

Body Mechanics

Working from the Core

by Joseph Muscolino

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



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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

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

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.

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

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