BUILD COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH AWARENESS AND CURIOSITY

The Art of Balanced Presence

Massage is a dance. This popular analogy is often used to illustrate the dynamic, spontaneous nature of communication between client and therapist. For it to be a fluid, successful exchange, both parties must give and receive feedback.

by Eric Stephenson

For the most part, massage is a nonverbal dance. Apparently, so is life. It may surprise you that around 80 percent of human communication is nonverbal. In fact, researcher Albert Mehrabian found less than 10 percent of a person's credibility is determined by spoken words.

But words still count. As therapists, many of our words are soft and nurturing—but sometimes we may need to be purposely direct. One session may find us guiding a client through an emotional release, while the next session finds us firmly establishing a professional boundary without any potential for uncertainty. This contrast presents both the beauty and the challenge behind communicating within a healing, therapeutic relationship. The goal for therapists is to stay present, continually tracking messages sent and received and adjusting our approach accordingly.

In this article, we will explore some important, yet often overlooked, ways to enhance your communication skills by simply being more aware and curious. In particular, we'll discuss the greeting and intake process.

Your seven seconds to shine

Take a moment to think about the style and manner in which you greet your clients. Unbelievably, psychologists agree the average length of time you have to make a first impression is only seven seconds!

A welcoming and professional greeting is of utmost importance and yet, one of the most overlooked aspects of a massage therapy session.

This is especially true when dealing with a first-time client. In my experience as an instructor and client, I have seen this deceptively simple exercise completely botched.

According to business etiquette expert Lydia Ramsey, your introduction should be authentic, reflecting your personality, as well as some necessary qualities.

In a client-centered session, the therapist is soliciting feedback and adjusting needs accordingly.

These qualities begin with a warm and confident smile to put both you and the client at ease. Then greet the client by using his or her name. Welcome her by maintaining eye contact and extending a gentle handshake. "Welcome, Mary. It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Ted, and I will be your therapist today." Find a simple greeting that feels authentic to you. While this initial contact should not sound rehearsed, Ramsey recommends you consciously choose your first words, rather than leave them to chance. Most importantly, they should be an authentic representation of who you are.

This intentional and authentic connection will pave the way for a smooth transition into the inherent power differential that takes place during a massage.

First things first

Recognizing this power differential is the first step toward effective communication. It is also easy to lose sight of day-to-day.

With massage you have, quite literally, a client who is in a state of undress and lying on a massage table. The therapist, on the other hand, is fully clothed and standing over the client. Add to this the fact the therapist is an expert in the mind of the client, and the potential for communication challenges abound.

Trust and safety come as the client realizes he is ultimately in control of the session and in turn, his body. Although the therapist facilitates the session, the client has the power to set boundaries concerning excessive pressure, improper draping and uninvited personal conversation. Even small details, such as the style or volume of the music in the treatment room, when not tracked through the client's experience, can turn from a tool for relaxation into an annoyance.

In reality, therapists don't always ask for feedback.

These are sessions where clients leave a massage in discomfort from excessive force. Sometimes they are unable to relax because the style of draping leaves them feeling exposed and vulnerable. Maybe they end up listening to the therapist talk about her personal problems during the majority of the massage, too kind to ask her to be quiet. A focus on the therapist's agenda is the common thread running through all these scenarios.

Conversely, in a client-centered session, the therapist is soliciting feedback and adjusting needs accordingly.

Thus, a client becomes empowered by realizing the therapist is paying close attention to the process. They are able to trust the therapist will do them no harm. This does not always ensure a client will ask for what she needs, even if the feedback loop is established—but as a therapist stays present, the door remains open.

A classic example of this occurs when your intuition instructs you to ask about pressure. The client may respond that the stroke feels fine, but his body may be sending conflicting signals. When a client's breath cycle has stopped or diminished, or he is curling his fingers or toes as if to brace himself, his words and actions may not be congruent. In a no-pain-no-gain paradigm, what he may feel is beneficial for his body, when in fact, his body is rejecting.

