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massage & bodywork

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WORKING WITH INVISIBLE PAIN

The Sustainable Practices
MTs Can Use to Help Clients
with Fibromyalgia

By Ruth Werner

PLUS

- + Setting Boundaries with Inappropriate Clients
- + Tonic Acupressure Points
- + Balance the Body Between Sessions

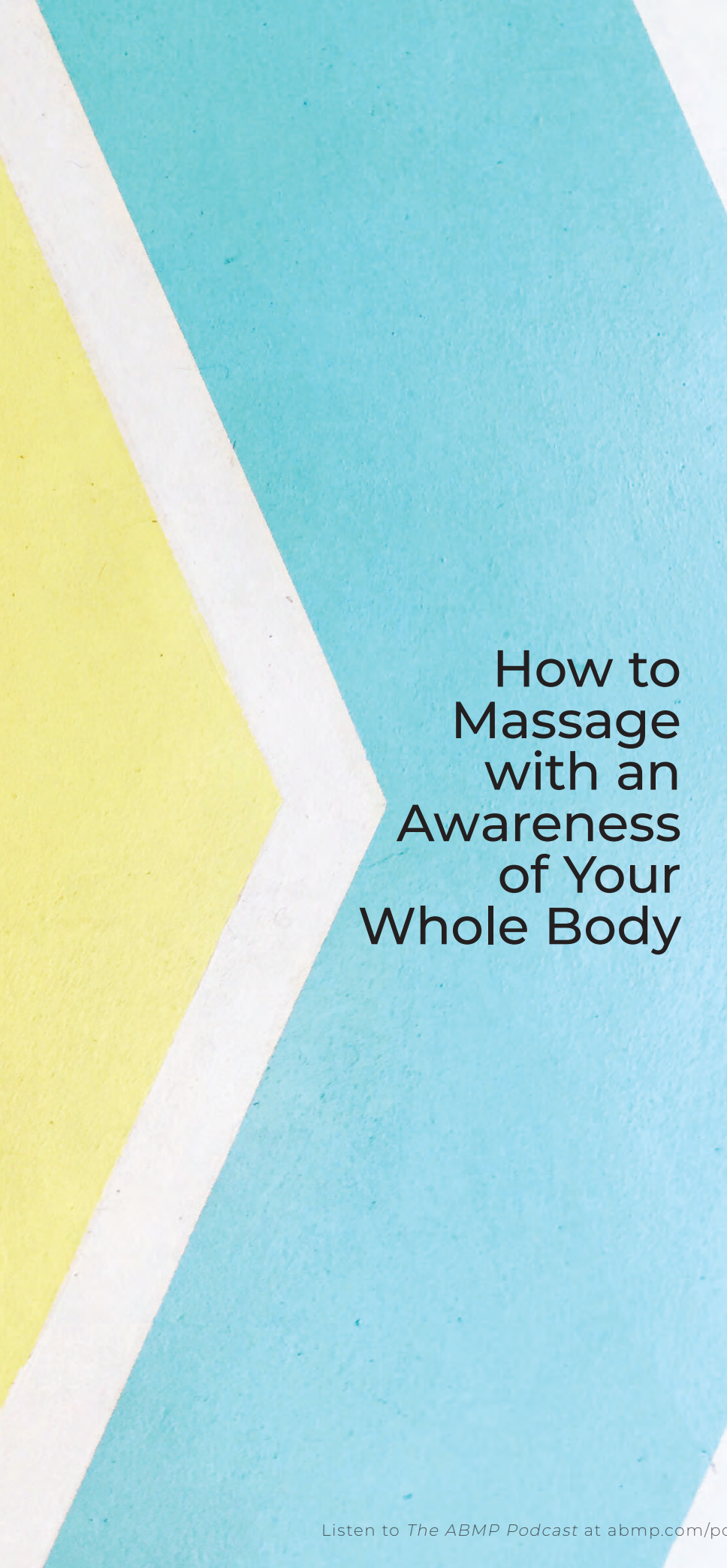


By David M. Lobenstine, LMT

feet first

■ KEY POINTS

- It is the author's belief that a massage therapist's feet are more important than their fingers.
- By practicing using your whole body in every movement you make, your sessions will start to feel flowing and full of ease, rather than heavy and full of effort.



How to Massage with an Awareness of Your Whole Body

“The motion is rooted in the feet, generated by the legs, controlled by the waist, and manifested through the fingers.”

—Bob Altheim, describing the central concept of tai chi

If you believe your hands are what make you a great therapist, you should stop reading this article. If you believe feeling tense and tired at the end of a massage is proof you’ve just given a good massage, then you should stop reading this article.

