a big selling point to first-time massage recipients, who sometimes feel uncomfortable lying undressed beneath a blanket of sheets, Hudek said.

Another difference: The massage therapist uses everything from her hands to her arms to her bare feet to administer the fully-body stretching treatment that is Thai massage. "It's funny, because sometimes people will say they don't know if they want my bare feet on them," Hudek said. "If that's the case, they'll be barefoot, but I'll put socks on."

Spiritual in nature, Thai massage begins - and ends - with a prayer of sorts that honors Shivago, the creator of the work, Eigenberger said. It was this spiritual aspect that had Lynn LeBlanc initially unsure about Thai massage. She since has become a believer in it. "The fact that you do feel so good afterwards, I believe the spiritual part is a factor," the 45-year-old Dubuque woman said.

Though the massage isn't cheap - it's \$85 for a 75-minute session at Body & Soul - its benefits often outlast those of traditional massage, recipients say. While you might experience the feel-good perks of traditional body work for up to a week afterward, it isn't unusual to continue feeling the effects of a Thai massage for multiple weeks, Hudek says, "People will say to me that they do Thai massage because it last longer for them," Hudek said. "And, to them, it's more affordable (than traditional massage) because in the long run the effects carry over longer."

LeBlanc now alternates between massage types, receiving Thai massage one month and Swedish the next. "You kind of think of massage as something to spoil yourself with, treating yourself to something special," LeBlanc said. "Now I've changed my view and think of it more as a health treatment. "It's still a treat, but I'm justifying it."

Emily Kittle writes for the Telegraph Herald.