

Why Massage Doesn't Have To Hurt

By Jodie Cara Lindley, RMT

**"You translate everything, whether physical, mental or spiritual, into muscular tension."
~F.M. Alexander~**

As an RMT for almost 20 years, I have worked on a lot of people and bodies. Through my hands, I have gathered a lot of information about how massage therapy affects the human body. My approach over the years has changed dramatically therefore. I no longer believe that aggressive deep tissue massage is necessary or effective in the long run.

I have had numerous clients come onto my table and say they "want it deep", but when I try to go deep their bodies literally bounce me out. It seems a total disconnect to me: their mind is saying go deep but their body is saying the complete opposite. To me, their body is saying "get out, that hurts me"! I feel that many people come to me thinking that in order for massage to be effective, it has to hurt, they have to wince and hold their breath. I will argue that simply isn't necessary.

If we feel we are being attacked, our nervous system goes into the fight, flight or freeze mode immediately. This is our primitive self-protection system, and is largely out of the control of our conscious mind. If we hold our breath, we are bracing for some kind of onslaught. If we are receiving pain through the efforts of another person, we feel we need to protect ourselves. When I go deep and aggressive with my clients, my perception is that they feel attacked: which is why the body keeps its "armouring" up.

Body armouring is what massage therapists and bodyworkers are up against when working with the human body. It is why people come for massage therapy, as this armouring, or tension build up, is the result of physical, mental, and emotional stress. Our bodies literally hold onto our daily and life experiences, and are reflected in the quality of tension in the muscles and tissues.

I approach this armouring differently. When I touch a person, I immediately engage in a quiet conversation with the person's armouring. This armouring is the person's unconscious: full of life experiences and traumas, both positive and negative. Instead of going into attack mode, my hands are curious, kind and loving. You might say that this body armour is a very vulnerable part of the person, which they are showing you. They can't hide it. So why would I be aggressive with it?

I find it most effective to be gentle, move slowly and really FEEL what is going on with the person. It involves a completely different mindset. It is more engaged with the person in actuality. What I feel I am doing, is gaining TRUST from the person. If I have their trust, their bodies can think about letting me in. THEN I can get to the deeper tissue tension and get some relief for them.

In order to go deep, I think deep. I don't need to push my way in. I don't need to bully their muscles. I need to gain the trust and respect of the person, and therefore the unconscious. And this is totally a process. I don't expect to get in right away: sometimes it takes many many treatments, especially if the person has experienced a lot of trauma and pain.

I feel that massage therapists and bodyworkers are primarily supposed to provide kind and loving touch to people. Touch brings us right back to our infant experiences: were we held in the right way by our caregivers? Did we receive a kind and nurturing touch, or was it rejecting and cold? Do we have anyone touching us currently our lives? How can we know this: the client's body will tell us right away. It's all there right under our hands. And we can create new and positive experiences for people with respect to touch, just by the way we treat their bodies on the table.

In a world that has become increasingly stressful and complicated, I think the role of massage therapy has to shift a bit. It needs to progress, and that has to happen in the mind of the therapist AND client. People are experiencing much more trauma, and the body and brain are the containers for this. So how we deal with ourselves, and ask for help, is shifting also. Maybe we need a different approach now?

In a society of hurt, I personally feel having a massage doesn't have to hurt. So I do my best to not hurt people, but to provide a welcoming, kind and loving space for them to relax and unwind. And I see and get results in my clients. It's a more holistic approach to bodywork that respects the whole being of experience that is not just body. It is soul as well.

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