

Interview with Megan Ayrault

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How did you first get into animal massage?

I first learned of it in 1999 when I was working as an instructor with a therapeutic riding center. A colleague of mine took a class on horse massage, and when I saw what she had learned in action, and how the horses responded, I wanted to learn to be able to do it, too. So I started with one class, and then another, and another, including adding dog massage. There have been too many classes and teachers to name here, but I do list them all on my website for anybody who's interested. When I found out there was a law in Washington requiring licensing, then along with the training I already had, I had to go to school for people massage, and loved that, too, so now I work with both animals and people, but mostly with animals.

How is massaging animals different than massaging people?

There are quite a few differences really, but I'll tell you the top three in my experience. One is that animals are usually more tuned in to their bodies, so they tend to respond more quickly and to more subtle techniques. Another is that even though they don't use words, animals' feedback is much more constant and reliable, just as a child might squirm and say "ow" when something feels uncomfortable when an adult might try to be polite or just not be as aware. A third difference is for my body mechanics in applying strokes. Some things are easier, and some things are more challenging, but overall I find working on animals easier for me than working on people.

What do you call an animal massage professional (Animal masseuse? Massage therapist?)

This has actually become something of a political issue. There are many terms used. I will say that "masseuse" is an outdated term and I don't know any professionals who refer to themselves this way. "Animal massage therapist" or "animal massage professional" are good descriptions to start with, though it may not be the person's actual credential. The best approach is to ask them what they prefer to be called. Or take a look at how they refer to their work in a brochure or website, and use the same term.

Can you massage a bird or a snake?

Yes and no. There are practitioners around the world working successfully with virtually every species bigger than a bug, and maybe even some that small! A friend of mine, Lola Michelin, has worked a lot with zoo animals in her practice. She's helped them recover from injuries and surgery, reduced the animals' anxiety, and generally helped make handling by caregivers easier and safer for all involved.

The two key words here are "intention" and "touch," not necessarily "massage." And you can get therapeutic effects even when the touch is not direct. Sometimes a long tool might be used if direct contact is too much for the animal or unsafe for the person. Even an energetic connection, a rapport between the

animal and the person, can be therapeutic. Animals especially, but people, too, of course, are so sensitive to the energy, mood or intention of the person touching them. The effects on the nervous system, just for a start, are so powerful. I'm sure you can imagine or recall how someone you know gave you a very simple touch – even just a hand on your shoulder – and how, as a result, your heart rate or breathing or posture changed quickly from tension to relaxation. Even a very simple, “untrained” touch can support health if the intention of the touch is positive and focused. These changes in the nervous system are very important for the body's healing responses to work well, and this is as true for birds and snakes as it is for other animals and for us.

The field of animal holistic health care is growing so rapidly. Why?

Are you ready for a long list?

1. Since every health situation is completely unique, the more options you have to work with, including Western medicine and alternative approaches, the more likely you will find a successful combination of therapies.
2. The level of devotion in this country to many of our animals is certainly fueling a demand for more care of all kinds, and raising standards for what health and wellness really means.
3. Holistic health care tends to involve the client much more than “Western” approaches. Clients participate in and learn more about the process of healing and living, so it's more soul-satisfying, for the owners at least, and perhaps for the animals, too, even when it doesn't always lead to a “cure.”
4. Gandhi said, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” The way we treat our beloved pets speaks well to the idea that we're on the right track, even as the way we treat many other animals shows how far we still have to go.
5. And of course, as people experience great results in the health of their animals, they have stories to tell. And word tends to spread quickly, especially among people who love their animals.

What's your favorite story of a particularly memorable animal massage?

While every session is meaningful, I suppose some of the more dramatic responses do tend to be especially memorable. Working with older animals is often especially touching, so I'll share about a session with an older mare named Abby. She was pretty much lame on three legs (if not four) and arthritic throughout her body, but being taken care of as well as possible by her very devoted owner. The vet who did acupuncture and chiropractic care for her referred Abby to me for bodywork to help with more support for the soft tissues. About the second or third session, when I was able to help Abby with a very nice release in her neck, she gave a very positive relaxation response that was immediately noticeable, but it was really when the session was over that the

biggest reward came. As usual, after the massage, Abby's owner let her out into the paddock, but this time Abby got down and rolled, then got back up and literally frolicked around her paddock! It was such a sweet moment, seeing this mare that had been almost unable to walk before the massage, just having a great time being in her body again. It brought her owner just about to tears, as she told me she hadn't seen Abby do that for quite a long time.

