

talk about touch

WITH MARY KATHLEEN ROSE AND MARY ANN FOSTER

OWNING YOUR ENERGY



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MARY KATHLEEN ROSE: When teaching massage, I am often asked, “How do you protect yourself?” And I ask, “From what?” One massage therapist told me that she had learned in massage school that people with cancer had a particular kind of dark energy, and that she had to use specific techniques to protect herself.

MARY ANN FOSTER: The protection question is loaded. It sounds like an old-fashioned fear of catching a communicable disease. What dangers actually lurk in the massage room? Perhaps an electrical short that could start a fire, a torn rug that a client could trip over, or a flimsy table that could collapse ...

MKR: Yes, bodyworkers do need to ensure a physically safe environment. Still, her comment on the energetic threat from cancer took me aback, because, while I have worked with many people with cancer and other chronic illnesses, my concern is for the person with the disease, not the disease itself. And I don't feel the need to protect myself from that person.

MAF: When I starting practicing massage in the early 1980s, I sometimes left a session extremely tired. My peers suggested I wasn't shielding myself adequately. After some soul-searching, I realized that my fatigue actually stemmed from an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, of not doing enough to alleviate pain and disease.

MKR: I may be vulnerable to disappointment if I perceive my clients as people I need to fix. If I buy into an expectation that I can take other people's problems away, and then come up short, I feel drained. And this is not the client's fault.

MAF: I've encountered many people who believe massage can produce miraculous results in alleviating pain and illness. I had a teacher once who taught us “we could be healers if only we could channel the right energy and block the wrong energy.” After a few frustrating attempts working under this assumption, I learned that trying to be a heroic healer, who needed to protect myself from invisible forces, was draining. It served neither me nor the client.

MKR: So true. I've learned that as I let go of expectations of producing results, change does happen, but not because I will it so. I find it always helpful to focus on being grounded,¹ as this gives me the most efficient use of my physical and mental energy. So when I'm asked how to avoid picking up other people's “negative energy,” I tell them that owning my own energy is more important than protecting myself from someone else's energy.

MAF: I can get sidetracked with protection rituals, and so can a client. A client once asked me if it was difficult working with him. Apparently, another therapist had told him his energy field was so scattered that the therapist had to actively “pull it in.” When I told him I found him easy to work with, he breathed a sigh of relief. I also told him that even if he had been in a bad mood, that's OK with me, because that's his energy and not mine. I think it's easy to confuse energy with emotional response.

MKR: Can you imagine your family doctor practicing protection rituals to ward off unsavory energy? After all, energy is energy. How can it be good or bad, right or wrong?

MAF: No, I can't. There is, however, value in private rituals or practices to help prepare and focus before a session. We all encounter pain and suffering that pulls on the heartstrings. It can be a challenge to have compassion and empathy for others without losing ourselves in a sympathetic resonance.

MKR: Here's a story my students find helpful in understanding the difference between sympathy and compassion. Imagine walking down the street. You hear someone crying for help. As you get closer to the sound, you see that someone is in a pit. You jump in to help. Now you are both stuck in the hole. That's sympathy. But if you really want to help, you stay at the top of the pit and offer the person a ladder. In that act of compassion, you are helpful, but maintain a safe and practical boundary. **m&b**

6 Mary Kathleen Rose, BA, CMT, teaches wellness education and massage in medical settings, advocating self-care for the caregiver. She is the author of *Comfort Touch: Massage for the Elderly and the Ill* (Lippincott Wilkins and Williams, 2009). www.comforttouch.com.

6 Mary Ann Foster, BA, CMT, specializes in movement education for massage, teaches experiential kinesiology at the Boulder College of Massage School, and is the author of *Somatic Patterning: How to Improve Posture and Movement and Ease Pain* (Educational Movement Systems Press, 2004). www.emspress.com.

NOTE

1. See *Talk about Touch*, “Grounding: A Body-Mind Practice,” *Massage & Bodywork* March/April 2009.