

Massaging away the aches and pains

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Massage therapist Karlo Berger says the new class he'll be teaching at the **Community College of Rhode Island** come January will be a mix of science and art.

To learn the type of shiatsu massage that Berger plans to teach will take a knowledge of anatomy and physiology, but he will also offer lessons on less scientific things, too, such as chi, the life force energy those who study Eastern medicine believe flows through the body.

"It's a scientific art and an artistic science," Berger says of shiatsu, a massage technique that uses finger and palm pressure and various stretches to hit certain points on the body. "It's really hard to pin down as an art or a science."

CCRI offered a class in shiatsu in recent years, but when a previous instructor decided to stop teaching the course, Berger stepped in for the spring semester.

The lessons won't be intended for the hobbyist, and they are not intended to turn out full-fledged shiatsu therapists. Instead, Berger says he is going to emphasize how the knowledge of things like chi and meridian lines can be worked into a conventional therapy practice.

To become a shiatsu therapist takes hours and hours of training, Berger says. "But I can help them integrate a lot of these principles into their work as a

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massage therapist."

That thinking fits in with Berger's other job, leading a Boston-based non-profit called the Integrative Medicine Alliance, which attempts to bridge conventional and holistic health care.

Berger traces his interest in shiatsu to a t'ai chi class he took while he was a student at Brown University. After several years of using the meditative form of exercise, he took a community education course on Japanese shiatsu, which is based on principles developed over thousands of years in China.

He continued his shiatsu studies in Bristol, England, and then at the now-

defunct Boston Shiatsu School. He now operates his shiatsu therapy business on the East Side.

CCRI officials say the school will be one of only a few places in New England that will offer lessons in shiatsu. Bristol Community College in Fall River has a course, but two shiatsu schools in Boston have closed in recent years.

Berger likens the technique to acupuncture, which uses needles to stimulate areas on the body along meridian lines to "unblock" the flow of chi.

Acupuncturists and shiatsu therapists believe that illness occurs when a person's chi is blocked, deficient or in excess as it flows through the body.

Instead of needles, shiatsu therapists use acupressure. Berger said he performs the massage with a client lying and fully clothed. The pressure at particular points along meridian lines on the body "unblocks the chi and helps the body," he adds.

For doubters, Berger says studies have shown that in many cases techniques such as shiatsu and acupuncture have improved a person's health. "There have been demonstrable effects," he says. "But how it works is still pretty mysterious."

Unlike acupuncture, shiatsu doesn't help much with smoking cessation, weight loss and easing addictions. But, Berger said, it is good for relieving pain.

In his own practice, Berger says most of his clients come to him with chronic pain, either back or neck or both. Many are white-collar workers who spend their days at desks in front of computer screens. Some develop headaches.

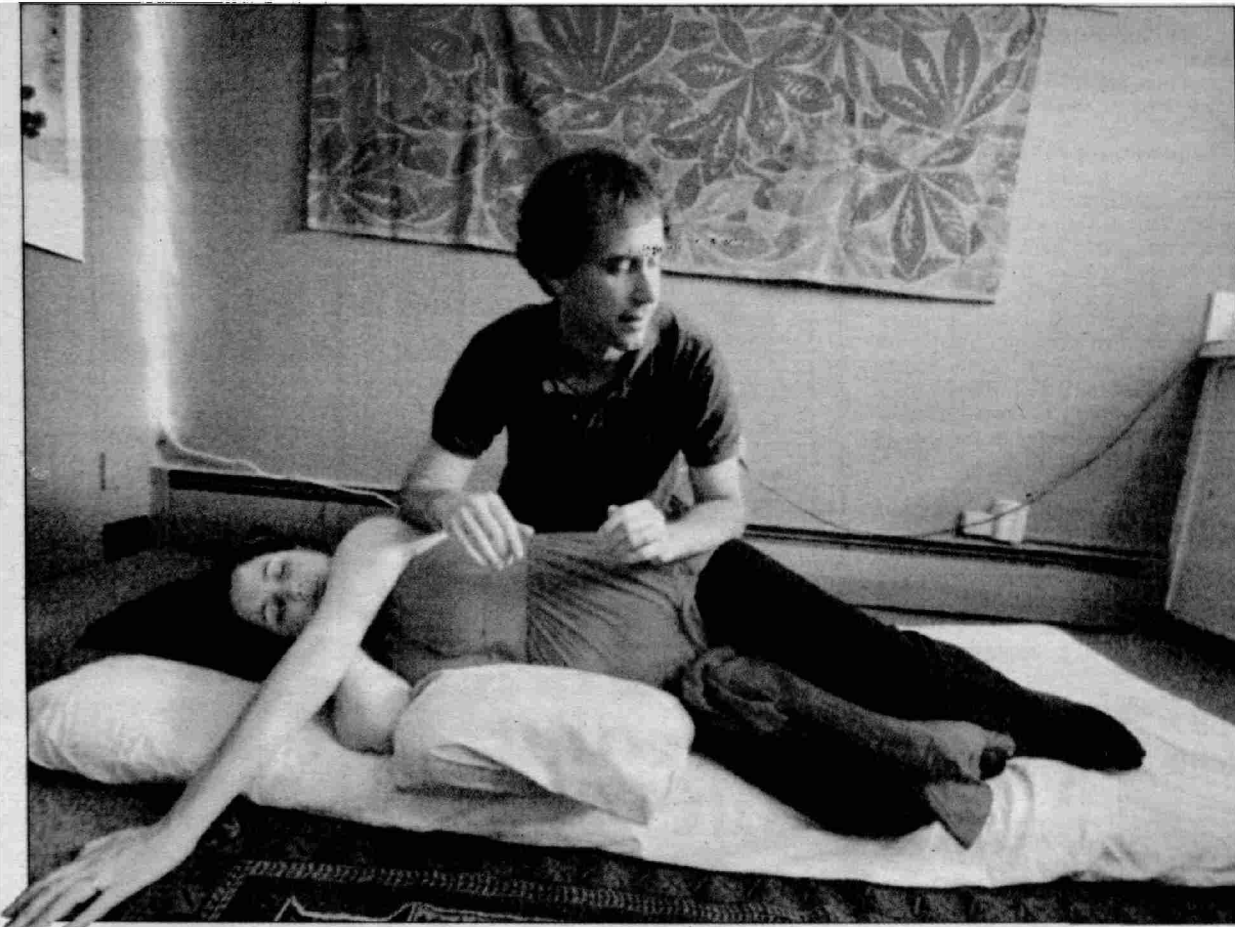
Many clients are looking for help with stress-related problems, such as anxiety and insomnia. He offers special workshops for expectant women suffering back pain. The sessions show the proper pressure points to relieve sciatic-nerve discomfort and labor pain.

The full semester course is expected to draw about 10 advanced-level students in the therapeutic massage program at CCRI.



It certainly will be different from the standard courses offered at the school. Students will be expected to bring in people to massage for their final exam. For classes in the middle of the semester, students will work on each other.

"There's a great deal of hands-on work," Berger said. "It's actually nice in a program like this because you get to receive a lot of massages, which is part of the learning process." ■



PBN PHOTO/BRIAN MCDONALD

THE RIGHT TOUCH: Massage therapist Karlo Berger works with Heather Robertson, who is suffering from pregnancy-induced sciatica. Berger is slated to teach a shiatsu class at the Community College of Rhode Island this spring.