

Therapeutic Application of Affective Touch: The Psychoactive Massage Therapy

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INTRODUCTION

Psychoactive Massage (PAM) in Germany refers to a number of special techniques aiming at triggering psychopsychological effects in healthy persons as well as in patients with predominantly psychiatric or psychosomatic disorders. According to our knowledge, there exist at present four different varieties of PAM; all of them have shown their effectiveness and their efficacy in various scientific studies: Psychoregulatory Massage (Sabine Baumgart & Bruno Blum), Slow Stroke®Massage (Claudia Berg & Bruno Müller-Oerlinghausen), PAM GMK® (Gabriele Mariell Kiebgis) and Affekt-Regulating Massagetherapie (Michaela Maria Arnold). Although classical Swedish massage forms the technical background of PAM, PAM is based on our current understanding of insights and mechanism of affective touch. PAM GMK® is an integrative-complementary massage therapy that delivers positive psychophysical effects in the short and long term (Kiebgis et al., 2018).

METHOD PAM GMK

The target organ of all kinds of PAM is the skin and fascia superficialis. The basis of PAM GMK® consist different massage strokes of the skin in order to activate neurobiological and psychoneuroimmunological processes.

- Light pressure stroking as CT-optimal effleurage (3 cm/second rate (Olausson et al., 2010; 2014; 2016, Reichert, 2015)) incorporate the insights of affective touch
- Petrissages with moderate pressure stimulate muscles and connective tissues in order to trigger vagal activity (Field, 2000)

