

Consumer, Heal Thyself

Spas and the Psychology of Well-being

by Jeremy McCarthy

When you think about visiting a spa, what comes to mind? Many people immediately think of the physical benefits. You can have a massage to improve circulation and release toxins in the body; you can try a body or facial treatment using a variety of creams, lotions and masks with curative properties designed to rejuvenate and nourish the skin; you can use hydrotherapy to improve circulation; or you can start an exercise program or a healthy diet. But did you know that spas also offer less tangible psychological benefits?

The International SPA Association (ISPA) defines spas as “places devoted to enhancing overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit.” But how can a spa enhance well-being in such a holistic way?

Intention and Belief

The benefits of visiting a spa start with intention. Taking steps for your own well-being can have positive effects. The “power of intention” has been popularized by modern-day healers including Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, “The Secret” and many others. But this is also grounded in hard medical science. In fact, it may be the most researched healing method in all of science: the placebo effect. The placebo effect is a physiological improvement that comes from an “inert” treatment. The typical example is a sugar pill, which has no medicinal value, yet has led to improvements in a vast array of diseases. The placebo effect describes the body’s own healing powers, which have been found in thousands of research studies. In fact, most rigorous medical studies are “placebo-controlled,” meaning they remove the placebo effect from the data in order to get an accurate measure of the medicine or procedure being studied.

Today, physicians recognize the importance of this healing effect, not only from the standpoint of having to control for it in medical research, but also for the value of the effect as an aid for real healing. While the mechanisms behind it are still unclear, research has shown that a majority of diseases can be improved simply by the power of the mind believing in the treatment. I am not suggesting that a spa is only a placebo and no other benefit may be gained from it. But spas improve well-being in many ways, and one of them is by engaging you in a ritual that is performed for your own good. Simply having the right intentions and a place to go to focus on your own well-being can have a powerful effect. Spas help us to benefit from the mind’s powerful healing properties, even when we don’t fully understand them.

Time and Mindfulness

A visit to a spa usually consists of a certain amount of time simply being in a quiet space, enjoying the experiences one is having or reflecting on whatever is on the mind at the moment. Often the hour that you spend in a spa treatment is the only hour of waking time you have being disconnected from technology, disconnected from telephones and disconnected from the demands of a fast-paced world.

The most powerful benefits of visiting a spa may come simply from being in a safe space, separated from the interruptions of technology, where you can become present and tune into the thoughts in your own head. I find I have the greatest flashes of inspiration and insight while I am lying on a massage table. Solutions appear for problems that have been lingering, ideas come without thinking and stress dissipates into the silence. The scarcity of time and space for reflection in our culture makes these moments sacred. Spas give us that time and space to tap into our spiritual side and reflect on what is important.

The People Effect

The most important findings from the new field of positive psychology have been summed up by this simple statement: other people matter (a quote from one of the fathers of positive

psychology, Chris Peterson, 2006). Visiting a spa is an opportunity to be touched and cared for by another person.

Most people are aware of the famous psychological conditioning experiments involving Pavlov's dogs. After associating a bell with food, it only took the sound of the bell to make the dogs salivate. Similar experiments have been done with flashing lights and electric shock, showing that the dogs' fear reactions (heart rate, etc.) would amp up as soon as the light flashed. Most people don't know about the "effect of person" that has been found in similar studies. The presence of a researcher in the room with the dog had a calming effect. Their heart rates did not go up as quickly and returned to normal much sooner whenever there was a person in the room. The effect of a nurturing therapist taking care of you in a spa treatment may begin before they even set their hands on you. In fact some spa treatments, such as Reiki, Therapeutic Touch and Craniosacral are deeply rooted in this philosophy.

In the spa setting, not only do you benefit from the presence of another person whose role is to nurture and care for you, those benefits are deepened because they are transmitted through touch. Those same studies on "effect of person" show that the effect on the dogs is greatly enhanced when the dog is being petted.

Research has shown that people also have a physiological reaction to human touch. Touch not only reduces heart rate but also levels of hormones such as cortisol that are associated with the stress response. Given the long list of serious physical medical conditions associated with these stress hormones, the ability to lessen their impact makes touch potentially one of the most powerful healing therapies known today.

Reading spa menus today, it is easy to find descriptive statements such as "soothes the mind and the body" or "relaxes your mind, body and spirit." It would be convenient to dismiss this as hyperbole, an exaggerated claim for the sake of marketing the spa. But looking at some of the related research from the field of psychology, we can see that spas have the power to make good on these claims. The spa does indeed make an impact on mind, body and spirit. Why else do we keep coming back for more?