

Evolution in Practice

Communication Key to Bringing New Skills to the Table

By Art Riggs



Q

DEAR ART,
My clients love my established relaxation-based practice, but I want to move to more therapeutic and structural integration work that I've learned with recent continuing education. Do you have some suggestions on how to smoothly transition to more "fix-it" work?

—STUCK IN MY SUCCESS

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DEAR STUCK,
Segueing to any new direction in your work can indeed be daunting when you are already successful, with a happy base of clientele who have grown to expect a certain kind of work from you. However, I feel that bodywork is an art rather than a routine. Artistic expression often evolves with experience, and any evolution in your work can be incremental. Regular clients need to be assured that they will continue to receive the caring and relaxing massage they are accustomed to, and that new skills are an added benefit rather than a totally different direction in your work.

As in any relationship, there is a need for growth on both sides or the relationship can fall into stagnation. Just as you assume that your clients prefer the kind of massage they've grown accustomed to, they may be assuming that you only perform that kind of massage. Communication from both sides about what your clients expect and what you offer can help evolve your practice.

Your office ambiance is also important to conveying the type of work you perform. We've come a long way from the days of lava lamps, colored drip candles, and sitar music, but a warm and comforting mood is still important. While we don't want to present an appearance of an inhospitable medical setting, a few anatomical charts, models, and medical/therapeutic books can suggest a broader expertise. My

Remember
that
relaxation
massage
and more
structural
work are
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conflict.



clients love the skeleton that I often use to show them how joints work or muscles attach when we discuss session plans. Additionally, a new brochure or website update detailing your varied areas of expertise and their benefits can attract new clients and inform present clients of your broadening interest.

COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION

The manner in which you bring up the transition to more therapeutic or structural work is crucial. In my initial Rolf training, a group of us neophytes were scrutinizing a model for things to “fix,” like we were prospectors panning for gold. As our list of faults accumulated, Neal Powers, a fantastic teacher for the Guild for Structural Integration, gently asked us to try to find what really worked well with the body and to consider how we could build our session by expanding these strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses.

Our culture of seeking perfection in our bodies can create a feeling of shame in our inadequacies that can have significant emotional repercussions. Bodyworkers need to remember there is a human being lurking behind all those muscles and joints.

I used to call therapeutic work “fix-it” work, but now realize that wrongly implies something is broken or wrong. Most of us have had a therapist command us to “relax” or “breathe,” or state that some muscle is “tight,” implying the sin of being uptight. We don’t want to mince words, but the tone of one’s communication can create a relaxed, nonjudgmental mood resulting

in an opportunity for change rather than a moment of criticism. Following are some examples of how different ways of communicating can initiate more positive reactions in our clients.

Instead of remarking that a particular muscle or group is “tight,” try saying, “It’s interesting that this area seems to be overworking a bit; maybe we could explore some ways to relax it a little and figure out why it seems to be working so hard.”

I often find myself saying, “This seems like a great spot.” When clients ask what I mean, I simply say that it seems like it would appreciate some extra attention.

If a client’s shoulder seems restricted in mobility, instead of focusing on the restriction, point out how much more freedom the other shoulder seems to have. Ask if your client can think of any reason or injury to explain the difference. After the subject is raised, the door is open to suggest some extra, more structural work to see if you can create better balance.

Remember that relaxation massage and more structural work are not in conflict. Even if clients don’t mention it, most have some issues that would love more detailed therapeutic work. This can be the icing on the cake for a relaxation-based practice. **m&b**

6 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.