

## Using Skincare Expertise and the Power of Touch to Transform Lives

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A cancer diagnosis often elicits a flurry of emotions. Once treatment begins, those feelings are frequently compounded by additional side effects – physical, mental and emotional. This is both normal and unsurprising due to the plethora of changes, most of which are frustrating, as they adversely affect typical routines and preferences.

Women who are often soothed by being together with others, reaping the benefits of both community and touch, can find themselves at a deficit for what they need most: physical contact. Because patients and their loved ones may be hesitant to draw near, there may be a larger than typical void of hugs, hand-holding, and skin stimulation. Once thought to be for the protection of a cancer survivor, there is now an increasing volume of evidence that suggests physical touch is, in fact, healing in more ways than one.

A recent study by researchers at the University of Miami revealed that consensual skin-to-skin contact supports physical, mental and emotional health. Tiffany Field, Ph.D., who has been studying the effects of human touch for decades, further states that when combined with conventional medical care, massage therapy can help bring relief to conditions such as anxiety and depression, pain and headaches. Specific to cancer survivors, she observed that massage may also enhance the immune function. “We were surprised by the increased natural killer cells (the frontline of our immune system) that ward off bacterial, viral, and cancer cells,” she stated.

According to Dr. Field, the positive effects of massage therapy derive from the movement of the skin and the stimulation of pressure receptor cells under the skin. When the skin moves, it increases activity in the body’s parasympathetic nervous system, specifically triggering the vagal nerves. This stimulation benefits digestion, immunity and heart function and can improve cognitive alertness as well as lower the body’s stress response. Heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol (the hormone released during stress and pain) decrease, while oxytocin (a hormone released during moments of human connection associated with feelings of empathy and trust) simultaneously increases.

A 2021 article written by Nicole K. McNichols in Psychology Today underscored many of the same points above, citing additional research on the topic of touch. As well, Dr. McNichols stated that PET scans have shown the brain quiets in response to stress when a person’s hand is held. The effect is greatest when the hand being held is that of a loved one, but it still works even if it’s just a stranger. On the flip side, touch deprivation is correlated with negative health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and immune system disorders.



*The Fisas Family*



# Ricardo Fisas

NATURA BISSÉ FOUNDATION

“My Skin has never felt or looked so good.”

Every day, licensed aestheticians and massage therapists can testify to the reality of this research as they witness the positive after-effects on their relaxed, renewed and refreshed clients. Not only do these professionals soothe skin, but they activate the body and often rejuvenate the soul, particularly for those who have experienced the trauma and stress of a cancer diagnosis. Amazingly, it’s only been in recent years that these specialists have been encouraged or allowed to touch a survivor. Until their industries caught up to research, they avoided physically touching this population out of an abundance of caution, and they often turned away women who would have greatly benefited from their expertise. Thankfully, this outdated view is falling by the wayside and there’s a hopeful emergence of evidence showing the value of skincare and contact within the oncological community. Natura Bissé, an international skincare company, is at the forefront of this charge with its Ricardo Fisas Foundation serving women with cancer through skin treatment and training.

Since its inception in 1979 in Barcelona, Ricardo Fisas Natura Bissé Foundation has not only been a staple in world-renowned spas and celebrity aesthetics, but the company has been deeply committed to its purpose: to take care of people’s skin as well as their sense of well-being at every stage of life. Their unique perspective that connects our largest organ to our overall health has led to awards and recognition around the globe. With a philosophy that blends innovation, pioneering technology, and active ingredients with the power of touch, the company realizes the impact of deep, emotional sensitivity and connection. “Touch is more than just physical contact. Touch is about listening, understanding, and empathizing,” their website emphasizes. It’s the defining hallmark of their spa experiences and products.



Further leveraging that philosophy of connectedness, Ricardo Fisas and Gloria Vergés, the founders of Natura Bissé, created a private and independent foundation to launch two programs benefiting vulnerable people: the Oncology Skin Care Program and Project Difference, which supports teachers and children with learning differences. Natura Bissé funds the Foundation with 0.7% of its total annual revenue, and in 2013 they created a collection of hotel charitable amenities to help fund its initiatives. In 2020, the Oncology Skin Care Program launched in the United States, and this year it will begin fully rolling out services and education now that pandemic concerns have subsided.

Capitalizing on ingredient awareness from strict European skincare standards, as well as Natura Bissé’s access to the latest research and understanding of emulsions, active and healing elements and skin regeneration, the Ricardo Fisas Natura Bissé Foundation generously

shares knowledge so others can benefit. With programs designed to equip and train aestheticians, massage therapists, salon professionals and consumers on the specific needs of oncology patients, they are addressing some of the most common ailments experienced by those who are in or have gone through cancer treatment. Skin sensitivity and irritation, dryness, acne, wound care and scarring often raise questions among survivors, yet many struggle to find solutions, much less comfort from an educated response or healing touch.