But if, instead, you have a nagging feeling there might be a more effective way to give a massage—if you suspect it is possible to take care of your clients without completely neglecting your body—then keep reading. This article is for you. That nagging feeling you have, that solution you can’t quite figure out? It’s right in front of you. Or more specifically, right beneath you. Literally. The answer is in your feet.

Allow me to offer a daring concept: At the start of every massage stroke you should forget about your fingers, and instead pay attention to your feet.

FINDING MY FOOTING

It is my belief, after nearly 20 years of massaging and a dozen years of teaching, that our feet are more important than our fingers. I believe that if we massage with an awareness of our whole body, we can do amazing things for our clients without hurting ourselves.

Nothing I tell you here will surprise dancers or professional athletes. Paying attention to how you position each part of you is simply taken for granted by anyone who spends their lives doing complicated physical feats. Think about how much time baseball players devote to digging their cleats into just the right spot in the batter's box when they come to the plate. And if you ask any golfer, they'll tell you those 300-yard drives are only possible because of the rotation of their hips. And a ballet dancer would find it absurd you would do anything other than focus on your feet. To put it simply: All complicated activities (and even a lot of the less complicated ones) work better when we use our whole body.

Even though the whole purpose of our profession is to help our clients inhabit their bodies more effectively, we therapists are good at forgetting our own advice. Instead, we focus on lots of other things. We are determined to figure out the best strokes and to learn cool, new techniques. We are eager to add more modalities to our list of skills. But after more than a decade in the classroom, what I find again and again is that the fanciest strokes don't do a thing if the rest of your body isn't properly positioned. (Or, even worse, all those cool, new techniques have a good chance of *injuring* you if you aren't paying attention to what the rest of your body is doing.)

A lot of our problems—from exhaustion to injury to burnout—come from one pervasive bias in our profession: We

are obsessed with our hands. We think the value of our work comes from our fingers and hands and arms. So when we work—especially when we use techniques that require a lot of pressure, whether deep-tissue massage or sports massage or myofascial release, we tend to focus all our attention on our upper body, on our shoulders and arms and hands. We assume the part of our body that is contacting the client has to be the part of the body where the pressure, or the “force,” is created. It is no surprise then, when we focus so much attention on forcing our hands and arms and shoulders to work hard, that they end up working *too* hard. And then our hands and arms and shoulders (and fingers, and back, and everywhere in between) get tired, get strained and get injured.

Our clients unintentionally reinforce this faulty vision of our work. In the many compliments I have been fortunate enough to receive in my massage career, my hands feature prominently. Several clients have told me I have “magic hands.” At least a couple have said I have “the hands of an angel.” My new favorite, which I got a few weeks ago, was that I am “the hand whisperer.” (Still not exactly sure what that means, but the point remains.) Not surprisingly, no one has ever complimented my feet.

The generous words from my clients move me deeply and are a balm on long days, but they are not actually accurate. Yes, our hands are great. And yes, they are essential to our success as therapists. But there is a danger in focusing on them *too much*. So, I want to suggest something different. When you think about working “deep,” think about your feet, rather than your hands. Give yourself a moment to consider this proposition. First, be honest: How often do you think about your feet while you are working? And second, if you thought about the position of your feet as essential to the amount of pressure you could deliver, how would this change your massage?

For me, the answer has been: a lot. When I first started massaging, at a chiropractor's office in October 2004, I was

so eager to do a good job that my lower back seized up and my shoulders and forearms ached. By accident I stumbled upon a tai chi class that, after several months of what seemed like pointless practice, eventually changed everything. I didn't realize it right away, but I was figuring out how to use my whole body in every movement I made. Soon, I realized I was using my shoulders and arms less as I massaged, and the rest of my body more. I was still doing the same strokes, still using the same points of contact (thumbs, fingers, soft fists, palms, and forearms) still doing the same deep-tissue work. But I was learning how to use my body weight rather than muscling; the sessions started to feel flowing and full of ease, rather than heavy and full of effort. I even felt relaxed and energized after a long day of clients. My feet can't take all the credit for this transformation, but they are where it all began. Ever since, I've been refining this “feet first” principle in my own practice and teaching it to other therapists through my continuing education classes.

