



joint mobilization of the thoracic region

THERE ARE MANY EFFECTIVE TREATMENT APPROACHES THAT ARE AVAILABLE WITHIN THE SCOPE OF PRACTICE FOR MASSAGE THERAPISTS. EACH ONE OF THESE, WHEN PRACTICED INDIVIDUALLY, CAN BE VERY HELPFUL WHEN WORKING ON CLIENTS WITH MUSCULOSKELETAL CONDITIONS. Certainly, Western-based Swedish strokes are helpful to loosen muscle tone, break up patterns of adhesions, increase local circulation and provide many other benefits.

Before practicing any new modalities or techniques, check with your state's massage therapy regulatory authority to ensure they are within the state's defined scope of practice for massage therapy.

Another effective approach is to use moist heat. As a central nervous system depressant, heat helps to relax muscle tone, increase local circulation and loosen fascia. Stretching is another treatment approach that can be extremely effective. Stretching also helps to break up adhesions and change baseline muscle tone to become more relaxed.

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There is an old saying: “If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Therapists who know and practice only one technique tend to force every client into being treated with that technique. Although a specific approach might be effective for some clients, others may not benefit. If we think of each treatment technique in our practice as a tool, then as we learn more techniques, we add to our toolbox and are able to help more clients. This enables us to become more effective therapists. The art of being a skillful clinical therapist is learning when to apply each technique, as well as how to combine them.

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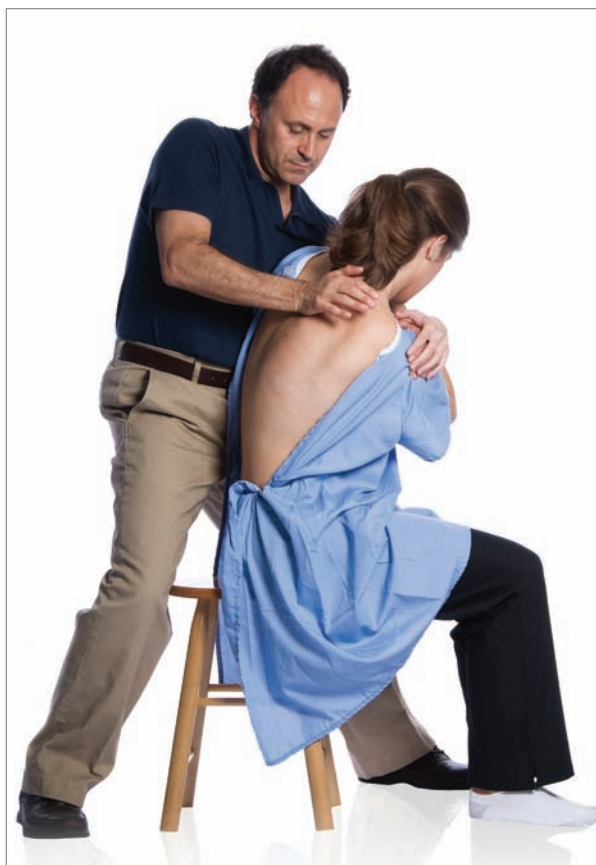


FIGURE 1: Initial position for joint mobilization of the thoracic region. The therapist's left hand is supporting the client and bringing her upper and middle back into flexion and left rotation to create tension in the client's thoracic region.



FIGURE 2: Incorrect initial position for joint mobilization of the thoracic region. The therapist is bending and rotating the client from the lumbar region.

Putting It Together

Although there is no single combination of treatment techniques that always works for clients who present with taut soft tissues, the mix of massage and heat, followed by stretching, is usually an effective and powerful approach. Besides helping in their own right, massage and heat help warm up and prepare the client's soft tissues so that stretching is much more effective. Indeed, I strongly recommend this combination of techniques.

However, across the spine and rib cage, broad stretching strokes, even when applied after massage and heat, are often ineffective at loosening taut soft tissues located at a specific "segmental" joint level of the spine.

A segmental joint level of the spine is a specific joint level, for example the T4-T5 or T5-T6 joint, and a segmental taut spot often exhibits decreased motion. In other words, the spot becomes hypomobile due to a combination of increased fascial adhesions and increased muscle tone of the small intrinsic muscles of that joint, such as *rotatores*, *interspinales* and *intertransversarii*.

The reason broad stretches are largely ineffective at loosening a taut segmental hypomobile level is that

For more information on joint mobilization of the neck, see Muscolino's "Body Mechanics" column in the Fall 2007 issue of *mtj*.

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