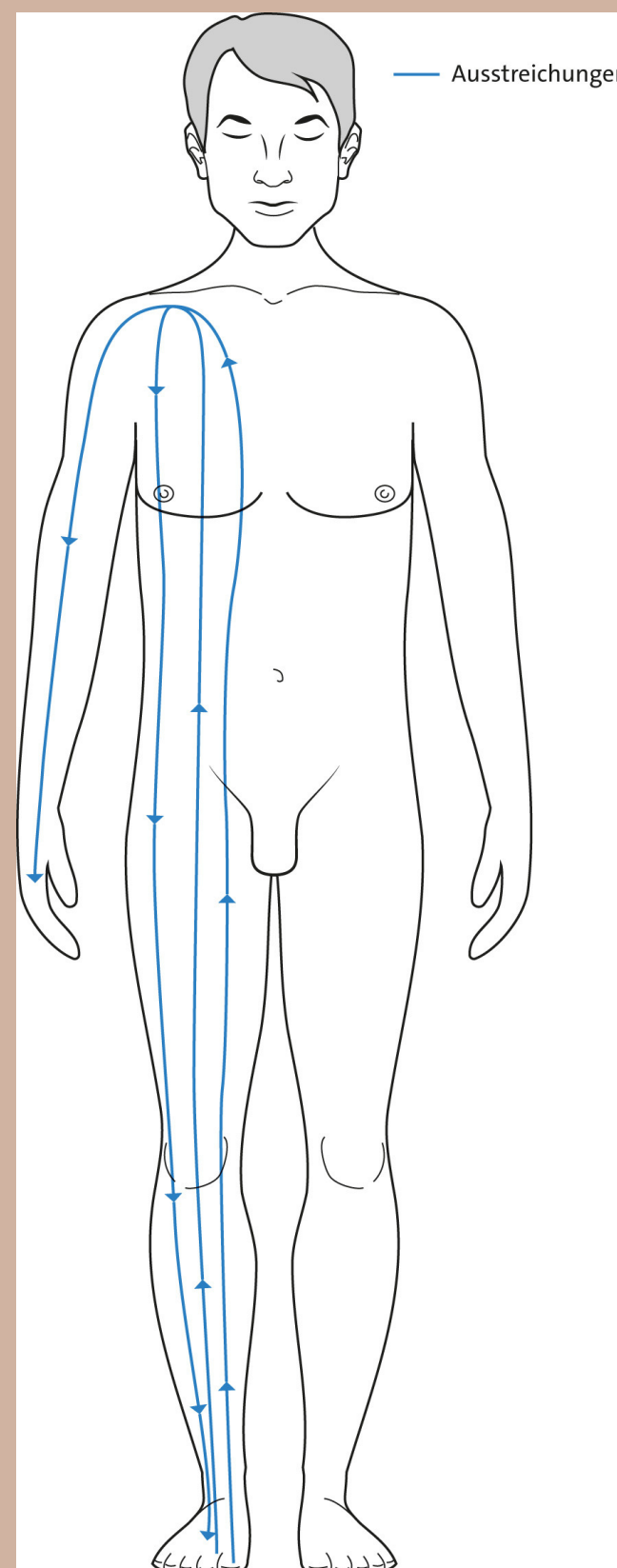
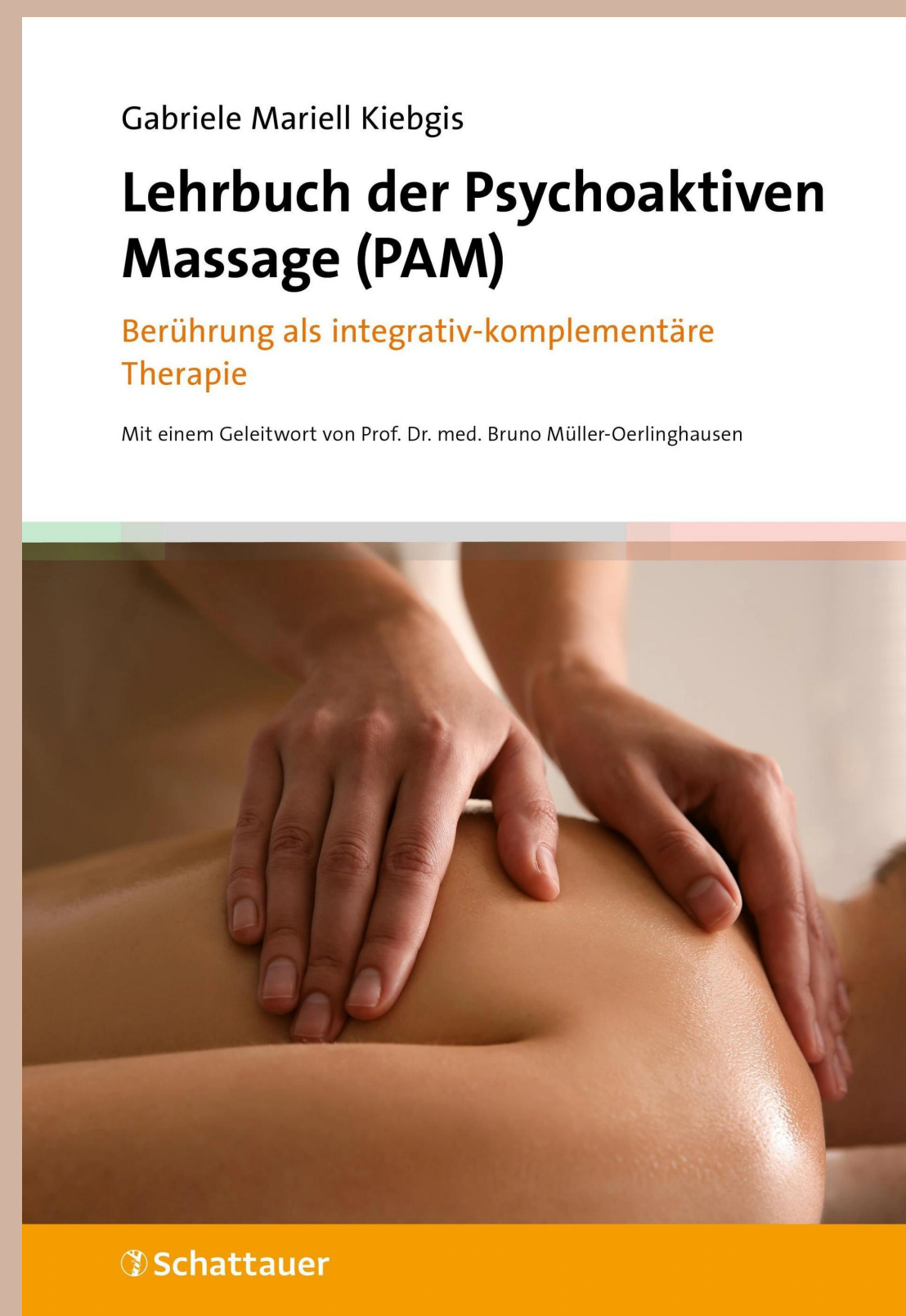
All massage strokes are logically interwoven during a session so that all parts of the body are massaged separately and connected equally.

- With also connecting strokes for a constant and fluid touch experience
- Conducted in a standardised manner by a trained therapist
- Performed on a disrobed patient with a light fleece blanket covering the parts that shall be massaged later.
- The massage oil heaten to CT-optimal 32°C (Ackerley et al., 2014) is applied in a special uniquely technique.