FIGURING OUT THE FEET

When we pay attention to our feet while we massage, we benefit both physically and mentally. To put it simply, by broadening your awareness of your body, it is possible to feel both happier and healthier while you work. The reasons why are multiple and interconnected. When you pay more attention to your feet, you are more *grounded* while you work—literally, since you are more aware of the ground beneath you. (And that is why I encourage you to experiment with working barefoot, at least as you start with this foot-awareness practice. We'll come back to that.) As you pay attention to your feet, you can't help but pay attention to the rest of your body—how your legs are moving (or, more likely, *not moving*) and how your upper body is moving (or, more likely, moving *too much*). And with that body



Deepening Your Foot Awareness

You don't need to do every one of these steps, and you don't have to do them in this exact order. But together they offer an abundance of possibilities.

- At the beginning of each session (and then throughout each session), start by paying attention to yourself before you pay attention to your client.
- Notice your feet making contact with the floor. Wiggle your toes a bit. Rock slightly back and forth, shifting your body weight between the heels and the toes. Rock slightly side to side, shifting your body weight from the

inside to the outside edges of your feet.

- Notice your breath. Notice your thoughts. Each time you are distracted or find yourself thinking about something else, notice that thought or feeling—don't try to deny it or push it away or judge yourself for having it—and then focus on your next exhalation.
- As you become more aware of your breath, focus on slowing your exhale and following it all the way down to empty. Allow the inhale to emerge by itself, from your diaphragm,

when, and only when, your body needs it.

- Bend your knees slightly. Feel your upper body long and loose, and your lower body rooted and relaxed.
- Make contact with your client without doing anything. Just introduce your touch and slowly lean your body weight into the client.
- Create each contact from your lower body: pointing your feet in the direction you want the stroke to go, then tipping your hips forward, and pouring your body weight into the client.

- Each time you want to change the direction of your contact, start by shifting the position of your feet.
- Notice what it feels like to use your upper body less and your lower body more.
- Practice observing the direction and position of your feet, notice when your feet and lower body get stuck in one position, then try shifting the feet little by little.
- Remember that with every session, every stroke, every exhale, you have the chance to grow your awareness and create new habits.

awareness you are more likely to become more aware of your breath.

The combination of all these elements can be profound. This deepened awareness of breath and body enables you to get away from that myopic focus on the most-injured parts of our body: hands, arms, shoulders, and back. Instead, you can use your *whole body* as your tool and leverage the far greater strength, endurance, and ease that is possible when you create each stroke from, literally, the ground up.

Let's explore what this looks like in a typical massage. The principle here is the same whether you are a myofascial therapist who works really deep or you spend all day doing nothing but mud wraps and seaweed scrubs. In addition, the principle I describe here applies to all our typical stances: when one foot is in front of the other (what we typically call the "lunge" stance) and when our feet are parallel to each other (typically called the "horse riding" or "side by side" stance). What is key, regardless of the type of work you are doing and regardless of the stance you are using, is with each and every stroke to notice—and then adjust—two things: the *direction* and the *position* of your feet.

Directing Your Feet

By *direction* I mean where your feet are pointing. To massage using your whole body, your feet should always be pointing in the same direction you want your massage stroke to go. This is a very basic idea, and probably something most of us figured out during our first semester in massage school. The problem, in my experience, is that even though we might start out with our feet pointing in the right direction, that beneficial positioning doesn't last.

Imagine this scenario. You are reading this article, nodding your head in agreement, eager to put this idea into

practice. Here's what will happen in your next session—the same thing that happens in all your sessions. You will start out with your feet in a great position, and the work will feel great, and then a few minutes later, you'll notice you are reaching way ahead of your body, or your shoulders and neck are in some weird, contorted position, or your arms are traveling in a totally different direction from the rest of you. Suddenly, some part of you—or more likely, multiple parts of you—don't feel all that good. No judgment. We've all been there.

So, what happened? Chances are you started with your feet pointed in the same direction you were performing the stroke, just as I've suggested. But then, as your stroke followed the changing contour of the tissue, your feet didn't shift accordingly. Thus, your lower body stayed the same, and so all the shift happened in your (now contorted) upper body.

I would guess this happens to every massage therapist all the time—or at the very least, multiple times in every massage. Feet that remain stuck in the same direction, even after our point of contact changes direction, is probably one of the most difficult aspects of our work for us to change. To put it simply, it is easy to get stuck, and it is much harder to get unstuck. We are so focused on our upper body, and particularly on our point of contact, that we just don't pay all that much attention to the lower body most of the time. The only solution is practice. Challenge yourself to move your feet during your next massage at least once every 10 seconds. Even tiny little adjustments make a difference. And as soon as your feet get into the habit of shifting throughout the session, everything else will get easier.