Is it possible to harm an animal if you don't know what you're doing?

That's a great question and the answer is yes. But at the same time, anyone can learn basic massage without worry of causing harm if you follow a few, easy-to-remember guidelines:

1. Always check with your vet first if your animal has any health conditions or symptoms of concern. This includes if your pet is on medication, since that indicates some condition is being treated.
2. Never massage an animal who has a fever or is in shock.
3. Always listen to your animal. If he or she lets you know that what you're doing doesn't feel good, don't do it.
4. Finally, exploration and creativity in massaging your animal is wonderful, but don't waste your time and energy trying to reinvent the wheel. Learn as much as you can from professionals, classes, books and videos so you can make quicker progress and help yourself avoid mistakes. Of course, the best resource for getting started is www.AllAboutAnimalMassage.com!

How can you tell if something hurts the animal while you're massaging them?

Animals are excellent communicators. We just have to pay attention. They'll tell you what they're feeling with their body language, the expression on their face, their breathing, posture, and many other signals. I describe many specific examples in my books, *The Dog Lover's Guide to Animal Massage* and *The Horse Lover's Guide to Animal Massage*. And I go into even more detail in the Guided Journals, which are designed to help you practice what you learn in the books.

Do you have to be really strong to massage a horse?

Not if you learn to be accurate with your techniques and smart about your body mechanics. It would be very easy to wear yourself out and still get very little accomplished (or even do harm) if you don't know what you're doing. That said, some styles of massage will take more muscle than others, but still, a good massage is never really about strength – it's more about positive intention and focus.

You've said that animal massage isn't just "pet pampering"; it's basic health care. Why is that?

Pampering is great, too, but it's important to realize that massage and other forms of bodywork have very real health benefits. In my books, I explain for

animal owners six ways that massage works in the animal's body. Of course, some animals will get along better without massage than others, but it can help any animal be healthier and more comfortable. Massage is also a wonderful way to deepen your connection with your animals. (In fact, for people who adopt adult animals, massage can really help create a strong bond more quickly.) For animals with various health challenges -- those with a greater need for massage -- it can have a big impact on their quality of life. And for some it very likely increases longevity as well.

How do you know if your animal needs a massage?

Well, my bias is that we should be massaging our animals *before* they really need it. That's the whole idea with a preventative care approach, and it's very valuable. However, I'll suggest just four examples out of a long list of possibilities that would tell you that your animal definitely needs something more, possibly including a visit from a professional.

Your animal will have more need of massage if he or she

1. Shows signs of stiffness or soreness, such as not moving around as much or as freely, or with any signs of pain.
2. Is recovering from an injury, illness or surgery.
3. Must be confined more than usual, as during a show, travel, or boarding while you're on vacation.
4. Is challenged by a hard workout. They'll get sore muscles just like you.

(Remember to consult with your veterinarian first, especially in the case of pain, illness, injury, or surgery.)

Can massage help animals when they're injured or sick?

Yes, it helps the healing process quite a bit in many cases, but when your animal is in this more vulnerable situation, it's especially important to check with your veterinarian first, and ideally also to have a professional do at least the first massage. Then he or she can help you determine whether your skills are the right match for your animal's needs, or whether additional sessions from the professional would be best.

Do you ever work with veterinarians or trainers?

Yes, I work quite often with both, and with anyone else who is part of the team caring for the animal, including the owner, of course. The more communication between everyone involved, the better it is for the animal. More and more veterinarians and trainers these days are recognizing how well massage can support their own work for their clients.

Is there more than one kind of massage for animals?

