

## ADD SUBSTANCE TO YOUR WARM-UP



DEAR ART,  
I've been taught that I need to warm the  
body before starting a massage. How much  
time is sufficient so I can get to work?

—TIME URGENCY

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DEAR TIME URGENCY,

Actually, your question brings up a crucial issue: a warm-up is not something to do before you begin real work. Warm-ups are, indeed, work and require a definite therapeutic focus, albeit with more emphasis on evaluation. A broad and general warm-up is certainly beneficial, as long as it doesn't entice you to cut corners in the body of your massage because you lost time with preliminaries.

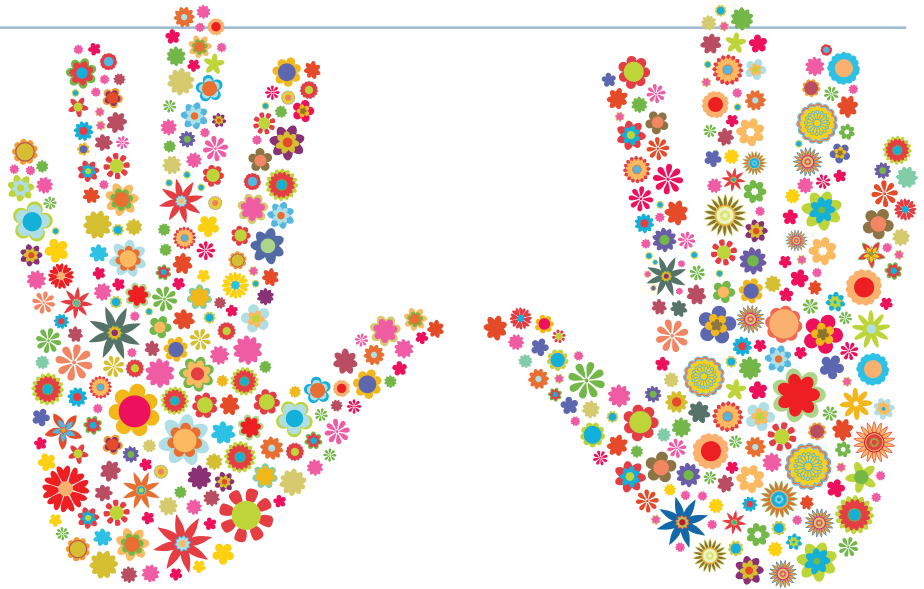
Time management is crucial for a smooth session. Even five minutes of superfluous preliminary work may have more downsides than benefits because of lost opportunities for concentrated focus in the core of your session. That's why I try to educate my clients on the benefits of longer sessions.

Let's look at the main reasons for doing a warm-up:

**Introducing yourself.** Particularly with new clients, this can be a good way to introduce yourself to the whole body, rather than an isolated part, and to prospect for areas of hidden tension. However, some therapists aren't clear with their intention. This doesn't accomplish much in getting to know each other and can seem like superficial conversation at a cocktail party: "Nice weather we're having." "So ... are you a Taurus?"

**Calming your client.** We want to release the client from the emotional stresses of life before performing deep work. This is certainly a worthwhile goal, but may not always be necessary. By starting your work with a slow and focused intention on the shoulders or other core areas of holding, you may initiate an even deeper relaxation and leave more time for detailed work.

The most important thing is to have a clear purpose in your strokes. A stroke without intention is an empty gesture.



Preparing for later work. While this is a worthy strategy, many therapists spend an inordinate amount of time working on relaxed superficial layers that cover the actual deep holding patterns. Always apply enough pressure to sink through to deeper holding to say “hello” to the specific tissue pressing back in resistance, if only to give the message that you will return.

Evaluating holding patterns and tension. This is also useful, but work to hone these skills during the actual performance of work, rather than putting on your evaluation “soft” hat to begin, and then abruptly rolling up your sleeves and putting on your “hard” hat after the introduction. What’s your prelude?

#### MAKE YOUR WARM-UP PLEASING AND EFFECTIVE

Most everyone I ask seems to feel they can tell how good a massage will be in the first minute or two after they feel the therapist’s touch. The most important thing is to have a clear purpose in your strokes. A stroke (even a gentle energy stroke) without

intention is an empty gesture (or like a day without chocolate). As the saying goes, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

I’ve had fantastic warm-ups as the therapist tunes into my body rhythms, slows down to say hello to pockets of tension, and actually lays the groundwork for later. Conversely, I’ve had therapists performing a choreographed routine that, like a limp handshake, only demonstrates a lack of focus and contact, and a waste of time.

Here are some suggestions to add substance to your warm-up:

- Apply pressure from your body weight and core, rather than through peripheral muscular effort.
- Linger at areas of holding and begin the first stage of release.
- When moving any part of the body, move joint and muscular restrictions to their end range of easy motion and wait a bit to give a message of release, rather than just testing or jostling in the middle range of joint motion.
- Sink quickly through layers of superficial ease until you encounter deeper layers that resist your efforts. This will not only begin to free tension in the first couple of minutes, but will tell you where to plan work for efficient management of your time.

Don’t feel obligated to perform an extensive warm-up with every client. Undue emphasis is sometimes placed on an overcautious approach to working both with the body’s energy and more deeply with specific tight areas. We don’t want to get a running start from across the room, but we also don’t want to tiptoe or hesitate. A photographer, explaining how he composes photographs and what to include in the foreground, background, and main focus, once told me, “With every consideration, I ask myself, ‘Does this add to, or detract from, what I’m trying to convey?’” These are wise words for many things, and especially for a bodywork session. **m&b**

Art Riggs 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](http://www.deeptissuemassagemanual.com).