

# talk about touch

WITH MARY KATHLEEN ROSE AND MARY ANN FOSTER

## DRAPING: UNCOVERING A TOUCHY SUBJECT



The purpose of draping during a professional massage is to ensure the privacy and comfort of the client. ➔

MARY ANN FOSTER: A client consulted me recently about an encounter she had during a massage in a clinic. The client was confused because the massage practitioner asked her whether she wanted draped or undraped chest massage. She asked me if it was standard practice for a massage practitioner to offer clients this draping option.

MARY KATHLEEN ROSE: Standard practice? Depends on where and when—perhaps in a tropical spa or on a 1970s commune. But at a professional massage clinic in the United States in 2009? How did your client respond?

MAF: First, she asked the practitioner what she meant. The practitioner replied that there were some flowing strokes on the chest and abdomen that worked better without draping over the breasts. The practitioner also explained that undraped chest massage could help people become more comfortable with their bodies.

MKR: Huh?! Seems to me this would make most women very uncomfortable. After all, the purpose of draping during a professional massage is to ensure the privacy and comfort of the client.

MAF: This practitioner assumed that women become more comfortable with their bodies, specifically their breasts, by having them exposed during a chest and/or abdominal massage.

MKR: I wonder if this is a cultural issue. A friend shared with me her experience of traveling in Europe, saying that she and her woman friend were the only ones on the beach wearing one-piece bathing suits. They were struck by the lack of self-consciousness of the other bathers, many of whom were topless. In addition, massage therapists who were practicing nearby were using minimal draping. Another client of mine told me about receiving massage in a tropical location where there was no draping at all.

MAF: What did your client say about that?

MKR: Once she got over the initial shock, she thought, “When in Rome...” and decided to go with the experience. She remarked that the therapist was skillful in her technique, so in that hot and balmy atmosphere, she settled into a deep relaxation.

MAF: I am curious how your client would respond to that approach in this country.

MKR: I asked her that very question and she exclaimed, “No way!” She was absolutely clear that this experience was part of the vacation adventure, a one-time event in which anonymity protected her; but back in the United States, she expects draping practices that respect her privacy.

MAF: Let’s face it. We live in a culture where the female body is highly objectified and sexualized, so professional draping protects the practitioner as well as the client. Imagine a male practitioner asking a female client if she wants undraped chest massage. The very question could put him in jeopardy.

MKR: This discussion sent me through a search of ethics guidelines in our massage texts and professional organizations. The most widely stated draping protocols require that the client be covered at all times, except for the part of the body that is being worked on.

MAF: Some practitioners become confused when the client doesn’t want to be covered. One client I had insisted on being completely uncovered during her massage. I was stunned.

MKR: In this case, it’s important for a practitioner to be clear to the client that undraped nudity is not an option.

MAF: Which I did, and she left in a huff. Yes, we’ve come a long way since the emergence of massage and bodywork in the 1970s counterculture, when standards of practice around draping were pretty loose. Since then, many dedicated leaders in our field have worked tirelessly to establish clinical guidelines that raise the bar on professionalism in order to distinguish therapeutic massage from illicit massage.

MKR: It’s amazing that this process, which began on a grassroots level, is developing a national continuity. Our professional organizations and certifying bodies seem to be arriving at the same standards, which have clarified once nebulous ethical issues.

MAF: These standards have greatly improved the reputation of our profession, allowing the field to grow as a respectable healthcare industry. Moreover, consistent standards allow consumers to feel safe with touch practitioners and therefore have a therapeutic and healing experience. **m&b**

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