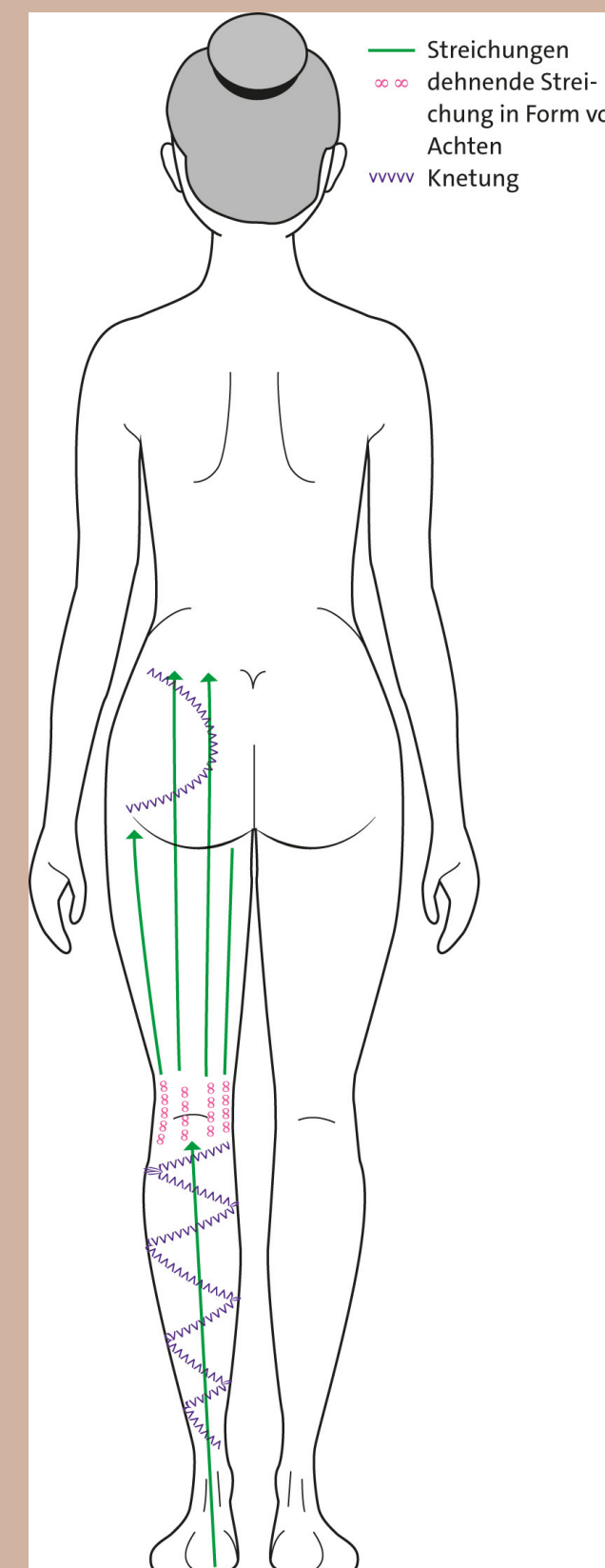


Many other scientifically proven conditions and effects of affective touch are incorporated into the strokes and structure of PAM GMK®.

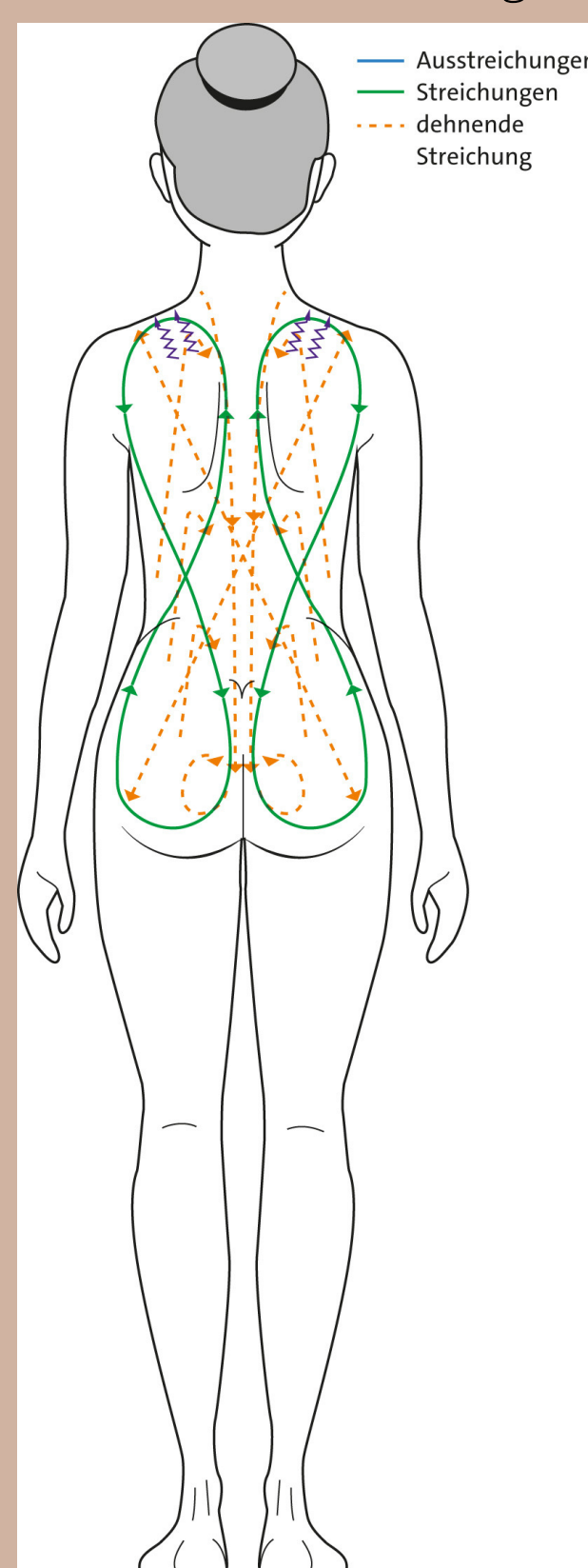
- According to Schleip (2012), affective touch requires sufficient repetition to obtain long-term effects. Therefore psychoactive massage therapy should ideally be repeated at least three times with sufficient time between the sessions to be effective (Kiebgis, 2018; 2023).
- Kiebgis (2023) recommends that a session of PAM GMK® should last a maximum of 75 minutes; it takes into account the risk that prolonged CT-activation may produce opposite effects (Ackerley, 2022).



