Body Mechanics

Working from the Core

by Joseph Muscolino

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARIPAT GOODWIN

Any massage therapist in practice knows, massage—especially deep tissue massage—can be hard work. It is physically taxing to create and deliver pressure hour after hour into the bodies of your clients.

Some therapists find there is a limit to how many clients they can see in a day or a week. Others find they cannot seem to deliver the pressure many of their clients want. The reality for many therapists is their success, both economically and qualitatively, is limited by their inability to confidently and comfortably deliver deep pressure.

Much of the success you, as a therapist, will enjoy depends on the quality of your body mechanics.

Tip: Ask about the pressure

When inquiring about your pressure, do not ask the client, "How is the pressure?" Very often, not wanting to negatively critique you, the client will simply reply, "Fine." It is better to ask, "Would you like more pressure or less pressure?" Now you are inviting the client to ask for a change, and the client would have to go out of his way to just say, "Fine."

Body mechanics is a topic that is often addressed in massage schools, but is rarely perfected by students or therapists. Perhaps there simply is not sufficient time in the curriculum to adequately teach and learn this subject; or perhaps its full importance is not embraced and understood by the student until she is in practice and confronted with one client after another who asks for deeper work, which then reveals the weakness of her technique.

Regardless of the circumstance, teaching and learning body mechanics can be simple and straightforward. Good body mechanics follow from the laws of physics. Physics is literally the study of bodies, so it is appropriate that the principles of physics would apply to the world of massage. But instead of concerning ourselves with the forces of planets and stars, we will concern ourselves with the forces the body of the therapist places upon the body of the client.

The big picture

There are many aspects to employing good body mechanics. So to avoid becoming lost in the minutiae of all the different poses, stances and joint angles, let's take a step back and look at the big picture of what we are trying to achieve.

The key principle I would like to offer, so that you can have strong and efficient body mechanics, is to work from the core. The core of the body is located at the lumbar spine-pelvis region. If you originate your strokes from your core, much of the rest of good body mechanics technique will naturally follow.

When working on a client, you have two choices to create force to deliver pressure: to use your body weight or to use muscular effort.

Body weight is created by gravity acting on the mass of your body. The beauty of using body weight is it is free. It takes no effort, and all you have to do is lean in. The core is the center of your weight, so creating strokes from the core allows you to maximize body weight to work deeply.

Your other choice is to use your musculature; however, this requires effort on your part and can be very fatiguing. To get the maximal pressure with the least effort, you need to use the largest muscles possible. Many of the larger muscles of the body are located at your core. Working from the core allows you to take advantage of body weight and use larger muscles.

Working from the core means getting the core in line with the stroke. This means getting it behind your contact on the client. The simplest way to know you are successfully doing this is to draw an imaginary line directly outward from the belly button. This line shows the direction the core is facing. It should be pointed toward the client and in line with the stroke you are employing at that moment.

With the force emanating from your core, you now need to transmit that force into the client. To do this, you need to keep the upper extremity you are using to contact the client in front of the core. This requires keeping the elbows in. Whether your arms are straight with the elbow joints extended when you are standing and working or your elbow joints are bent when you are working from a seated position, it is crucially important to always remember to keep the elbows in.

Discover how life-force energy, or chi, can assist your health by visiting www.massagemag.com/chipower to read "The Power of Chi," by BioSync Research Institute's Founder Mark Lamm.

Tip: Always keep your elbows in.

Following are examples of massage and bodywork that demonstrate working from the core. Note in each example how the therapist's core is aligned with the stroke, and the upper extremities are in front of the core—with the elbows in.

Standing, using body weight

When working on the client from a standing position, you can effectively use your body weight to deliver deep pressure into the client by positioning your trunk/core over the client and dropping down to lean in as you see in Figure 1. Note that the therapist is literally over the client with his core facing the client and in line with the stroke that is being employed (Blue arrow drawn from therapist's belly button demonstrates alignment of the core). Additionally, his arms are straight with the elbows in. Orienting the core and keeping the elbows in demonstrates working from the core.

