

# Can a back massage heal your emotional pain?

Hot rocks: Nicola Gill is treated with volcanic stones by Sophia Kupse



Picture: JULIETTE NEEL

by Nicola Gill

**S**OPHIA Kupse digs her fingers hard into my sore left shoulder, and cheerily asks if it hurts. 'Yes!'

I squeak, hoping she'll stop. Instead she digs deeper, until I wonder if she is trying to pummel me into submission.

The truth is quite the opposite. Sophia, known by her clients as the 'muscle whisperer', believes we store up emotional pain in the knotted muscles of our backs — and her brutal treatment is designed to release it.

She says that in 25 years of practice she has developed a 'map' of places on your back where specific emotional problems cause pain.

Lower back hurting? It's something from your childhood. An ache on your left side? Must be to do with a male boss, relative or partner. Neck pain? It's linked to what's happening in your life now.

Sound mad? Her celebrity fans, including actress Liv Tyler and top sports players, swear by her treatments — and if they can cure my back pain, I'll believe it.

She points out her method is no stranger than reflexology, the discipline that it is claimed can revive your mind and body by pressing key points on the feet.

So, what does Sophia make of my bad left shoulder, which has been throbbing and burning for four years no matter what I do — from popping painkillers and natural anti-inflammatory supplements, to taking up yoga and trying new ways of sitting at my desk?

After digging deep into the knots on my back, Sophia says the pain is caused by 'negative male energy'. 'Did you have a bad break-up, a few years ago? Perhaps just before the shoulder began to bother you?'

I'm stunned. Five years ago, I split up with the father of my two children, now nine and 11. I was left overwhelmed by the realities of life as a single mother, and the financial and emotional after-shocks kept on coming.

Now the family breadwinner, I moved back to London from the country and had to give up my cherished horseriding and daily hikes. There was no time for exercise, let alone pampering.

I'd never joined the dots before, but it was about the same time that my shoulder started to hurt. Truth be told, I had so many other things to worry about that I just pushed it to the back of my mind, hoping it would go away.

**B**UT at the start of this year — now in a new, supportive relationship — I decided to turn over a new leaf. No man loves a moaning, moping partner, while my kids needed their vibrant, active mother back. So I gave up drinking and unhealthy treats and started dragging myself to yoga classes.

Soon, my energy was back, and I was whizzing around on bike rides with the kids or racing them up the stairs. But my shoulder still hurt, although my doctor found nothing serious.

I'm far from alone in living with chronic pain. A recent study found lower back problems cause more disability worldwide than any other condition, affecting nearly one in ten — and is commonest of all in privileged Western Europe. Upper back pain like mine isn't quite as prevalent, but it's no less horrible to live with.

So, could my back pain be due to a broken relationship — and could a massage really fix it?

Sophia insists it will, and that her method is based in science.

'People with back pain always

place to get rid of it. This leads to excess lactic acid being stored in the biggest muscle groups — in the neck, shoulders and back. As a result, they start to tighten, and become painful.

Twenty years ago, Sophia's ideas might have seemed like quackery, but today there's a lot of research to back her up.

A recent study showed it was possible to predict which individuals would develop chronic back pain after injury by looking at scans of the nucleus accumbens, the part of the brain controlling how we react to the outside world.

'The more emotionally the brain reacted to the injury, the more likely it was that pain would persist after the injury had healed,'

said lead scientist Professor Vania Apakarian, from Northwestern University in Chicago. Brian Hammond, chair of UK charity Back-Care, says: 'Numerous studies in the last 30 years have shown that how we perceive and react to pain changes the way it is experienced.'

And some emotions really are displayed in our bodies, he adds. 'Think about a dog raising its hackles when it's scared or

aggressive. That's a physical movement controlled by emotion. And humans have a similar reflex which causes us to raise our shoulders when we're angry or frightened.

'If that happens enough, it can affect posture and cause pain.'

Sophia believes much physical pain is a side-effect of emotional distress, stored in the body over many years.

'When doctors cannot clearly see a reason for back pain, even after X-rays and scans, the only solution offered is painkillers, but I have an answer,' she says.

She has plenty of experience of pain, having developed massage techniques to help her own recovery after a car accident.

She was hit head-on, one Christmas Eve in her 20s, by an epileptic drunk driver. She spent many months in hospital in her native Yorkshire, and was told she'd probably never walk again.

During long weeks of treatment, Sophia read about alternative healing methods — and used them on herself. To medics' amazement she made a full recovery, and is pain-free.

She now runs a back clinic in Bradford and has a consulting room in London's Marylebone, where I meet her today.

Now she's found my shoulder pain, can she fix it? And how will that affect my feelings about past break-ups, not to mention my relationship with my current partner? Sophia sets to work,

applying heated volcanic rock to trouble spots followed by ice-cold marble. 'Volcanic stone retains heat well. I keep them at 62 degrees, to help muscles relax and recover. The cold marble then encourages blood flow, bringing nutrients back to the muscle.'

But it's not just a massage — she also raises thorny issues with clients, asking them to think about possible emotional causes for their pain. We discuss my feelings of guilt over my break-up and how I sometimes struggled to cope as a single mum.

Some of the most likely triggers for back pain, she tells me, are 'never feeling good enough, worrying about the future, feeling someone else is better off than you, anger at being let down and being overwhelmed by taking too much on.'

**A**PPARENTLY, it's not uncommon for clients to cry during treatment — then walk away pain-free. Although I feel physically drained at the end of my 40-minute session, I also feel lighter, calmer, and more content than after a regular massage.

The next day Sophia emails a 'recovery guide' to use at home. It instructs me to make two small changes over the next few weeks. Suggestions range from more physical activity to setting firmer boundaries with loved ones. She suggests a follow-up appointment to check my progress.

So, did it work? Two weeks on my shoulder is much less painful — and I have gone through a stressful house move with barely a cross word passing between my partner and myself.

On that basis alone, I'm happy to add Sophia to my speed dial.

■ **PAIN-Free Easy Steps To A Happier, Healthier You**, by Sophia Kupse, Amazon £9.99. [themusclewhisperer.co.uk](http://themusclewhisperer.co.uk).

say it's because of a physical reason, like sleeping strangely or spending too long at the computer,' she says. 'But making changes to how they sleep or sit often doesn't help. They never consider that the pain might be due to their emotional state.'

She says that whenever we get upset, angry or stressed, two chemicals are released in the body — adrenaline and cortisol. The 'fight or flight' chemicals were designed to help us get out of trouble fast in prehistoric times. But the stresses of modern life mean we often experience strong emotions when 'fight or flight' responses aren't appropriate — in the office, on the Tube or in an argument with a partner.

If our bodies aren't able to use the adrenaline rush, a series of complex chemical reactions take

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