



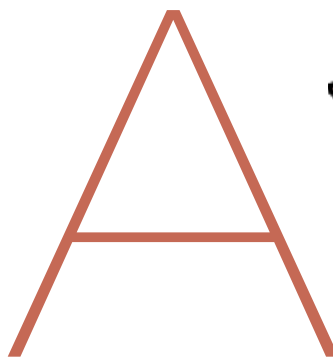
How Best Intentions and Poor Boundaries Fuel Burnout

By Art Riggs



DEAR ART,
I have a client who always requests deep work, but I never seem to get deep enough for his standards, and I find myself exhausted after the session. Do you have any suggestions?

—TUCKERED OUT



DEAR TUCKERED,
This is a common problem. In fact, I've had two similar queries this week, both from therapists whose clients imply that the therapist's pressure isn't "deep" enough for their standards.

Of course, proper mechanics, the use of core energy and not muscling, a precise intention of depth, and the ability to sink through superficial tissue are all important to working deeply, but the bottom line is that we should never strain or sacrifice ourselves for our clients' requests, especially if they subscribe to the "no pain, no gain" fallacy that confuses intensity with depth.

SESSION PLANNING

More often than not, fatigue isn't a result of how deep one works or how hard one presses, but how quickly one works trying to make things happen to satisfy clients. In my early Rolfing work, I was often tired and even depressed at the end of the day. It took years to understand that I was trying to coerce resistant tissue to conform to my demands and, sometimes, the client's perception of depth. We must remember that we are working *with* tissue to overcome its resistance, not *on* tissue by overpowering it. The great bodyworkers I know are masters of choosing a limited number of goals that they can work on at a proper pace without trying to force things. The major reason I was so tired was simply that I was biting off more than I could chew in a limited time period and not being selective in my goals.



To a conscientious therapist, the “not deep enough” expressed by clients can be indistinguishable from the specter of “I’m not good enough.”



A major culprit of this fatigue is the one-hour format—and, more frequently, the 50-minute hour in many spas where therapists are expected to quickly clean the treatment room, in preparation for a conveyor belt of waiting clients. I much prefer longer sessions to spread the work out and concentrate on troublesome areas, but if that isn’t possible, then skillful communication, negotiation of realistic goals, and spot work are necessities.

EMOTIONAL FACTORS

It really saddens me to see how many therapists are such harsh critics of their own work. They become fatigued not from how hard they work, but from the emotional strain of self-criticism and trying too hard to please clients. To a conscientious therapist, the “not deep enough” expressed by clients can be indistinguishable from the specter of “I’m not good enough,” especially in a field where we attempt to couple therapeutic benefits with the client’s (sometimes misguided) standards of

approval. As in all human relations, a certain chemistry is necessary between therapist and client. This is the art of our work, and it just doesn’t happen with everyone; the clash of different energies can be emotionally draining.

The simple truth is that some clients can be manipulative in their attempts to control the session or in implying that we are somehow inadequate if we don’t fulfill all of their (sometimes unrealistic) expectations. If you worked just as hard on someone who gave you the praise you deserve, I wonder whether you would be as worn out?


If we find that we consistently are not looking forward to a particular client, or feeling exhausted or unfulfilled after the session, it is good to carefully consider how we use our energy, but also to ask if we should continue the therapeutic relationship. Many therapists I speak with admit that if they had a full practice, they would probably extricate themselves from certain clients; however, they are hesitant to lose the income. That’s not a good enough reason to sacrifice your own well-being.

I also look at myself to see my part in the relationship. Rather than immediately running for the hills, it can be rewarding to stick with a difficult client for a while and work to see if you can find a harmony that is rewarding, with growth on both sides of the table.

EXIT STRATEGIES

On rare occasions, discretion is the better part of valor, and it is better to go in different directions. Most often, both parties will just sense it isn’t a match.

If this is necessary, it is very important to act with compassion and refrain from blame, keeping personalities out of it. A deep conversation is rarely productive; keep it simple, using broad terms about how the work the client is seeking is not your specialty, and even admitting that you find yourself exhausted attempting to work at the requested depth. You may never know what it was that exhausted you, but both you and the client will probably be better off, and your other clients will appreciate the energy you conserve. **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.deeptissuemassagemanual.com.