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Josanna Gaither, U.S. Executive Director of the Ricardo Fisas Natura Bissé Foundation, has been part of the Natura Bissé organization for years and is also a trained aesthetician herself. “It just makes sense for us, because there are so many people experiencing cancer diagnoses, and we know that good skincare can make a difference,” she explained. “Skin issues are prolific among cancer patients, and learning how to care for skin helps them feel more comfortable and more confident in how they look. All of that only leads to their body healing in a better way. It’s never been about us selling skincare. It’s simply about us offering what we know to help others. We want to help improve lives.”



The Oncology Skin Care Program has a two-pronged approach: one is to deliver training to aestheticians, massage therapists, hair and nail salons, and the second is to deliver services to oncology patients through massage and skincare offered at hospital or spa locations. In both cases, the primary goal is education and to increase the awareness of helpful ingredients, necessary routines, healing practices and tips for skin resilience. The Foundation created a Skin Care Guide for oncological patients that addresses facial skin, scalp, hands and feet, scaring, blemishes, irritation and sun. They hope to broadly share the information with people as they are diagnosed and beyond, since skin side-effects often evolve. Notably, these recommendations are ingredient-based and brand agnostic. “We want to train people how to help,” noted Gaither.

The training for service professionals is an intensive learning process, including 20 hours of education on cancer diagnoses, side effects, cosmetic chemistry and skin benefits, setting up a treatment room to better accommodate someone with cancer, as well as hands-on training with a survivor. “The hands-on portion is so important, because for many people, it may be the first time they’ve heard personal stories or seen scars and treatment effects, or even a woman with her wig removed,” Gaither expressed. “Because it’s different from what they’ve seen in the past, we want to equip them with the interaction, so they can respond in the best way. Our goal is for survivors to be seen and to feel comfortable, and something as small as a wig stand helps them feel more welcomed and reassured.” She also explained that the hands-on portion doesn’t teach about using specific massage or products, but is more about performing scalp hydration on a bald head, lymph node massage adjustments and other oncological adaptations, including listening. “It can be quite emotional,” she added.

Foundation leaders recognize the effects, not just on skin, but on the overall wellbeing of survivors. When meeting directly with cancer patients, they have seen confidence improve as women better understand their skin and are able to treat it effectively. Not only do they feel better equipped, but they walk away feeling more beautiful and cared for.

“The Oncology Skin Care program can contribute to improving the quality of life during the cancer journey by minimizing the potential side effects of medical treatments on one’s skin. People who participated in the program highlight that looking better during the illness helps them feel better and stronger and improve their self-esteem. At the spa room they also find a safe space that allows them to disconnect and reconnect,” added Joaquín Serra, Fisas’ son-in-law and second-generation leader of Natura Bissé.

The Ricardo Fisas Natura Bissé Foundation is located in Dallas, Texas and working on partnerships with major hospitals, as well as cosmetology schools and retailers. They also offer virtual consultations with a trained and certified aesthetician. All of the services are free to survivors, and there is a small fee for professionals. The hope is to grow the organization’s programs across the United States, much like they have in their native country of Spain. There, they have made a difference in the lives of survivors for over a decade. One such person, Rosemarie Tucciarone shared, “During my recent cancer journey, it was truly amazing to experience what skincare products did for my physical and mental well-being. The Ricardo Fisas Natura Bissé Foundation [helped] me not only look good, but feel better with their amazing recommendations that I used after surgery, during treatment and continue to use. I was never on a consistent skincare routine (I tried) but now I make the investment in myself every day. My skin has never felt or looked so good!”

Gaither reiterated that Natura Bissé and the Foundation understand the power of good skin. “If our skin is itchy or extra-sensitive, it makes all the difference in our mood, ability to concentrate and even sleep,” she said. “If they can feel better, they can heal easier, and if it’s combined with even a light touch or something as simple as a hand-hold, it maximizes the benefit.” Gaither recounted story after story of cancer patients receiving hand massages and explaining how wonderful it felt because it was “the first time anyone has touched me since I was diagnosed.” She explained that it’s a more than common response for family members to keep a physical distance for fear of hurting the one they love. The Foundation is working to close this gap.

Our combined hope with this article is not just that readers and their caregivers would learn more about the importance of skincare, but that they might also recognize the need to offer a simple touch. Aestheticians have the opportunity to apply creams, and massage therapists can use lotions or oils while they knead stress away, but loved ones can also care for cancer patients by encouraging hand and feet hydration or even a gentle hug or stroke on the arm. Also remember that a listening ear is a touchpoint as well. Humans were made with the need, and cancer is isolating enough.

For more information on the Oncology Skin Care Guide, services or training, please contact [info@ricardofisasfoundation.org](mailto:info@ricardofisasfoundation.org). 