By now it's likely that there are close to a hundred forms of touch therapy, including many types of massage, being used for animals. There are hundreds of types of bodywork for people. Some are more distinctly different than others. Many are variations of basic themes used for thousands of years, for people and for animals. On our website there's a glossary describing many of the most common kinds of massage and bodywork used for animals, and links to many other resources where you can find out more.

If I want to get a professional massage for my pet, where should I go?

I definitely recommend you first visit AllAboutAnimalMassage.com. There's really no other site quite like it, specially created as a community for animal lovers wanting to learn more about all kinds of massage and other complementary therapies. You can start by downloading the free e-book, *Animal Massage: A Consumer Guide*, which has lots of information, including specific tips about finding and working with a professional. From our website you can find just about anything you need next, including a network of animal care professionals where you can find someone in your area. I'm also always happy to answer individual questions in my [blog](#).

I want to especially mention that some of the top professionals in the country are featured on the website as Expert Advisors. You can read about them and contact them from the website. And if you subscribe to our free Animal Wellness newsletter you'll get our Expert Advisors' tips on animal care and massage delivered by email every month.

It seems there are a few books available on animal massage. Is there anything that sets your books apart from others on the subject?

I believe whenever you want to learn something, you should always learn from more than one source. Naturally, I do think my books should be on everyone's list! My books have quite a few features that make them especially helpful to all animal lovers. They do include a more extensive section on consumer education than the free e-book I already mentioned, but also much more than that. The titles give you a pretty good sense of what you'll find: *The Horse Lover's Guide to Massage: What Your Horse Wants You to Know*, and *The Dog Lover's Guide to Massage: What Your Dog Wants You to Know*. Both books very clearly explain key ideas of how the body works and how both stress and massage affect the body in different ways. This helps you understand your animal's body better – and it helps you understand your own body better, too. You really end up with a good sense of what's happening under your animal's skin as you practice massage. My books do this in laymen's terms and with color photographs showing you how to apply the techniques effectively. Having step-by-step visuals and instructions in plain language just makes it more fun to learn animal massage! To begin, the books show one technique at a time, along with a small chunk of anatomy education that applies to that technique. As you progress and get more comfortable with the techniques, there are suggestions for combining them into full body sessions.

I highly recommend that people use my guided journals with the books. They're

called *Massaging My Dog* and *Massaging My Horse*. The journals give more guidance about practicing massage and observing your animal's responses. They also walk you step-by-step through recording your sessions to help you learn more effectively as you track your progress and your animal's progress.

You mentioned at first that you used to teach therapeutic riding? Are you still involved with therapeutic riding centers?

I haven't worked as an instructor for several years now, but I have a great respect for, and a desire to support, therapy animals. That's why I created the Serving Therapy Animals Project through All About Animal Massage to promote massage and bodywork for these important working animals, and also for shelter animals. This project includes advice, communication tools and funding to get more massage happening for these non-profit organizations. The website outlines different ways professionals and non-professionals can participate, so do check it out. You can also tell anyone you know who is involved with an animal-related non-profit, that they can find resources to support massage for their animals on AllAboutAnimalMassage.com.

How would you advise someone who wants to get into the animal massage profession?

Start by finding as many professionals as you can to talk to, and ideally, see if you can watch them work. Word of mouth recommendations are always a good start, and you can also contact professionals through the Animal Wellness Network on the website. Ask them to tell you their story, what path they followed. You may get a sense that their approach to bodywork is a good match with your own style, and whether the training they did matches your needs as a student. Keep looking until you find a fit.

If you intend to do massage professionally, it's important to find out what the regulations are, if any, for animal massage in your state. That's a big topic, but you can find out more about that on our website as well.

We've gathered lots of information on animal massage education at All About Animal Massage, whether you're interested in professional training or just for use with your own animals. Chances are you'll love whatever classes you find because the animals just make it magical. There are some people successfully making a business and serving animals well with as little as 50 hours of training, and at the other end there are people earning college degrees in animal massage and therapy. Many certification courses offered are between 100-300 hours, which is a nice compromise between these extremes. I've probably taken over 1500 hours of training myself over the years, and I'm still taking classes and learning new things. There's just always more to learn -- and it's fun!