Deep-Tissue Massage Made Easy by Eric Stephenson

Deep Tissue Massage is one of the most requested services; it is also one of the most misunderstood by therapists and clients alike. As a continuing education teacher traveling the country, I hear firsthand how therapists are struggling to meet the requests for “deep” massage.” Many therapists find themselves in pain. It’s no secret physical injury is a major cause of compromised daily life for therapists and forced premature exit from the profession.

No Pain, big gain

On average, a massage therapist receives just over 600 hours of formal training in Swedish massage — the bedrock of therapeutic massage. Long on enthusiasm and short on wisdom, students quickly begin the quest for “deeper, more specific work” using the same table height, techniques, and amount of lubricant. Soon, they may end up hurting themselves and possibly the person underneath their touch.

In the minds of much of the public (as well as some practitioners) massage has to be painful to have lasting therapeutic...
benefits. It is the “no pain, no gain” mentality. I often take informal polls amongst therapists, asking: “How many of you have received a massage where the practitioner went past exposing pain and started to impose pain?” Without fail, more than half will raise their hands.

It always leads me to think about the Hippocratic Oath, “First, do no harm.”

In fact, if these informal surveys are any indication, one might conclude that over half of the population has been harmed by the very therapy that they sought for pain relief. Sadly, many of these clients will be reluctant to try a Deep Tissue massage again.

Reflecting back, I recognize times where I breached clients’ boundaries in an effort to please someone who didn’t realize his own limits or to placate my ego. It is just as easy to recognize times that I went beyond my body’s ability to deliver pressure and harmed myself. These were nights spent with my hapless thumbs soaking in an ice bucket, the result of trying to annihilate stubborn trigger points. Author/educator Art Riggs shares his wisdom: “Rarely is there a need for pain in massage. In fact, pain is actually one of the major obstacles to our goal of relaxing and lengthening muscles and releasing tension. I wish I could offer recall notices to my early Rolfing clients for the unnecessary discomfort I imposed on them — and the wasted energy that exhausted me.”

“This wasted energy is life-force that could be used to improve the quality of life outside of work,” adds Massage Therapist and Industrial Hygienist Kevin Powell. “Improving the quality of our life by doing the things we love like gardening, biking, family time, instead of being exhausted after a day of giving five massages.”

**Frame of Mind**

Deep Tissue Made Easy is not just an approach but a mindset. It seeks always to provide the most comfort for both the client and therapist rather than for one at the expense of the other. It holds the following principles as truths:

1. All force will be met with resistance.
2. Applied pressure levels are subjective and depend on in-the-moment feedback.
3. Speed is the enemy of depth.

It follows a methodology:

1. Position the client to make the best use of gravity.
2. Get “long and strong” coming from your core before beginning.
3. When it comes to making contact: “Land like a swan in the lake, not a pelican in the ocean.”
4. Allow, don’t plow tissue! Avoid what Ida Rolf called the “client’s motor intent to withdraw.”

**Table height and Lubricant**

The legendary John Wooden, the winningest coach in college basketball history understood the importance of basics. He
would spend a half hour the first day of practice teaching his men how to put on a sock. “Wrinkles can lead to blisters,” he would warn. He knew that a team full of blistered players is compromised.

I often think about this as I step up to the massage table. Table height should not be a mystery. It should allow you to go vertically through body’s tissue layers with felt sensation in your body confirming the correct height. Too low and we lose our vertical alignment, loading the lumbar spine. Too high and our shoulders elevate, fatiguing the upper trapezius and the levator scapulae. Especially in the case of a stationary table, a client’s physical size, pressure tolerance, and position should factor in when choosing a correct height. We may also ask the client to frequently move on the table, even into a side-lying position to make better use of leverage. With practice, our effort diminishes as we rely on gravity to sink into tissue layers.

This sinking requires using little, or in some cases, no lubrication. With too much lubricant, hands slide over tissue rather than hooking into it. Experiment with using less and less lubricant, adjusting to the hydration levels of individual clients’ tissue.

