

OSTEOPATHIC TECHNIQUES FOR MASSAGE THERAPISTS

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As manual therapists, our overriding desire is to help people get better. In some ways it doesn't matter what technique or method we use to achieve this, all we want is our patient to recover fully. The tools that we have to do this are our store of treatment techniques and ourselves. When used effectively, both contribute to the patient's wellbeing. Having said that, the techniques we choose depends on the knowledge and experience of the practitioner as well as the limitations of the patient. Carefully considering your patient, along with your own skill level, when choosing "when to use what" is often difficult until one acquires a certain body of clinical experience, largely by seeing as many people as you can and from watching experienced practitioners. Naturally you would take a different approach from treating a 70lb, 5'10" sportsman to an elderly patient who already has general health problems. Choosing the correct technique not only increases your likelihood of success of healing your patient, but also reduces the likelihood of injuring yourself in the process. To start off with the practitioner must have enough interaction with the patient to achieve relaxation and trust. The way you place your hand on your patient can convey different impressions, negative or positive. The size of your hand and length of fingers is something you can't change but how you make contact is a motor skill you can learn. Positive handling is slow, firm but gentle introducing the fingertips initially then gradually the whole hand to the palm. Negative handling is fast, tough and 'cold' often by introducing the whole hand immediately. Your patient must sense confidence, comfort and control from you. This often does not come naturally and as with any new motor skill, seeing or doing something once is only a beginning. Repeated practice of any technique is necessary to gain skill. Likewise, good handling for any technique does not come naturally and requires practice, do so and you will be amply rewarded.

Knowing your anatomy is important, being able to visualise what is under and near your fingers is essential, but being able to mentally interpret the response of tissues to your treatment is just as important. You can only do this if you too are comfortable and not using excessive effort in your treatments. Your knowledge of anatomy will help your own body positioning and understanding of what you want to achieve without tiring you out and causing injury. In general, using a wide base i.e. feet apart, using fixed hands, and a rhythm created through the use of your body weight, will demonstrate technique control. These basic elements will not only help your patient by making treatment more comfortable and controlled but will help you physically. You can't afford to be shattered if you are only halfway through your day, your patient will sense it. Position your body so it does the work, not individual muscles. Use your finger pads or thumbs over areas to be palpated. To ensure greater accuracy, there is nothing wrong with mentally transferring your thoughts to the interface of your hand with the patient's body. There are several exercises you can do to improve your palpatory awareness.

The following suggestions will help you:

- Palpate objects with the lightest possible touch, for example a hair under a sheet of paper.
- Be aware of surface elevations and temperature differences of skin.
- Try to ascertain the qualities or characteristics of the object you are palpating.

Some common errors made in this process are:

- Using too much finger pressure
- A lack of concentration
- Using excessive amounts of joint movement

Cameron Reid BSc(Hons) DO read Human Biology and Ergonomics at University, then studied Osteopathy in London, qualifying in 1986. Alongside his busy practice in Norfolk, he runs courses in osteopathic treatment technique, ergonomics and sports injuries for manual therapists. He is regulated by the General Osteopathic Council.