

TOUCHING AT AN APPROPRIATE LAYER

By Noah Karrasch, CORE Bodyworker

Many massage therapists have been exposed to deep tissue bodywork just enough to intrigue them, make them consider changing their techniques, and make them feel they should be doing more to help clients. This isn't always the truth. Sometimes, less is more. Sometimes, a deeper touch is a more penetrating lighter touch.

Over the twenty-three years I've been a practicing bodyworker, I've learned this message the hard way. When I certified at the Rolf Institute in 1986, Ida Rolf had only been gone a few years. Most teachers were still fairly faithful to the message they thought she delivered: "Get in there and make changes." While that may have been Ida Rolf's vision and mode, the longer I've worked the more I've come to realize the benefit of remaining on a less invasive path as I accomplish my deep goals. And I do accomplish them. I've often laughingly said that when I first certified, I thought Rolfing was Jesus Christ and I was John the Baptist. I thought everyone in the world needed this deep work (which I still believe) and that it was up to me to make sure they had a taste of it. These days, I'm not so sure.

During my classes for massage therapists, and during my sessions with private clients, I often talk to students or clients about a three layer system for knowing how deeply we're working with a body. I describe it thus: Layer one is that place where a body says, "How nice—a relaxing massage. I can lie here and enjoy." At layer two the body's message might be, "What's happening to me? Is it good or bad?" Hopefully, the body will decide something good is happening and work to receive benefit from it. Layer three is the place where the body decides this manipulation can't possibly be helpful—too painful, too intense, too great a challenge. If the body were talking, it would say, "Too much. I'll just check out for awhile. Let me know when you're done." To my thinking, at layer one we accomplish relaxation without much structural change. At layer two we accomplish the change we want; at layer three we do damage by pushing the trauma even further into the tissues.

I believe when we challenge a layer too quickly and deeply, we're encouraging the body's tissues to shorten, harden, and defend old patterns. It's our job as bodyworkers to refine our communication skills so as to be able to read our clients' bodies, find the stuck and held spots, and invite release instead of force it. When we force, we become the therapist. Look closely at that one word, and you see two words: the rapist. Any bodyworker who pushes too hard to accomplish too much with a client has moved from therapist to rapist, taking away the power of the client and trying to make changes for them instead of empowering them to make the changes in their own worlds.

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A second important technique I use with clients is to ask them to work with me to elicit change, instead of allowing them to come along for the ride. I get this client participation in two distinct ways: I ask for breath and movement most of the time when I’m working with clients. It’s not uncommon for me to ask a client to extend one heel, pull a low back into the table, pull the chin toward the chest, and breathe, all at once! An image that makes sense to me is this: Ask someone to stretch a rubber band while they hold only one end of it. Nothing happens—no stretch is made. However, when we hold both ends of the band and tug, we are making change. If we were to add further twist to the ends of the band, or even add an extra bend/tug in the middle of the band, we create further stretches and enhance the work we’re asking the client to do with us. And they will feel the difference. The more we can put our clients to work, the more they’ll accomplish in their sessions with us.

Much of the time I also talk with clients about what I’m doing and why I think it will be helpful to them. I’ve found if I can explain to a client what I think I’m doing and how I think it can help them, they often return, “That makes sense.” If I get this response from my words, I feel I’m well on the way to helping them remember how to feel better. If my model resonates with them, they get better.

So, how I touch involves not only my hands, but my words, my intention, my communication skills, my ability to coax or induce change in the body. As I work to meet the client where they are instead of where I expect them to be, they are changed and pleased.

I’ve watched too many massage therapists who have just completed a weekend seminar in deep tissue therapy, myofascial release, or one of many names given to deeper work. Too often, new students seem to miss this concept that it’s important to keep the client in charge of the process. I refer to the ‘drill press method’ of deep work; I’ve actually seen new therapists say, “Now, breathe!” just as they come straight down with a sharp elbow into a tight gluteal area. They have no respect for the tissue or the person. I’d like to see this technique shift so that practitioners realize they are educators and guides, not therapists.

Let’s take the psoas muscle as an example of places we can get overeager in our work. Many of us were taught very little in terms of how to release a psoas, or even were warned away from the area entirely. Yet, if we’ll simply palpate, hold, ask for a bit of breath and movement, then allow the tension to dissolve, great changes can happen! Unfortunately, too many of us are still waiting to see the big changes and are disappointed when small but powerful changes occur. I see the psoas as the superhighway of the deep line of the body; if I can help a client find release here, their world is changed. If I decide to force them into changing, I’ve raped them—again.

No matter which of my important areas I work—and there are many—I continue to work with the concept in my head that my work is about coaxing (CORE=Coax Order, Restore Ease) tissue changes. The longer I work, the more I want to convince my clients they’re in charge of the process and I’m only along to tell them how they might move through the process faster. I often say, “I’m just the scratching post—you know where you itch.” It’s true, they do!

Occasionally I run into a massage therapist who is stuck too far on the side of doing everything for the client, taking them into total relaxation, and not nudging clients toward change. I think many of us could examine where we are on the spectrum that runs from doing everything for our clients to making them work too hard. Where is that middle ground, where the client feels nurtured and relaxed, yet also realizes they’ve been nudged in the direction of change and letting go of old patterns. Even those practitioners who consistently work in a relaxation setting can challenge clients: “Have you thought about drinking more water? Do you know you could breathe and work on the computer at the same time?”

But often, and this is a large point for me: We as therapists get too excited about the idea of making changes in our clients and deny them the power to find and make those changes for themselves. For me, it’s much more important to see the subtle shift behind the eyes when my clients begin to realize how they’ve been holding themselves in unhealthy patterns and make a decision to change. I’d love to be known as the miracle worker who can cure anything in anyone; I’m more interested in developing a reputation as the bodyworker who will do everything in his power to point clients toward the road to bodymindcore integration, and then turn them loose to see who they decide to become.

My recently released book, *Meet Your Body: CORE Bodywork and Rolfing Tools to Release Bodymindcore Trauma*, (Singing Dragon Press, London, 2009) talks to the idea that even after we’ve gotten our clients off the table, we can still be whispering in their ear during their daily activities, reminding them to pay more attention to the way they’re using their bodies. I find myself increasingly interested in touching the client with my hands during their session; but leaving a finger or two in their bodymindcore to convince them that change is ongoing, and up to them. Creating space for a client to grow into is a far different philosophy than creating relaxation of the tissues or of release of symptoms. Ultimately, coaxing a client to create their own space is a highly satisfying way of working for me.

Noah Karrasch, developer of CORE Bodywork, advanced certified Rolfer, has been a practicing bodyworker for the past 23 years. During this time he has created his own five session series based in part on the teaching of Ida Rolf, PhD, but modified through his own experiences. He will be teaching this June/July in London, Yorkshire, and at the SUMO School of Massage in Falkirk, Scotland. For more information please see the school’s website.