

Body Mechanics

BY BARBARA FRYE

The demand for massage therapy and other types of bodywork is at its highest, as is the opportunity for work. From employment in a spa, athletics facility, chiropractic office, or hospital, to independent practice, newly licensed therapists have more career choices than ever before. To maintain this momentum, we must find a way to ensure that work-related injuries do not slow us down. At the present time, they are sadly on the rise, and the rate of attrition from the profession is growing. However, I am convinced that we can turn this trend around and become stronger than ever before.



Client Tip #1

Help increase your clients' body awareness by asking a few simple awareness questions.

For instance, ask them what side of the bed they sleep on, which leg they lift first when putting on a pair of pants, or which arm they use first when putting on a jacket. Awareness questions prompt your clients to become more self-observant and thus more self-reliant.

Client Tip #2

If a client is experiencing discomfort or pain in his/her wrist joint during certain activities—for example, when gardening or playing tennis—a postural habit could be the culprit. Have him/her demonstrate how he/she gardens or holds a tennis racket. Notice if certain wrist movements are used repetitively (e.g., deviations, flexion, extension). If so, point out the movements and see if you can find alternative movements that help relieve the stress in the joint. Simply finding a few new alternatives can make all the difference.

In this article you will learn why the answer to healthful body mechanics and injury prevention can be found in developing awareness. As you become aware of your body and its habits of movement, you will start to sense the difference between ease and effort. Then you can begin to discover which habits serve you and which ones hinder you and cause you discomfort. This heightened body awareness leads to an awareness of choice. When you recognize that you have choices, you have the opportunity to embrace change. Choosing change allows you to problem solve and to develop a wide range of body mechanics that will contribute to a sound and effective self-care strategy and longevity of practice.

BODY AWARENESS

Body awareness requires you to become mindful of your body's movements, responses, and sensations. While developing this mindfulness, you become more aware of subtle movement patterns, such as the posture of your head when working or the shifting of weight when standing. Increasing body awareness requires you to become more self-observant, not only when performing manual therapy, but also during everyday life.

Try a short self-observation exercise now: Freeze your current reading position, but be sure to continue to breathe. Notice the position of your head. Is it lilted to one side? Is it hanging forward? Is it comfortable?

Notice the position of your shoulders. Are you holding them up? Do the muscles of your neck feel at ease, or are they a bit tense?

Notice the position of your arms. Are they comfortable? Are you holding one or both elbows out to the side?

Notice how you are using your hands. Are they relaxed?

Notice how you are using your fingers and thumbs. Are they being held in a tense or relaxed manner?

Notice the position of your legs and feet. Are your legs crossed? Are your feet in contact with the ground?

Finally, notice how you are breathing. Are you breathing deeply or shallowly? Are you breathing from your chest, from your abdomen, or do both seem involved? Does your current reading position allow you to breathe freely?

Now stop holding your reading position and move around.



“Awareness is the part of the consciousness which involves knowledge.”

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, founder of The Feldenkrais Method

When you apply body awareness as a massage therapist, you discover the most effective yet effortless way of working. Whether applying deep tissue, lifting and moving a limb, or manipulating energy, your body's movement (mechanics) is guided by your inner sense of awareness. Body awareness also enables you to become self-reliant in troubleshooting situations of discomfort or pain. When working alone in a practice or clinic, nothing is more valuable than the ability to problem-solve body mechanic issues, (i.e., wrist pain and back discomfort). Armed with body awareness and, in turn, self-reliance, you can rest assured that your body mechanics are in good hands—yours.

POSTURAL HABITS

What comes to mind when you think about your postural habits? Is it the way you stand or walk? Is it the way you gesture when talking? We learn and form habits from the beginning of life, and continue the process until we die. Some even say that the process of learning habits begins before birth. In *Habits: Their Making and Unmaking* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1949), psychologist Knight Dunlap writes, "The process of learning is the formation of a habit," which he defines further as "a way of living that has been learned." As we mature, we begin to recognize that some of our habits serve us well, whereas others do not. "Bad habits" are harmful, either to our health, to others, or to the pursuit of our goals, whereas "good habits" promote our health and well-being, help us achieve our goals, and/or contribute to the well-being of others.

As a massage therapist, you are likely to transfer many of your everyday postural habits into your working environment. For example, think about the posture you use when sitting at your computer. Do you tend to sit with proper alignment, or do you sit with a forward bent posture? Now think about how you sit when working with a client. Do you transfer your computer posture to your massage stool? Becoming aware of your everyday postural habits is a first step toward understanding how you integrate them into your body mechanics during massage therapy. With postural awareness, you can sense which of your postural habits serve you and which ones can contribute to work-related discomfort, pain, or injury.

MUSCULOSKELETAL AWARENESS

Take a moment and think about the last time you gave a massage. How did your body feel during the session? Did you experience moments of discomfort or pain, for example, in your back or hands? Or were you able to perform the entire massage without discomfort? When you become more aware of your postural habits, you begin to discover which feel comfortable and easy and which cause you discomfort and increase your risk for chronic pain or injury. To understand how you can work competently, without effort or pain, you need to become aware of how your musculoskeletal system can work for you, not against you.



The skeleton, specifically its joints, can most easily maintain the body's balance and strength when it is in proper alignment. The skeleton's bones and joints are in proper relative position so that its symmetric design supports the body to endure the force of gravity. When the skeleton is properly aligned, with all of its bones



stacked one on top of the next, it can endure not only the powerful force of gravity, but up to 2,000 pounds of atmospheric pressure (image 1).

In contrast, when the skeleton deviates from vertical alignment, balance is severely compromised. For example, if you stand with a “slumped” posture, moving away from vertical alignment, effort in the neck and back increases to offset the force of gravity (image 2). In this case, you are working against gravity instead of with it.



This lack of musculoskeletal efficiency is often seen in the body mechanics of massage therapists, for example, when standing too far away to apply direct pressure or when attempting to lift a client’s limb or head. In image 3, we see that the therapist must lift by bending forward using her neck and back, thus compromising alignment. If she were to use this strategy consistently, she could develop chronic pain.



Proper alignment allows your muscles to perform efficiency by evenly distributing the work of the postural muscles symmetrically and reducing the amount of work that they must do to maintain balance. This gives you the freedom to perform your massage with ease and comfort (image 4).



On the other hand, if you worked asymmetrically—that is, with a shoulder held up, or a hip projected out—your muscles would be too occupied with maintaining your balance to perform massage efficiently. As you can see in image 5, the therapist is using an enormous amount of effort, specifically muscular contraction, not only to maintain balance but also to perform the task. Although such deviations in alignment will probably not lead to pain or injury if they occur once in a while, frequent use of this kind of improper alignment will lead to muscle tension, pain, and injury.

The bottom line is this: the reason why some body mechanics feel easy and some difficult depends on how you use yourself, specifically your musculoskeletal system, in gravity. Awareness of musculoskeletal efficiency and how to put it to good use empowers you to work smarter, not harder.

The complete article is available in printed form in *Massage & Bodywork* magazine. To subscribe visit www.massagetherapy.com or call 800-458-2267.