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cover story: The gift of Relaxation: **Spa** services offer perfect 'me' time

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Staff

Friends don't let friends poke holes in the bottom of chocolates.

Traditional Valentine's Day candy isn't passe, but the gift of relaxation at a day spa is a calorie-free way to celebrate Cupid for your loved one.

Facials, massages and body treatments can be luxurious without breaking the bank.

Sheri Ross of Sandy Springs says she enjoys getting massage therapy and skin care services such as facials and microdermabrasion.

"I work a lot, and my favorite thing about going to the spa is it's 'me' time. It's something I do just for me," she says. "You do it for yourself, and you take it with you -- your skin looks better and when you look better you feel better."

A spa service can also afford you a few minutes of peace, but you have to remind yourself to take advantage of it. "You leave your problems at the door," Ross says.

Here are some examples of how you can indulge yourself:

KAI, THE MEDICAL SPA

Kai, the Medical Spa, offers a Valentine's Day special for you and your honey: a 60-minute, after-hours couple's massage with food and wine (\$400) at any of Kai's three locations. Or add two customized facials to the couple's massage for \$600. Choose any type of massage, such as deep tissue, sports, Swedish, lymphatic or reflexology, says owner Grace Choung. www.kaimedspa.com

- Re-create the experience at home: Sign up for Kai's couple's massage class (404-250-0882), or use the instructions at right for a relaxing partner massage. For more ideas, pick up a copy of "Lovers' Massage: Soothing Touch for Two" by Darrin Zeer (\$9.95), which illustrates dozens of Thai, shiatsu and other massage techniques for back, neck, legs and more. Massage techniques are placed into categories such as rejuvenating and relaxing. No time for a facial? A warm washcloth will do in a pinch.

THE SPA ON PACES

Have dessert in a different form. The Spa on Paces offers a Chocolate and Cherries Jubilee Facial (\$95) with products from the Hungarian line Eminence Organic Skin Care. Chocolate, cocoa, sour cherry, red rose and other powerfully scented skin-care items feel silky and smell good enough to eat. www.spaonpaces.com

- Re-create the experience at home: Eminence Organics sells its Chocolate Mousse Hydration Masque for \$48 and Sour Cherry Masque for \$40. Resist the temptation to nibble on the products; they're not edible. Available at the Spa on Paces; more locations at www.eminenceorganics.com.

SPA SYDELL

With Massage Stretch, the name says it all: It's a clothed massage session with the benefits of stretching. Trained technicians lead you through stretching and compression techniques designed to improve your range of motion, energy and relaxation levels, and circulation. They can also suggest exercises to improve your flexibility at home. A 60-minute session costs \$85. spasydell.com.

- Re-create the experience at home: You can't fool us -- you don't stretch as much you should. Marie Allen, Spa Sydell's director of education, recommends a couple of basic stretches:

For hamstrings: Stand up straight. Breathing slowly, reach over and grab your ankles. Release them and roll up slowly. Repeat several times.

For shoulders: Stand in a doorway with your hands on each side of the frame. Lean forward. Don't bounce -- hold about 20 seconds. Move your hands to different positions inside the frame -- waist

height, shoulder height, etc. -- and lean forward each time.

A SPECIAL TOUCH FOR SWEETHEART

Kami Sowder, a certified massage therapist at DeKalb Medical Center, offers tips to give your loved one a massage.

- Use a wide stance and put your whole body into the massage strokes. Don't hunch over the person.
- Use long, gliding strokes along the sides of the spine. Work your way out. You can also massage arms, hands and feet.
- On the shoulders, use kneading strokes, like you're working bread dough.
- A slower pace and deeper pressure are for relaxation, and a faster pace and lighter touch can be rejuvenating.
- Stroke the soles of the feet and the toes.
- Use your whole hand, including palm, heel and knuckles, so your fingers don't get tired.
- Lace your fingers with your loved one's and use your thumbs to stroke the insides of the palms.
- Don't forget the scalp. Have the person lie face up. Start at the base of the neck and pull your fingers up their scalp toward you.

THE EXTRAS

- Fluffy, comfortable robe
- Flip-flops to protect your pedicure (you'll need a few hours to dry toes completely)
- Candles in scents such as jasmine, mint or lavender
- Background music. It shouldn't be too loud, upbeat, noisy or talkative.

MASSAGE WORKSHOP

DeKalb Medical Center will hold a massage workshop Feb. 14 (\$50 per couple). 404-501-9355 for information or to register.

Clip 'n' keep!

TRY THIS AT HOME

Judy Tuttle, manager of Jolie the Day Spa, says it's not difficult to pamper yourself between spa appointments. Here are her ideas for a spa day at home:

>Start with a long, brisk walk or other exercise.

>Do a mini facial with these best-sellers from Jolie: MD Skincare makes an All-in-One Facial Cleanser with toner that also removes makeup for \$36. Murad Exfoliating Fruit Enzyme Mask (\$30) works in 10 minutes -- "It makes your skin just look new," Tuttle says. Follow with a moisturizer such as SkinCeuticals Emollience (\$49.50). "When you use good products, less is more," she says -- and these products can last a long time.

>Soak for 20 minutes in Mountain Body Aromatherapy Bath Tea (\$10.50), which soothes skin and relieves achy muscles.

>If you want to, shower and wash your hair. Moisturize after your shower. Dry your hair too, because you'll do your fingernails next.

>Have a quickie manicure and pedicure with a kit by Creative Nail Design, each \$19.95.

>While your nails dry and you marinate in moisturizer, find a quiet spot to meditate or read.

>Finish the spa experience with a light lunch such as mixed field greens with grilled chicken or turkey, and fresh fruit.