

talk about touch

WITH MARY KATHLEEN ROSE AND MARY ANN FOSTER

A JARFUL OF PENNIES



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MARY KATHLEEN ROSE: If I had a penny for every time a massage therapist touched my body and said, “You’re really tight,” I’d have a nice chunk of change to give to the first person who touches me and says, “You must be very strong!” Recently, I received a complimentary massage from a therapist who started working in a local medical clinic. The first thing she said when she touched my body was, “You’re so tight.”

MARY ANN FOSTER: How did you feel about that?

MR: That’s the problem. She didn’t ask me how I felt. She told me how I felt. I was looking forward to a nice relaxing massage, but when she said that, I feared the worst.

MAF: What did you fear?

MR: I knew she had an agenda and was going to do her best to fix me.

MAF: I find this an example of a bigger problem in our field. We are working to enhance our client’s overall health and well-being, yet when someone says, “You’re so tight,” the only thing I feel enhanced is my tension. Comments like this make me feel like defective goods, and right away we’re off to a bad start.

MR: Yes, I feel judged and wonder about the practitioner’s intentions. Is “You’re so tight” a useful assessment or an irrelevant assumption?

MAF: It seems overly simplistic. She jumped to a conclusion before you two had begun to develop rapport. Did she even know why you were there, or indicate that she knew why, or what you wanted, or needed?

MR: Many therapists sincerely believe they are demonstrating a level of skill and perceptiveness by saying, “You’re so tight.” But it implies that there is something wrong with the client.

Massage given with that attitude can hurt the client emotionally, because it is judgmental. It can also hurt the client physically, if the therapist proceeds to work too deep, too fast, or otherwise without listening to the needs of the individual. Irene Smith, a massage therapist with more than thirty years of experience, says that when she receives massage she wants a therapist who knows that “nothing about me needs to be fixed.” Rather, she talks about the “need to be received.”

MAF: That’s what puts me off about comments such as “You’re so tight,” “Your left hip is higher than your right,” “Your back’s inflamed, etc.” I realize that the practitioner is not listening to me. I feel like an object that’s too shiny, too hard, too bent, too whatever.

MR: Yes, a broken object to be fixed. But what about me?

MAF: I feel like running up a white flag and declaring, “Wait, I’m a person, not a tight thing. I live in this body. Just what are you planning to do with it?” Then I get really, really tight.

MR: Proving the therapist’s point!

MAF: Now that’s job security. But what is it really that keeps people coming back?

MR: I’m not going to come back to someone who isn’t listening to me. And I trust that the clients who come back to me as a therapist return because I am doing my best to help them feel better about who they are as whole human beings. I focus on what’s right with them rather any naive notion about what’s wrong with them.

MAF: Those first few comments, those initial moments of contact, are crucial for setting the tone of the whole session.


MR: They define the relationship we are creating.

MAF: And they give the client powerful clues about the mindset of the massage therapist, the model or paradigm of healing in which the therapist is working.

MR: Do you think massage therapists feel duty bound to assess the client’s body, by sharing their perceptions, albeit assumptions, about what they feel? What is so hard about saying, “How are you?” “What do you need today?” or “How can I help you?”

MAF: I find that with the proliferation of techniques taught in massage schools these days, many students lose sight of the overall intention of massage. Those questions aren’t hard. They are the basic communication skills and tools for building rapport. I find them the best and easiest way to start a client-centered session.

MR: I agree. Here’s a postscript for you: a few days after the aforementioned massage, I attended my regular dance class. During a break, a friend started to massage my shoulders and arms. He commented, “You are really strong!” I almost broke into tears, then laughed and said, “Thank you. You just made my day. I’ve got a jarful of pennies for you!” **m&b**

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