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**Pamela Fitch, RMT**



## What Makes a Good Massage Therapeutic Relationship?

By Pamela Fitch, RMT

A massage therapist's palpation skills are highly developed and with experience, it becomes increasingly easy to perceive very subtle changes in tissue texture, temperature, tone, tension, swelling or fascial restriction. But massage therapists do so much more than "assess, treat and rehabilitate the soft tissues and joints of the body ... (ON MT Act, 1991). Massage therapy is, by its very nature – relational and interpersonal. This is one of the biggest reasons that we succeed with clients (Moyer, et al, 2004) - yet our profession still thinks in terms of myofascial or other structural issues when considering client care.

Historically, the massage therapeutic relationship usually surfaces in professional discussions when reading about professional misconduct and what went wrong. But paying attention to the dynamic between therapist and client can help

the treatment along every bit as effectively as orthopedic assessment may confirm a clinical impression.

So - what exactly IS a “massage therapeutic relationship”? This phrase describes the unique communication dyad that develops between massage therapist and client that is unlike any other type of health care professional relationship. It is not a friendship, but clients may wish to treat therapists as friends. It is not a diagnostic relationship, yet clients often depend on therapists' opinions to help them make healthcare decisions. It is not an intimate personal relationship, yet the client usually lies naked between the sheets, sleepy and possibly sharing deeply personal information reflections. As with personal relationships, the massage therapeutic relationship develops its own character based on the interactions between therapist and client.

## What makes a good massage therapeutic relationship? (continued)

There are many simple therapist actions and reactions that colour the client's experience of massage therapy. For example, does the therapist listen to the client's comments pre and post treatment or does she shut down any possibility of conversation by turning up the music, hurrying the client onto the table? Does the therapist ask open-ended questions and show genuine interest in the client or stick strictly to closed questions that only relate to the immediate condition? Does the therapist take the time to adjust the client's pillows, straighten the sheets and ensure that the client is warm enough and comfortable throughout the treatment? This attention to client comfort communicates the therapist's willingness to accommodate client needs.

When therapists listen to their clients' spoken and unspoken messages, responding in a way that fully supports treatment and the clients needs, they ensure that the therapeutic relationship is a safe place in which to explore sensation.



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Safety in the treatment room promotes trust. And when clients trust their massage therapists to accept even the simplest needs to relax and unwind, the relationship that develops between therapist and client can deeply enrich the experience of healthy, nurturing touch and massage therapy for both therapist and client.

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