

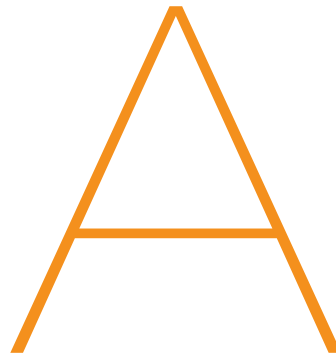
# Make Room for Progress

By Art Riggs



DEAR ART,  
I enjoy taking workshops and learning new techniques, but I always seem to return to the basic massage routine I learned in my first training. I feel stagnant—any thoughts on how to move to a new level?

—STUCK



DEAR STUCK,

Many therapists have this problem, especially if they have regular clients and are hesitant to alter a routine that seems to be working. I experienced this myself as I added craniosacral, joint mobilization, and other skills to my Rolfing practice. If only accumulating knowledge just involved a simple, incremental accumulation of new skills added to present ones! Sometimes, early training rules and a rigid perception of proper ways of working butt heads with more advanced knowledge and growth. The solution doesn't lie in heaping new techniques on top of old if they conflict with your paradigm of bodywork; look back and carefully examine what techniques or general philosophies of massage are limiting you and need to be let go of to make room for progress.

Strict rules in early training are sometimes necessary to provide a secure environment in which students aren't confused by too many options. However, some teachers present an inflexible image of massage. Early training is only a stepping-stone on which therapists may later expand, freeing themselves from their training wheels by relying on intuition and the joy of self-expression and discovery.

As a child, I was warned not to talk to strangers and to always slowly look both ways three times before crossing a street—sage advice for an enthusiastic young lad with the discrimination powers and attention span of a Labrador retriever puppy, but not for a man attempting to make friends in a new area or trying to capitalize on short intervals between cars to cross a busy street.

When it comes to our practices, stagnation and resistance to change can fall into several categories:

#### Misinformed Concern Over Safety

Many of the restrictions of early training are necessary to ensure safety in the classroom and in a new practice, but are totally unnecessary once manual skills improve and knowledge of anatomy grows. As a practice moves toward more therapeutic emphasis, the very things that we've been warned to stay away from need to be addressed to help our clients. I've seen students break into a cold sweat from trepidation while learning to work next to the spine, in the anterior neck, around the deep abdomen, or anywhere they can feel a distant pulse.

Of course, we all must work safely and err on the side of caution, but most of the fear I see is not a result of careful learning of contraindications, but from a lack of anatomical knowledge about safety. If you fear working in certain areas that others work with successfully, do your homework to learn how to work there safely, too.

#### Narrow Definitions of Massage that are No Longer Applicable

Some therapists make assumptions about what clients will like from projections based upon rigid parameters. Some obstacles include resistance to side-lying work, overuse of lubrication, over-fastidious draping that interrupts the flow of the massage, or a focus on superficial whole-body massage to the exclusion of productive spot work.

#### Information that is False or Incomplete

The line is not always sharp between incomplete information and incorrect information. While this can be a relatively harmless limitation in some instances, some fallacious information can promote unsafe practices. An example of this is the incorrect belief that soreness the day after deep work is due to the release of lactic acid that had been locked in the muscles. This urban legend results in practitioners who persist in working too aggressively, possibly doing damage with the rationalization that they are being helpful.

#### A Strict and Inflexible Self-Image of Your Role as a Practitioner

Other teachers I've spoken with agree that this is probably the largest impediment to growth. Almost all therapists leave continuing education workshops excited at their new skills, but the key to implementing new knowledge lies in having a flexible self-perception and communicating your enthusiasm for progress to

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clients rather than relying on the comfort of old and safe routines.

#### A Hard Taskmaster—Yourself!

There is often a learning curve to smoothly implementing new paradigms and complicated manual skills into your practice. That's why it is called a "practice." Being comfortable with yourself when you're going through an awkward stage—refining your skills or evolving your practice—is a key to growth.

Don't let strict adherence to an inflexible image of a proper bodywork session have you miss out on the joy of experimentation, innovation, and growth. Both you and your clients will benefit. **m&b**

 Art Riggs teaches at the San Francisco School of Massage and is the author of the textbook *Deep Tissue Massage: A Visual Guide to Techniques* (North Atlantic Books, 2007), which has been translated into seven languages, and the seven-volume DVD series *Deep Tissue Massage* and *Myofascial Release: A Video Guide to Techniques*. Visit his website at [www.deeptissuemassage.com](http://www.deeptissuemassage.com).