

ATTACK OF THE BODY THUMPERS

RECOVERY FROM THE YEAR-END BASH IS ALWAYS TRICKY, UNLESS YOU HAVE THESE LAID-BACK ROBOTS TO HELP YOU SIT BACK AND RELAX. BY WINSTON TAY

DON'T GET US WRONG – ROBOTIC MASSAGE DEVICES (if we can call them "robotic") are as great as the handheld apparatuses that we have seen in the market for a long time. These apparatuses, shaped like wooden hammers, meat-beaters and odd-looking oversized toys, are great for a quick relief of aching muscles and strained sinews – provided you know how best to do it yourself. Otherwise, you might end up with a bruised patch of skin on top further damaged muscle tissues underneath.

Comfortable chairs that work your body while you rest. Pulsating mechanical "legwarmers" that unleash gentle, rolling strokes up and down your calves. Belly fat-burners that vibrate and presumably "tremble" away your excess blubber. And the list goes on...

Let's keep to chairs for the moment. While their brochures and advertisements blatantly tout the advanced AI, fuzzy logic and/or computerised technology built into their whirring, breathing mechanics, the chairs will almost always bring some contentment to initially sceptical and amused customers who walk away with a satisfied smile after a 30-minute sit-down in these big, body-kneading machines that double up as comfy lounge chairs.

You may have your reservations about the robotic massage chairs. But the creators and marketers of such mechanised furniture pieces have introduced them as a form of healthcare based on human touch, natural sources and zen ideals. To the uninitiated, all this sounds as wonderful as using durian shells to make claypot rice. Coupled with the fact that every single person is built differently with different physical problems to contend with, massage therapy seems much more of a personalised service (i.e. in the hands of a skilful physiotherapist, masseur or reflexologist) than can be boiled down to a mass-market product.

But who's to say it doesn't work? If you'd ever tried sitting in a robotic massage chair just for kicks, and your pain threshold was high enough not to feel it kicking you back, my guess is that you most probably ended up falling asleep in it. Voilà! The chair has done its job. But more importantly,



though, it wouldn't by any means replace the hands of a good physiotherapist, a good robotic massage chair can act as a supplemental healthcare regimen to maintain treatment for any existing problems you may be seeking actual therapy for. At the very least, a daily half-hour sit-down with your leather-clad prized possession will help you through the days before requiring your next session.

Simpler massage devices are no less effective at providing such relief than their bulkier cousins, and OTO Bodycare's Cyber Indulge CD-1880 seems like the perfect candidate to start off with. While seemingly light for its size (the chair weighs in at 64kg) its four patented rollers pack a rather solid punch that extends from the neck all the way down to the buttocks when the recliner is in full horizontal position. Its real attraction though, lies in its \$2,680 price point, the lowest among all its competitors. Yip Yen Yen, OTO's brand and communications manager, emphasises that the products they produce are a reflection of their consumer's needs, and the company believes that health should be accessible to everyone, not just the affluent.

OTO's popularity as a brand is further driven by its consistent innovations. For example, smaller products for targeted areas of the body that work and sell so well have seen quick imitations from competitors. The company was the first to come up with the hands-free shoulder tapping massager (OTO Power Tap), the foot massage floorpad (OTO Electro Reflexologist) and the wearable slimming belt (OTO Trimax). It has



even made the massage chair portable with the OTO e-Lux, a massage backrest and seatpad that can be laid on any seat in the home, office or even in the car.

The success of robotic massage products is also very much helped along by the industry's blatant hard-sell tactics (cue the sexy female models and celebrity endorsements), some of which may seem rather misguided even though the product works well enough on its own. Take for example Ogawa's latest offering, which uses space age ergonomics to set it apart from its competition. Inspired (but not endorsed) by NASA research studies, Ogawa's SmartAire and SmartAire Plus chairs boast a "zero-gravity experience" by angling the torso-to-leg curvature in such a way to almost completely alleviate gravitational pressure to the body. The machine itself has the design characteristics of a traditional massage chair with business class curves (on airlines) thrown in for good measure. But it's really the massage experience that counts, to which the SmartAire performs reasonably well, with its combination of air bags and rollers comfortably hitting contact points on every part of the body the chair can handle, including the sides of the neck, shoulders, arms, and the top of the feet...

That is, until the purported zero-gravity tries to kick in.

The SmartAire has the widest reclining angle in its class, able to angle itself so far back that your upper body will start dipping below your legs, causing a blood rush to your head. Ogawa claims this "reverse blood circulation" will detoxify the kidneys, open up the lungs and de-stress the heart, much like what astronauts in zero-gravity will experience. The problem getting inspired by NASA's theory of ergonomics is, NASA employs its research in zero-gravity environs, while here we are, inevitably stuck in Earth's ever-present gravity pull, and no amount of tilting will prevent gravity from doing what it has always done. Understandably, the makers disclaim that such a position is suitable for individuals suffering from high blood pressure, and users should always check that they don't come up feeling light-headed from the whole experience.

That's not to say all robotic massage chair makers are getting their sales strategies mixed up in delusions of marketing grandeur. Leading the charge in the battle for supremacy is undoubtedly OSIM, which has been delving into the healthcare innovation game since 1989. For the most part, OSIM generated massage and wellness products that were more focused on function than form, up until 2008 when it launched its very radical multi-sensory massage recliner, the uSpace.

At first glance, the uSpace wellness chair looked like Eero Aarnio's modern-classic Globe chair that has undergone some alteration by the Transformers' all powerful AllSpark. But comparing it to Michael Bay's iteration of a Transformer robot would be wrong, because the chair was actually a beauty in itself. Having received an honourable mention in the 2008 Red Dot Design Awards, the \$9,688 "personal cocoon of wellbeing" is a testament to the design potential that the world of automated massage

can reach. A pity, then, that the uSpace didn't sell well in Singapore, as its fully assembled cocoon was much too large to fit through the doors of conventional apartment spaces that most massage chair buyers dwell in.

Since relegated to the export market, the uSpace has nonetheless forced a strategic rethinking to garnering consumer acceptance. The successor to the uSpace, the \$9,388 uDream, continues the trend of automated total body wellness encased in sleek, contemporary curves designed by world-renowned Japanese industrial designer Toshiyuki Kita. The medically approved "therapy chair" resembles a first-class cabin seat that one would be proud to display in the living room, and is the only chair on the market that can be used by everyone in your family - even children and pregnant women.

For a less ostentatious solution that still looks good enough to sit on, OSIM offers the uSofa and its smaller cousin, the uSofa Petit - automated massage solutions that are designed to look like contemporary single seaters. With its new category of "massage sofas", OSIM's design direction is proving much clearer and more effective though the uSofa range



inevitably exposes the massage chair market's ugly truth - the less it looks like a massage chair, the less it's going to massage.

So while their marketing strategy might end up distracting more than promoting the functions of massage chairs, their efforts really are paved with good intentions. Affordability, effectiveness and design are all available to those who believe in these reclining automatic "masseurs", though no one company will claim their product can replace the effectiveness of a real physiotherapist.

Still, a robotic massage chair is considered a heavy investment for consumers, so do heed

the advice given to me by the sales staff I encountered while researching for this article; fix a budget, and know what you

want to get out of your purchase. Give

every chair you're going to test a good 45-minute

trial to narrow down your selection, bring your entire family (and possibly your extended family) to have them each give your selection a good

45-minute trial. And after you've decided, sit back, relax, and let your chair do the rest. ⏻

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 No Yes
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