

Deep-Tissue Massage Made Easy

by Eric Stephenson

Deep-tissue massage is one of the most-requested massage services; it is also very misunderstood, by therapists and clients alike. As a continuing education teacher traveling the country, I hear firsthand how therapists are struggling to meet requests for “deep” massage.

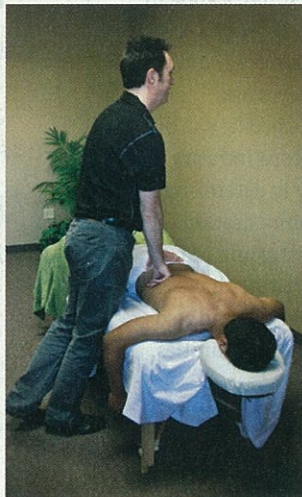
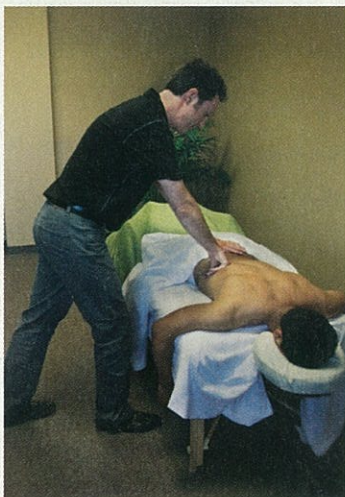
“Ninety percent of our clients request deep work,” says Tamara* a massage-clinic employee. “I’m exhausted at the end of the day. Clients are asking for more pressure, and my thumbs are going numb.”

It’s no secret physical injury is a major cause of compromised daily life for therapists and forced premature exit from the profession. In a growing attempt to meet the demand for deep-tissue massage, many therapists find themselves in pain.

No pain, big gain

On average, a massage therapist receives just more than 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 under their touch.

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 I went beyond my body’s ability to deliver pressure and harmed myself. These were nights spent with my hapless thumbs soaking in



Figures 1A and 1B. The effects of gravity pull our head and shoulders forward in Figure 1A, taxing the lumbar vertebrae and the spinal extensors. Figure 1B shows the same approach getting “long and strong” with vertical spinal alignment using gravity to sink at a 90-degree angle.

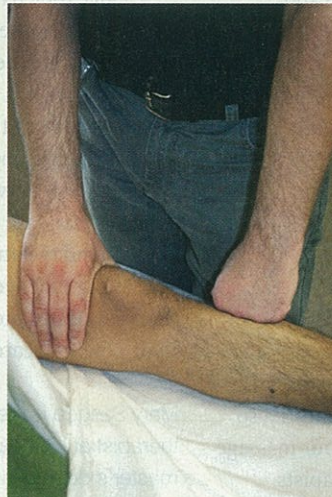


Figure 2A. A soft open fist making contact with the anterior compartment of the leg. The therapist sinks to depth and calls for client dorsi/plantarflexion.



Figure 2B. The technique in Figure 2A requires bringing body weight up onto the balls of the feet and again sinking at 90 degrees into the tissue. It’s not structural but functional perfection we are looking for.

an ice bucket, the result of trying to annihilate stubborn trigger points.

"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," says author and educator Art Riggs. "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 energy; energy "that could be used to improve the quality of life outside of work," adds Kevin Powell, a massage therapist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. "Improving the quality of our life by doing the things we love, like gardening, biking and 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; it's a mindset. It seeks to provide the most comfort for both client and therapist, rather than for one at the expense of the other. It holds the following principles as truths:

- All force will be met with resistance.
- Applied pressure levels are subjective and depend on in-the-moment feedback.

- 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" from your core before beginning the session.
3. When it comes to making contact, land like a swan in a lake, not a pelican in the ocean.
4. Allow, don't plow. Avoid what Ida Rolf called "the client's motor intention to withdraw."

