Modern Cupping Therapy

You have probably seen people with cupping marks and wondered, “What’s that all about?” You may even have passed it off as a fad. In fact, therapeutic cupping is an ancient healing modality dating back thousands of years and now western science can back up its effectiveness, not just with observed benefits, but with our understanding of anatomy and physiology. (Gilmartin, Modern Cupping Therapy, pp 12-18 & 30-31).

Therapeutic Cupping has three main physiological effects, and these can have a powerful impact on every system in our bodies—from the fascia to the circulatory; from the muscular to the nervous system; and from the digestive to the lymphatic system and every system in between. (Gilmartin, Modern Cupping Therapy, pp 32-69). The first physiological effect is that cupping is negative pressure; in contrast to other therapeutic massage modalities, therapeutic cupping lifts tissue rather than compressing it, creating space, rehydrating tissue and breaking up adhesions. The second prominent physiological effect of therapeutic cupping is vasodilation: the suction opens capillaries and allows for greater blood flow and better transportation of nutrients and oxygen to our bodies’ cells. The third physiological effect of therapeutic cupping is increased fluid exchange: cupping not only improves blood flow and venous return but also moves lymph and helps circulate it back into the blood. (Gilmartin, Modern Cupping Therapy, pp 20-22)

These three physiological effects of cupping can benefit the entire body by encouraging circulation, alleviating adhesions, clearing congestion and stagnation, lifting, rehydrating and making the fascia more pliable, causing microtrauma to tissues to help rebuild healthy tissue, encourage neovascularization and alleviating excessive pressure on sensory organs in soft tissue which leads to a reduction in pain. (Gilmartin, Modern Cupping Therapy, pp 24-25)

Now that we have touched on why therapeutic cupping is effective, it is important to say that not all cupping is created equal. Cupping should not be painful, and if it is, that means that the suction is too great for that application or that a different technique, such as lift and release, should be employed. This requires clear, constant and direct communication between the therapist and the client to ensure that no damage to tissues results. Moreover, Modern Therapeutic Cupping recommends that static cups be applied for a maximum of 3 minutes; more than 5 minutes crosses over into medicinal modalities that are beyond the scope and training of massage therapists. Therapeutic cupping should not be undertaken more frequently than every 48 hours, so sessions to address an area should be scheduled at least 2 days apart. More is definitely not always better. (Gilmartin, Modern Therapeutic Cupping, p 106)

Let’s address the elephant in the room: What’s with the marks? Cupping marks occur most often with static cupping and indicate a significant therapeutic release in the tissue. (Gilmartin, Shannon, Modern Cupping Therapy, p. 72). The vacuum pressure of cups can draw interstitial debris (old blood, toxins and other foreign substances) from the layers of tissue and into the more superficial layers just beneath the surface of the skin. Marks from cups properly applied can last from a few hours to several days and are NOT bruises—they may be tender, but they do not hurt, and they do not change in color, but rather, they fade away. Bruising can occur if the suction is too strong or the cups remain attached for too long, so choosing a practitioner trained in safe application and technique is of the utmost importance. Certified practitioners can effectively use cupping for decompressive myofascial release, lymphatic drainage and to diminish the appearance and adhesions caused by scarring.