Moving from the Core

In my opinion, moving from the body’s core and maintaining spinal alignment are the biggest challenges we face in delivering massage. Core movement involves intrinsic muscles attaching to the axial skeleton. Our umbilicus is the compass needle as we point it in the direction of each stroke and rely on body weight to deliver pressure. Without continual conscious awareness, we fall into habitual movement from our shoulders. The effects of gravity pull our head and shoulders forward as our torso moves into flexion, taxing the lumbar vertebrae and the spinal extensors.

We can bring our body weight up and over the client (even on to the balls of our feet), relying on gravity as pressure is applied at a 90-degree angle. Once at the desired depth, we ask the client to slowly plantar/dorsiflex the ankle, stretching the pinned fascia to individuate the underlying muscle. The practice becomes paying attention to mechanics—every stroke of every session.

My own training on body mechanics began at the Body Therapy Institute where I learned the methodology developed by Rick Rosen. It occurred to me that a lifelong massage career would require a conscious adherence to these concepts. Through my own experience and the work of other body mechanic advocates (Joe Muscolino, Sandy Fritz, and Barbara Frye), I found a sustainable methodology to deliver therapeutic touch.

Powell comments, “Any break in the vertical alignment of the spine requires additional energy expenditure. The amount of energy it takes to hold our posture against gravity is not to be underestimated, especially in our profession.”

In workshops, I remind therapists that we each have varying levels of resource in our bodies. Injury, trauma, misuse, and overall health give us different abilities tableside. It’s not structural but functional perfection we are looking for.

Take a Seat

In the book, Save Your Hands, authors Green and Goggins suggest that twenty-five percent of a therapist’s work can be accomplished while seated. By properly aligning your seated posture, bodyweight is easily transmitted into the front leg with a slight anterior pelvic tilt. I find that dropping the inside femur almost perpendicular with the ground and the outside femur parallel with the table provides a stable movement from the core.

Core body movement is transmitted into the front leg as the back leg provides stability. Two important elements should not be overlooked when assuming a kneeling stance.

First, use a cushion under the knee contacting the ground, and second, kneeling on both legs will not provide the necessary support to effectively transmit your body weight. While it is tempting to kneel without the use of a cushion, this will prove too harsh in a daily practice. And while we occasionally find ourselves on both knees, the movement form our core becomes less stable and the shoulders take over the job of stabilization, stressing upper body musculature.

Heads Up!

The effects of forward head posture are well documented. According to Renee Calliet, M.D., if the head weighs 10lbs and the center of the ear sits directly over the center of the shoulder, the load on the spine and its tissue is only 10 lbs. However, if the head is translated forward, its weight increases 10 lbs for every inch forward. In effect, if the center of the ear is three inches forward from the center of the shoulders, the weight of the head on the spine and its discs, joints and nerves is 30lbs.

This is not only a problem for a forward-facing society (computers, TV, driving) but for massage therapists. As one of my teachers used to say we suffer from “Tiltus Headus Too Muchas.” This attention-getting phrase helped students remember the unforgiving effects of looking down at our hands during a massage. Deep Tissue Made Easy teaches us to bring our head back to neutral position, bringing our spine back into alignment and trusting our palpation skills to guide us.

No Thumb Zone

I will often inform therapists they have entered into the NTZ when they attend my workshops. While thumbs make for wonderful palpation, that strength quickly becomes a weakness if we rely on them to deliver pressure.

According to Trumble and Recor from the University of Washington Medical Center, for every pound of pressure applied with the thumb, there can be 10 to 12 pounds of pressure concentrated in the carpometacarpal joint. This becomes painfully obvious imagining ourselves applying ten pounds of
pressure to tissue. The reward? 120 pounds of force at the base of your thumb! This explains the aforementioned nights with the ice bucket.

By keeping a straight wrist and using the proximal knuckle of the index finger, a therapist mimics the use of a thumb to apply static compression or cross fiber friction. This tool becomes the automatic default whenever possible to avoid digital compression with the thumb. While the knuckles, fist and elbow cannot rival the sensitivity of thumbs, with practice they can become quite perceptive.

**Sustainability**

Webster's dictionary defines sustainability as a method of using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged. We have only one body, and a lifelong practice of massage and bodywork will require careful attention to how we use it. As you apply these concepts, think of the advice from the late Ida Rolf: “Strength that has effort in it is not what you need; you need the strength that is the result of ease.”

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