Table height and lubricant

The legendary John Wooden, the most successful coach in college basketball history, understood the importance of basics. During the first day of practice, he would spend 30 minutes teaching his men how to put on a sock. "Wrinkles can lead to blisters," he warned. He knew 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 the 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

Figure 3. Twenty-five percent or more of our work can be accomplished in the seated position. By dropping the inside knee, body weight is easily transmitted into the front leg from core musculature.

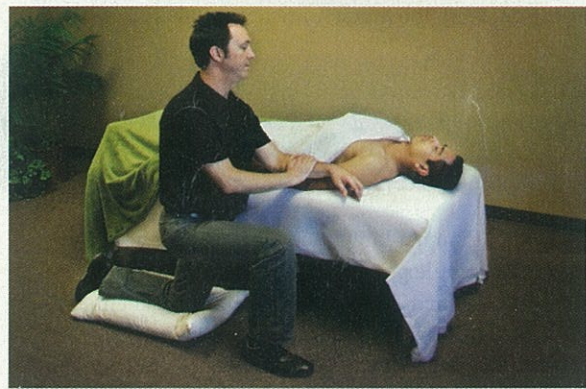
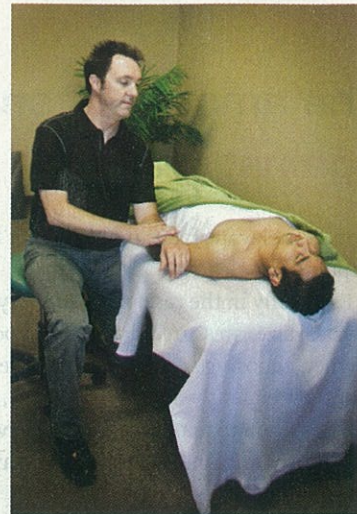


Figure 4. An alternative to sitting, kneeling on one knee will allow for stability and transfer of body weight into the front leg. Place a cushion under the knee contacting the ground.

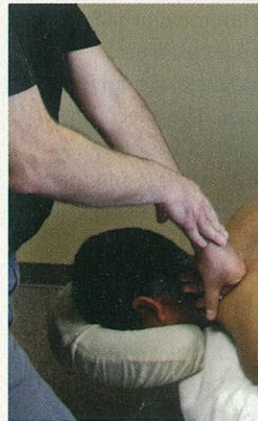


Figure 5. By keeping a straight but loose wrist and using the proximal knuckle of the index finger, we have an alternative to using the thumb on the levator scapulae and rhomboid attachments.

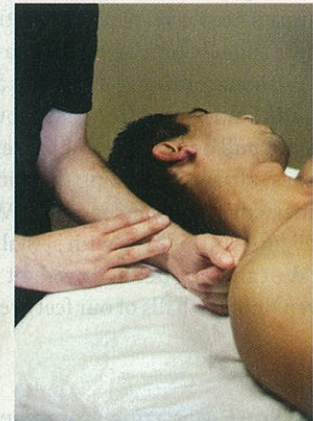


Figure 6. The proximal knuckle is again on the trapezius ridge as the left elbow is tucked into the core for stabilization. Our umbilicus becomes the compass needle as we point it in the direction of each stroke.

The amount of energy it takes to hold our posture against gravity is not to be underestimated.

shoulders elevate, fatiguing the upper trapezius and levator scapulae muscles.

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

pressure is applied at a 90-degree angle.

Figures 2A and 2B depict sinking into the anterior compartment of the leg with a soft open fist while maintaining vertical alignment in the spine. 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 training on body mechanics began at the Body Therapy Institute, where I learned the methodology developed by Rick Rosen. It occurred to me a lifelong massage career would require a conscious adherence to these concepts. Through my own experience and the work of other body mechanic advocates, including Joe Muscolino, Sandy Fritz and Barbara Frye, I found a sustainable methodology to deliver therapeutic touch.