Tracking this congruence between the verbal signals from the client's words and the nonverbal signals from his body is a natural result of staying present and curious. At times when there seems to be a disconnect, look for his body's nonverbal communication to reveal the truth.

Be. Here. Now.

The concept of presence (present-centered attention) is paramount to effective communication. When we are present, we are aware of moment-to-moment events, tracking the subtleties within them. Simply put, we are paying attention. Most people can tell when a friend suddenly checks out during a conversation, usually by the nonverbal cues of blank stares or an expressionless face. Contrast that with the feeling of being truly listened to by the same friend with intent eyes, an occasional head nod and a pensive expression conveyed through a wrinkled forehead.

All effective communication begins with listening. We have an innate ability to listen with our minds, bodies and spirits, and whether we realize it consciously, clients are tracking this. When one channel is blocked, our ability to listen is inhibited.

Here is a quick example: You introduce yourself to a client while shaking her hand, and 10 seconds later you realize you don't remember her name. How could this be? Surely your memory can retain a piece of information for that period of time! Where did the information go?

Truthfully, the information probably never made it

into your conscious awareness. The mind wandered into its own perceptions and inner dialogue.

Practicing the art of staying present during a greeting will greatly improve your ability to connect with your clients. In fact, it fulfills one of the most basic human needs: to be seen for who we are.

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To see or not to see

The idea of being seen presents in a client's availability—how open and receptive she is to the experience. Often, when a new client shows up for a first session, there is a hint of nervousness. As the intake begins, she may lose focus or eye contact as she begins to establish a feeling of safety, while many questions run through her conscious and subconscious mind. Because of this, she may only hear a fraction of what the therapist says.

This same phenomena occurs for the therapist. Communicating as an authority with a client can often lead to a preoccupation with our own thoughts in the midst of the interview. Does this person like the way I look, act, talk? Am I going to meet her expectations? Will he refer his friends?

A wealth of information presents during an intake, with clients relaying information in a variety of ways. Verbal cues, such as tone of voice, choice of words and overall engagement in the dialogue about his body, can help a therapist guide the process. Nonverbal cues present as a client chooses where and how to sit for the exchange, the level of eye contact and where he touches his own body as he describes it. A client may complain about stress at work while continually touching her right shoulder. She may speak of troubles in a relationship while placing her hand over her heart.

These subtle but important communications are occurring at almost every juncture of the client therapist dance.

Here is one I have noticed in my own personal practice: Clients who are receiving massage for the first time and exhibiting nervous behavior have a tendency to immediately draw attention away from themselves when I enter the treatment room to begin the massage. They may comment on a piece of furniture, a painting or the music. This is completely natural as their nervous system copes with the new experience of being unclothed on a table, possibly self-conscious and about to be touched by, more often than not, a stranger. The comments draw attention away from themselves.

By recognizing the distraction, we as therapists can provide extra attention to the communication around comfort, listening to the message beneath the communication.

This extra attention around comfort can take place in the closing moments of the interview.

A thorough explanation of disrobing down to their comfort level and what they are expected to do once the therapist leaves the room are usually the norm. Adding some kinesthetic cues to this process will help clients process this information. For example, requesting they get in between the two sheets, the therapist can make contact with the layers, lifting them up to visibly show the differentiation. Asking them to begin in a prone position with their head in the cradle while making contact with the cradle, even demonstrating how it can be adjusted for their comfort. Simple, yet effective nonverbal cues to enhance important communication. And always, leave an opening for the client: "Do you have any questions for me about today's session?"

As you reflect on these concepts, I encourage you to engage your curiosity. What aspects of communication would it pay to re-examine within the context of your professional practice? Even the most basic exchanges can become afterthoughts. What subtle qualities of your interactions with clients might you pay attention to in a new or different way?

Ultimately, what your clients are truly communicating with their minds, bodies and spirits could hold the key to their healing. The art of tracking this communication is grounded in awareness and curiosity. In the words of Martha Graham, "The body sometimes says what words cannot."

Visit www.massagemag.com/communication for a list of just-published books on topics ranging from talking to body language.

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