Because if you can continue to change the direction of your feet each time your point of contact changes direction, then you have the chance to continue to work with your whole body. To put it simply, when our feet are pointed in the same direction

as our stroke, we have the chance to create that stroke by leaning with our body weight. If we don't continually adjust the position of our feet, our only option is to create the stroke by muscling, and therefore add excess tension and strain into our body.

Positioning Your Feet

If *directing* the feet enables us to use our body weight, rather than muscling, then *positioning* the feet enables us to fine-tune how much of our body weight we are using. By changing the position of your feet relative to the table—stepping either a little closer to the table or a bit farther away—you have the ability to shift the amount of body weight you are using, giving the client exactly how much or how little pressure they need.

Most of us assume it is only our upper body that determines how "deep" we are working. When the client asks for more pressure, we instinctively contract the muscles of our shoulders and arms and push harder into the client. (No coincidence, then, that those muscles we are contracting the most are also the most likely to ache and get injured.) But there is another way. Instead of pressure being the result of how hard your upper body is working, if you get used to adjusting the position of your feet, how much pressure you give to the client is simply the result of how little body weight is in your feet. Because all your body weight that is not in your feet is, by default, pouring into your point of contact, and thus into the client.

Confused? Don't worry. This idea *is* a lot to wrap our heads around. This idea *is* confusing: It basically upends the typical way we think of every massage we've ever given. So for now, let this equation bounce

around your head until it settles in and begins to make sense:

- The less body weight in your feet, the more pressure you are giving to the client.
- The more body weight in your feet, the less pressure you are giving to the client.

This foot focus is, as you know, very different from how we usually think about the amount of pressure we are delivering. But take a minute to consider the potential ramifications. In our typical massage position, where the lower body tends to become fixed and stuck, and the upper body tends to do all the work, what happens when the client asks for *less* pressure? To decrease the pressure, we assume we have to yank ourselves up by our spine—contracting the erector muscles along the spine so the upper body is not pressing quite as hard. Or, if the client wants *more* pressure, we assume the only option is to contract the muscles of our upper body and dig down further. But neither of these options are therapeutic for us or the client.

Instead, what if the pressure you deliver could be determined by the amount of body weight in your feet? The options are numerous, but the essential principle is simple: If you want to give more pressure, position your feet a bit farther away from the table. If you want to give less pressure, position your feet a bit closer to the table. Each time you need to change the amount of pressure during a massage, simply change the position of your feet, same as you change the direction of your feet. (See “Giving More/Giving Less.”)

The only way to use the power that comes with positioning your feet is by practicing it. Just as I mentioned earlier that you should practice shifting the direction of your feet every 10 seconds or so (or every time the direction of your point of contact changes), you should also be changing the position of your feet. Most of the time, these changes happen simultaneously. Changing



Giving More/Giving Less

One of the great benefits of massaging from your feet is that you can offer the client just as much or as little pressure as they want.

When you need more pressure, you can:

- Step your feet farther away from the table
- Lean your hips more toward the table
- Straighten your legs
- Come up onto your tiptoes
- Lower your table

All of these will enable you to pour more of your body weight from your feet into your point of contact.

When you need less pressure, you can:

- Step your feet more toward the table
- Lean your hips farther away from the table
- Do both at the same time

These will shift more of your body weight from your point of contact back into your feet.

Check in with Your Body

These questions help you check in with all of you—body, brain, and breath—as you work.

- Observe your whole body as you massage. Can your upper body do less? Can your lower body do more?
- Check in with your feet. Are your feet pointed in the same direction your hands are going?
- Check in with your knees. Are your knees bent slightly instead of locked?
- Check in with your hips. Are your hips pliable, able to move back and forth and side to side to help you pour your body weight into the stroke?
- Check in with your spine. Is your spine long and loose, stacked and supported?
- Check in with your muscles. Are they doing just the minimum amount necessary to create the stroke?



the direction of your feet causes you to change the position and vice versa.

WORKING FROM YOUR FEET

It should be clear by now that focusing on our feet allows us to get away from our damaging reliance on our upper body, and instead to develop the ability to massage from our *entire* body. And as you have probably already sensed, my preoccupation with the feet is not really about the feet themselves, but rather, I see an awareness of the feet as a gateway—a small detail that can make you more aware of other, bigger details. By focusing our awareness on this one small part of our body, we have the potential to make big changes in our work—and in turn, in the happiness of our bodies. The broad impacts of this feet-first principle are numerous.