“Any break in the vertical alignment of the spine requires additional energy expenditure,” offers Powell. “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 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 seek.

How does deep-tissue massage benefit clients? Visit

www.massagemag.com/deepresearch to read “Deep-Tissue Massage Shown to Reduce Blood Pressure and Heart Rate.”

tissue rather than hooking into it. Experiment with using less lubricant while performing deep-tissue massage, and adjusting to the hydration levels of individual clients' tissue.

Moving from the core

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 as in Figure 1A. We see the same technique in Figure 1B, this time with spinal alignment.

We can bring our body weight up and over the client (even onto the balls of our feet), relying on gravity as

Take a seat

In the book *Save Your Hands: The Complete Guide to Injury Prevention and Ergonomics for Manual Therapists*, authors Lauriann Greene and Richard W. Goggins suggest 25 percent of a therapist's work can be accomplished while seated. By properly aligning your seated posture (Figure 3), body weight is easily transmitted into the front leg with a slight anterior pelvic tilt. I find dropping the inside femur almost perpendicular with the ground and the outside femur parallel with the table provides a stable movement from the core.

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The same posture is demonstrated in a kneeling position (Figure 4). 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. 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 from 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 Cailliet, M.D., if the head weighs 10 pounds 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 pounds. However, if the head is translated forward, its weight increases 10 pounds 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 30 pounds. We see the all-too-familiar image of this again in Figure 1A.

This is not only a problem for a forward-facing society that uses computers and TV and drives, but for massage therapists as well.

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.

The deep-tissue-made-easy mindset includes remembering 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

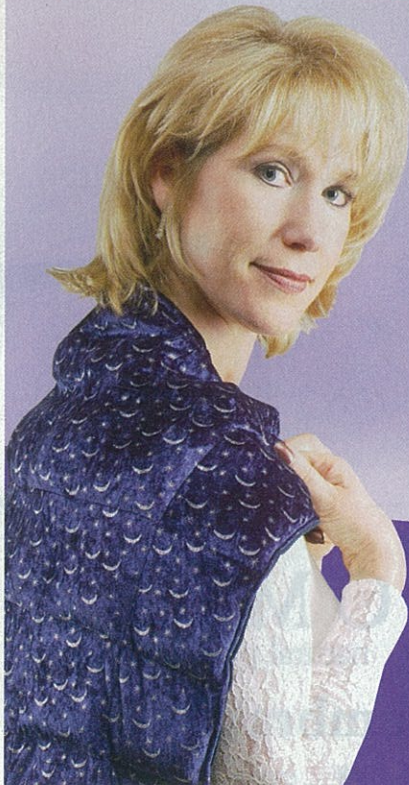
I often inform therapists they have entered into the no-thumb zone when they attend my workshops. While thumbs make for wonderful palpation, that strength quickly becomes a weakness if we rely on them to deliver pressure.

According to Thomas Trumble and Carol 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

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carpometacarpal joint. This becomes painfully obvious imagining ourselves applying 10 pounds of pressure to tissue. The reward? One hundred twenty pounds of force at the base of your thumb! This explains the aforementioned nights with the ice bucket.

In Figure 5, we see an alternative to using thumbs on the levator scapulae insertion. By keeping a straight wrist and

Visit www.massagemag.com/deepresources for a list of books and DVDs on deep-tissue massage.

using the proximal knuckle of the index finger, a therapist mimics the use of a thumb to apply static compression or cross-fiber friction. Figure 6 shows use of the proximal knuckle in the upper trapezius ridge. 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

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines sustainability as a method of using a resource so 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."

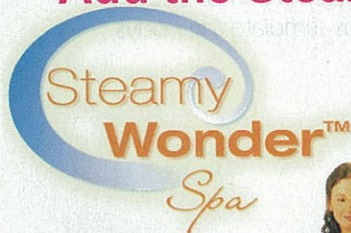
**Name changed by request*

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