Sketch of two CT-optimal effleurages on the ventral side (Gabriele Mariell Kiebgis, Lehrbuch der Psychoaktiven Massage (PAM), Schattauer Verlag, 2023)



Sketch of the different massage strokes of the dorsal side of the leg (Gabriele Mariell Kiebgis, Lehrbuch der Psychoaktiven Massage (PAM), Schattauer Verlag, 2023)



Sketch of CT-optimal effleurages, petrissages and connecting massage strokes on the backside (Gabriele Mariell Kiebgis, Lehrbuch der Psychoaktiven Massage (PAM), Schattauer Verlag, 2023)

CLINICAL EVIDENCE

Massage in depressed patients as well in non-psychiatric conditions such as cancer, HIV or fibromyalgia can reduce depression and, to a slightly lesser extent, anxiety (Moyer et al, 2004; Baumgart et al., 2014).

- Slow Stroke®Massage provides marked reductions in physical depression and anxiety symptoms (Müller-Oerlinghausen et al., 2004)
- In patients with chronic back pain, Psychoregulatory Massage clearly reduces perception of pain as well as depression (Baumgart et al., 2020).
- Affect-Regulating Massage of 50 minutes in depressed patients leads to improvement of several psychological symptoms compared to progressive muscle relaxation (Arnold et al., 2022)

Interoceptive capacities appear to be underpowered in patients with mood disorders (Stern et al., 2017; Eggart et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021).

- Affective touch activating Ct-fibres (CT) plays an important role in interoception (Schleip, 2009)
- Repeated massage might restore interoception and thus counteract depressive symptoms (Eggart et al., 2019).
- Kiebgis et al (2019) states that many depressed patients suffer from anhedonia; those who undergo a PAM GMK® experience marked clinical improvements and greater well-being.

Gentle rhythmic skin touch like massage activates oxytocin production that provides a relaxing effect and inhibits pain stimuli (Üvnas-Möberg, 1998; 2016)

- PAM results provide a pleasurable experience whereby the insula is responsible for its awareness (Kiebgis et al., 2023).
- According to del Monte (2023), the insula in turn activates the production of oxytocin, endorphins and serotonin.
- According to Eckstein et al. (2020), activation of the insula through massage and affective touch, among others, would regulate the amygdala whereby the stress response is inhibited.

A naturalistic study conducted by Kiebgis et al. (2018) showed that in healthy clients of an office for a single session of PAM GMK®

- Provided increased general well-being with significant improvements in anxiety, depression-related anxiety and myofascial pain.
- After 14 days, positive effects persisted including reduced sleep problems. Van Puyenvelde (2011) already showed that affective touch leads to improvement in sleep quality

OUTLOOK

Time has come to translate current knowledge on the interrelationship between affective touch and stress regulation into therapeutic and preventive measures (Krahé et al., 2016; Kidd et al., 2022).

The recently founded German Society for Touch Medicine (DGFBM) aims at establishing a knowledge centre for touch medicine so that researchers and physicians in the future will give more attention to the positive effects of touch in the medical context (Müller-Oerlinghausen, 2022).

Further research around effects of PAM GMK® in depressed patients in particular is desirable, taking into account the methodological requirements for such research described by Dryden and Moyer (2012), Reichert (2015) and Müller-Oerlinghausen and Eggart (2020), among others.