In a typical session, I start the client prone, and I begin by standing at the head of the table, my fingertips resting softly on the client's scalp. But I begin not by paying attention to their scalp, but rather—you guessed it—by paying attention to my feet. I work barefoot, so I feel the underside of my feet against the wood planks of my office floor. With that grounded contact, I bend my knees slightly and lengthen my spine; I feel supported by my lower body and long and loose through my upper body. I slow my exhalation and follow it all the way down to empty, feeling my body calm and ready to work. This moment lasts just 10 seconds or so, but that initial awareness of my feet sets the stage for the whole session to come.

A minute or two later, let's say I have undraped and applied oil to the client's back. I make a long effleurage stroke down their erector muscles. I am in a horse-riding stance, leaning my body weight to create the pressure. My feet are pointing toward their hips, parallel to their spine, just as my hands are moving down either side of their spine. As I get to their sacrum, I notice more tension in the lumbar musculature of

their left side than in their right. My hands instinctively want to turn toward that left side. But I don't follow that instinct. That would mean my hands would get ahead of my body, and soon I would start muscling. Instead, I first shift the direction of my feet; I swivel on the balls of my feet so my toes turn toward that tight side. With that small shift of my feet, just a 20- or 30-degree rotation, my legs and trunk rotate too. Then, when my hands move in that direction, toward their tense muscles, that stroke—same as the initial effleurage along the erectors—is merely the extension of my whole body leaning. I am not pushing or pressing that tense area, which would just add to the tension already there. Instead, I can simply pour my body weight, from my feet all the way into my hands, into that tense area. My upper body does not create the pressure; it merely is the conduit of what my lower body is doing.

That tiny shift in the direction of my feet enables me to continue to work in a way that feels good for the client and feels good for me.

But remember, along with *direction* comes *position*. In this case, as I pivot my body and sink into that tight area, I feel a sudden, sharp inhalation in the client's rib cage. Typically, this means I have come across an area that is more tender or tense or sore than the client expected. I want to adjust my pressure so the client doesn't tense further, but I want to do so in a way that is as effortless as possible, both for their sake and my own. The solution? Change the position of my feet. I slide one foot a few inches closer to the table, and then do the same with the other foot. Without disrupting my stroke, or even moving my hands at all, I have lightened the pressure: Shifting my feet further under my body means more of my body weight has come into my feet, and less of it is pouring into the client.

These changes in direction and position are largely imperceptible to the client—it doesn't seem like I am doing much of

anything at all—and yet the client is very aware of the results. Now that I have lightened the pressure, the client's breathing begins to slow and deepen once again, and I know I am doing useful work in this tense area of the back. In fact, after a few seconds, I am confident I can deepen my pressure once again. But instead of simply doing the default and pushing down deeper with my arms, I adjust my feet, this time reversing what I did a few seconds earlier. Then, I shuffle my feet closer to the table to decrease my pressure; now, I shuffle one foot, and then the other, a few inches *away* from the table. Same as before, the position of my hands doesn't change. But now, with my feet farther back, more of my body weight is poured into the client's tissue, thus deepening my pressure.

In this tiny moment we have a microcosm of the session as a whole. I will shift the direction and the position of my feet again and again across the next hour. And with these tiny shifts, multiple times every minute, I can give the client exactly what they need, while also taking care of my own body.

FUN WITH FEET


Paying attention to your feet is not a panacea for all the difficulties of being a massage therapist. Your feet can't solve all your problems. And indeed, it is possible to pay attention to your feet and still overuse the muscles of your upper body to push and dig into the client. No single change is going to save us from our counterproductive habits. But paying attention to the roots of your body does have the potential to alter the roots of your work.

I think it is inevitable that each of us will develop counterproductive habits over our careers. Using our lower body too little and our upper body too much is one of the most pervasive habits I find true in almost every therapist who comes into my classroom. These counterproductive habits tend to snowball, building on top of one another, growing so big that doing things differently

starts to seem impossible. Even though our bodies might hurt, and our brains might be unsatisfied, sometimes it's just easier to stay stuck and continue to do what we have long done.

But the opposite is also true. If you let yourself experiment with a simple new habit, then that new habit has the potential to snowball. Challenge yourself to check in with your feet, to shift the direction of your feet with each stroke, and to shift the position of your feet each time you need to adjust your pressure.

As your body remembers how satisfying it can be to give a massage, this new habit will grow and grow. If you give your lower body the chance to move more, and allow your upper body to work less, you'll find the same ease in your whole body that you try so hard to give your clients. **m&b**

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VIDEO: "FEET FIRST"

1. Open your camera
2. Scan the code
3. Tap on notification
4. Watch!