

talk about touch

BY MARY ANN FOSTER AND MARY KATHLEEN ROSE

The role you play as a professional may be different than the role you play as a friend.



Mary Ann Foster, left, and Mary Kathleen Rose. *Rick Giase Photography.*

CLIENTS AND FRIENDS

MARY ANN FOSTER: One of my neighbors who is a massage client announced to a group at a neighborhood party that I was a great massage therapist. Next thing I knew, I was deluged with people showing me their injuries and asking for advice.

MARY KATHLEEN ROSE: Over the years I've had similar experiences where people learned I'm a massage therapist. They asked, "Can you just work on this muscle?" as they pointed to their shoulder or lower back.

MAF: When that happens, I'm tempted to swipe the coffee table clear and say, "Sure, just take off your shirt and lie down here." I never do because someone might think I'm serious.

MKR: It's likely that friends and neighbors will want to be clients, and clients will want to be friends, but social interactions can get uncomfortable when friends ask for professional advice. When a client brings up body problems outside of a session, I say, "Let's remember to look at that in our next session." When new acquaintances ask for professional advice, I give them a business card and tell them to call for a consultation.

MAF: Networking has always been the primary mode of building a massage practice. Friends, neighbors, and acquaintances can naturally form our client base.

MKR: I'm reminded of the wisdom of the late Nina McIntosh who said, "It's not unusual for clients to want to become friends with us. Clients feel the heart connection in our work and want that connection to extend outside sessions. We may feel the client's affection

toward us and mistakenly think that affection should be carried into our daily lives rather than remain as part of the professional relationship, where it belongs. Or perhaps we find ourselves really liking a client and wanting to build that into a friendship."¹

MAF: I find clients are often very different outside of a session. I only see one side of their personality in a session and when we become friends, the friendship is limited because they relate to me more as a therapist.

MKR: Yes, this is a complex issue that speaks to the intricacies of human roles and relationships. For many years, I've worked as a massage therapist at women's fitness camps in the mountains. I play several roles: member of the staff, therapist with clients, and friend to many participants. Friendships naturally arise out of common interests, goals, and shared experiences.

MAF: The role you play as a professional may be different from the role you play as a friend. For example, friends can be notorious for talking about each other. What happens when someone on the staff solicits your opinion about a client who is a mutual friend?

MKR: It's most important to respect client-therapist confidentiality. One client who is also a friend told me, "Mary, I know I can trust you not to share in a social setting anything we talk about during a massage session."

MAF: Another problem I've run into when working with clients who are friends with each other is that one client might ask me about another client. The same thing also happens with couples. I acknowledge the person's concern about the friend or mate,

then remind her or him that what happens in sessions is confidential.


MKR: Friendships involve mutual give-and-take. To be friends with a client requires healthy compartmentalizing. I don't think about or focus on client's issues when we're outside of the massage room. I literally wash my hands of the session when it is over.


MAF: One friend wanted to be my client, so I informed her about the boundary issues. Still, she expected me to be on call whenever she had body problems, and at the end of a session she usually wanted more help. She kept pushing my boundaries, so I finally had to let both the friendship and the client relationship go.

MKR: That can be a wrenching decision, but we have to make choices. Ultimately, we can be the best therapists to our clients and the best friends to our friends, as we respect the boundaries of the roles we play. **m&b**

NOTE

1. *Nina McIntosh, The Educated Heart: Professional Boundaries for Massage Therapists and Bodyworkers, 3rd ed. (Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2011).*

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