



PRACTICE POINTS

CONNECTION RECESSION



The practice of massage during a pandemic

BY DONALD QUINN DILLON

At the time of this writing, much of the world is gripped by a pandemic. Physical distancing, work stoppage and prohibition of gatherings more than ten are mandated. Massage therapists are feeling a confluence of injury – lost income, separation from affirming and meaningful work, interruption of care and social relationships. Considering half of Ontario RMTs are 10 years or less in practice, many RMTs worry for their careers – education and training, student loans, commercial leases, established reputation and location. The

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pandemic presents an existential crisis...can we return to providing massage therapy in a period of physical distancing?

The response from massage therapists has been both feverish and frenetic. Realization of lost earnings and looming professional and personal expenses prompted cries for the association, the regulator and government to “do something!” Each stakeholder took action, prompting a variety of responses from practitioners.

Many RMTs reacted with incredulity at classification of “non-essential.” Others experienced and expressed moral distress in deferring patients in pain. Called to help, RMTs naturally believed they could and they should. They felt frustrated and demoralized when practice was strongly discouraged by the regulator. It was insult to injury when it was announced chiropractors and physiotherapists were deemed “essential” in providing “urgent” care. “Sit on your hands, and wait,” seemed to be our directive.

Some practitioners swore off social media, disgusted by incivility and agitation in a profession they believed should be offering support and perspective. Some problem-solved

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by sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE) and reviewed the draft guidelines of regulators ahead in other provinces. Some were hopeful they could work with the draft guidelines, while others couldn't imagine the added expense, discomfort and barrier to connection PPE would impose.

The unresolved, contentious issues of strained insurer relations, professional identity conflicts and insufficient leadership and vision for the profession reared their hissing, snarling heads in full force. At a time when everything was falling apart, the support scaffolding practitioners pined for was painfully absent.

As we reel from this unprecedented event, questions emerge. Will people become habituated to physical distancing and social avoidance? Will they remain touch averse and germophobic? Will society suffer a connection-recession, contributing to loneliness, depression, anxiety, even aggression? For practitioners, how will the "new normal" impact the (mind) set and setting of both client and practitioner?

It is too early to forecast how things will turn out. But, it is the right time for each of us to assign meaning, frame perspective, seek comfort, and postulate next steps. If this is to be a prolonged period of touch depravity, of sterile response to the human need for soothing and comfort in the face of pain and immobility, then I lean on the aphorisms of the wise and the wizened for my sense of agency.

Philosopher and theologian Aurelius Augustinus remarked on the elegant design and function of the body: "The arrangement of the body is so well proportioned, the symmetry of its parts so beautiful that it can be doubted whether at its creation, utility was more of a determining factor than beauty." William Shakespeare agreed: "What a piece of work is man. How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving. How express and admirable in action. How like an angel in apprehension. How like a God. The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals."

When the body is not functioning well, it creates great distress for the occupant. It limps, hobbles, buckles. Pain and immobility often present at the outset of injury or disease. Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung exclaimed, "While unconscious creation - animals, plants, crystals - function satisfactorily as far as we know, things are constantly going wrong with man." It appears when things do go wrong, we condemn the body for its frailty. We become anxious at the loss of function, worrying it may be a permanent, pernicious underlying cause. Our body is inseparable in the felt sense of who we are. As the body suffers so does the mind.

As Italian anatomist Giovanni Battista Morgagni observed, "symptoms are the cry of the suffering organs." When our body suffers, can we concentrate on anything other than its alleviation? And what role do our emotions play in function? Massage therapists are particularly attuned to observing how one's very posture can betray its emotional state - depressed, frightened, angry, melancholic.

Somatic educator Mabel Elsworth Todd proclaimed "For every thought supported by feeling there is a muscle change. Primary muscle patterns being the biological heritage of man, man's whole body records his emotional thinking." American modern dancer Martha Graham concludes, "The body says what words cannot."

Interoception is my felt sense of my body's functioning... the body's form of cognition. Friedrich Nietzsche posited, "Illness is a clumsy attempt to arrive at health. We must come to nature's aid with intellect." Surely intellect in not relegated to the mind alone; our body evokes its own intelligence. As massage therapists we are innately tuned to that intelligence. We observe with our own senses how the administration of our hands shapes and molds and transforms tense, inert musculature of our subject into pliant, responsive, integrated and vital organs.

Far from "passive therapy," massage communicates safety and comfort, and evokes somatic and psychologic response. DH Lawrence said, "My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds. But what our blood feels and believes and says is always true." Inventor and businessman, Thomas A. Edison affirmed "Great ideas originate in the muscles."

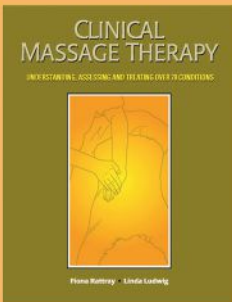
If you are searching for solace at this time of uncertainly, perhaps you can lean on your felt knowledge and understanding of the body-mind. Actively look for ways to reconnect with your practice patrons, to calm, to soothe, to engender perspective. If you feel so moved, use the time to study and to improve on your delivery of care model. Believe yourself to be fundamental in helping craft a sane, civil, well functioning society. We all have a role to play.

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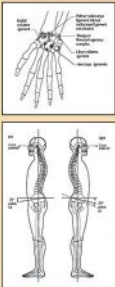
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