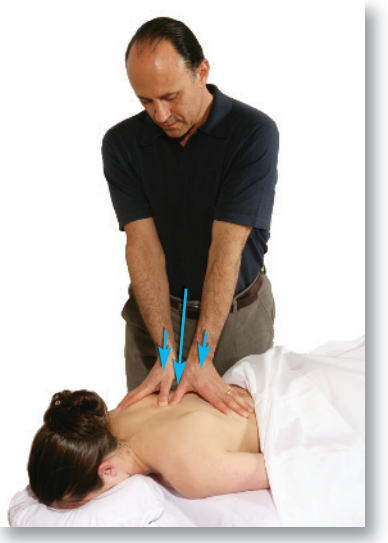

Figure 1. Working from the core when standing and using body weight to lean into the client.

Standing, using lower extremities

Positioning your core over the client is excellent for taking advantage of body weight, but it does not allow for efficient use of the large musculature of the lower extremity to push off the ground and into the client. (These muscles are the gastrocnemius and soleus as plantar flexors of the ankle joint, quadriceps femoris as extensors of the knee joint, and gluteals and hamstrings as extensors of the hip joint.)

To make use of these muscles, it is necessary to position the body slightly less vertical and slightly away from the client; in other words, not directly over him. Your feet should be in a sagittal plane stance with one foot forward and the other in back. The back foot should be fairly well aligned in the sagittal plane, not turned out. Your hip, knee and ankle joints should be somewhat bent (Figure 2a). Next, plantar flex the ankle joint and extend the knee and hip joints of the lower extremity in back, using that force to push into the client (Figure 2b).

Your core is aligned with the direction of the stroke, and

the force is transmitted from the core and through the upper extremities by keeping the elbow joints straight (but not locked) and in front of the core.

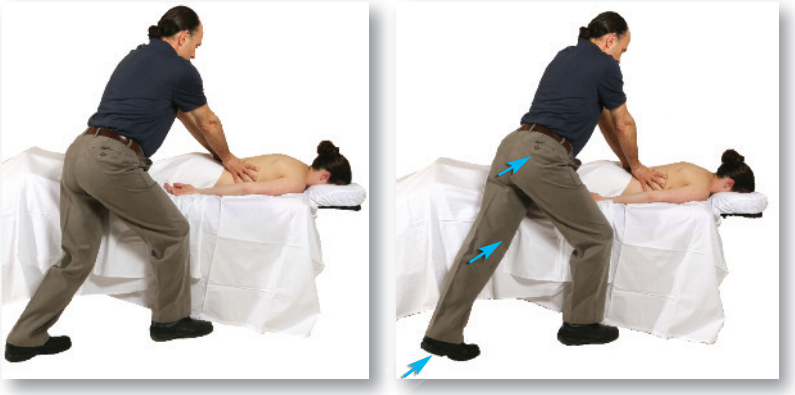

Figure 2a, 2b. Working from the core when standing and using the lower extremity in back to push off the floor and into the client.

Seated neck work

To work from the core on the supine client's neck while you are in a seated position, it is crucially important to align your core with the stroke. (Remember to visually draw a line straight outward from your belly button.) This requires moving your stool around the table to match the contour of the client's neck. Figure 3 demonstrates seated neck work on the client's lower neck in A, middle neck in B and upper neck in C. Note the higher in the neck the therapist works, the farther around the side of the table the therapist moves.

To keep the upper extremity in front of the body so you are working from the core, it is helpful to bring your elbow in by laterally rotating your arm at the shoulder joint and tucking the elbow just inside (or as close as possible to) the anterior superior iliac spine. Now when you lean in with your core, your body weight and muscular effort will immediately transfer through your forearm and into the client.

Figure 3a, 3b, 3c. Working from the core when seated and working the supine client's neck.

Pulling work

Similar to using the core to press into the client by pushing, you can use your core to employ pulling strokes on the client. Figure 4 demonstrates the therapist pulling on the client by working from the core, with the pelvis aligned with the stroke and the upper extremities straight and in front of the core.

Tip: Strengthen your core

Given how important it is to use your core, it is wise for massage therapists to exercise and strengthen their core. Many core-strengthening and stabilization programs exist. Perhaps best is Pilates, which through mat and apparatus work is designed to strengthen and stretch the entire body, but is specifically focused on working the core.

Stretching the client

Working from the core is just as important, if not more important, when stretching the client. Stretching usually requires the therapist to use both hands, one as the treatment hand doing the stretch and the other as the stabilization hand, stabilizing the adjacent body part of the client.

What makes stretching a bit more logistically challenging is these two hands are often delivering force in different directions; therefore, you have to decide which upper extremity is working harder and align your core behind that one. In most cases, the stabilization hand has the harder job and it is necessary to align the core behind that hand, as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6.

In Figure 5, the therapist is stretching the client's abductor musculature of the hip joint. Note that the therapist has aligned his core behind his left hand, which is stabilizing the iliac crest of the client's pelvis.

Learn a simple exercise you can practice for self-care by reading "Lewis Circles: Self-Care for Health Care," at www.massagemag.com/lewiscircles.

Table Height

It is important to point out that to position your trunk over the client, the client literally needs to be under you. This requires the table height to be very low, much lower than most therapists employ. Of course, it depends on the size of the client, but a good guideline to follow is to have the top of the table at the bottom of your patella. This may seem quite low to many, but to truly be over the client and lean in to utilize body weight, this guideline should be followed.

Many therapists develop the habit of having the table too high because that is the height they placed it when they were first learning massage and doing light work—but if you want to make the transition to deeper work, the table must be low. Ironically, many tables do not go low enough. There is somewhat of a lag in table technology. Many tables are still constructed with the idea of the lighter work that has traditionally been done in the past. As therapists increasingly do clinical orthopedic work, the need for lower tables becomes clear.

If you are shopping for a table, I strongly recommend buying an electric lift table. It is not much more expensive than stationary tables, operates smoothly and quietly, and is tax deductible if you are in business. An electric lift table allows you to change the height with the push of a foot pedal. You can set the table low for deep work and easily reset it higher when doing lighter work.

Make sure to choose a table that goes low enough for your height. Also, be sure it is not too wide, as wide tables make it more difficult to position your trunk, or core, over the client. An electric lift table will save your body.

Figure 4. Working from the core when employing a pulling stroke on the client.

Figure 5. Working from the core to stabilize the client's pelvis when stretching the abductor musculature of the hip joint.

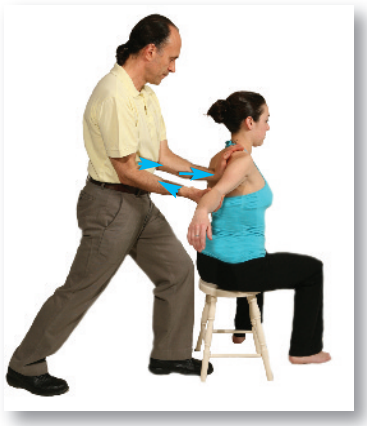

Figure 6. Working from the core to stabilize the client's trunk when stretching the pectoral musculature of the shoulder joint.

Figure 6 shows the therapist stretching the client's pectoral musculature. The therapist has aligned his core and lower extremities behind his left hand, which is stabilizing the client's trunk.

Increase success and longevity

As we can see, delivering pressure into the client, employing pulling strokes and stretching the client is less about the therapist's strength and more about efficiency of body mechanics.

Good body mechanics are always beneficial; however, they become vitally important when deeper work is being done. Many factors may be involved, but central to all of them is the concept of working from the core.

Employing good body mechanics by working from the core will increase your clinical technique, the success of your practice and the longevity of your career.

Joseph Muscolino, D.C., has been a massage therapy educator for 24 years and is the author of eight major publications with Mosby of Elsevier, including *The Muscle and Bone Palpation Manual*. He runs numerous continuing education workshops for therapists and instructors. For more information, visit www.learnmuscles.com. M

Why should you care about body mechanics? Visit www.massagemag.com/aspectselfcare to read "Body Mechanics: An Important Aspect of Self-Care," by Lauriann Greene and Richard W. Goggins.