

PHARMACOLOGY FOR BODYWORKERS | KEEPING CLIENTS SAFE, PART 2: CLIENT BOUNDARIES

# massage bodywork

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## SAVVY SELF-CARE

EXERCISES TO STRETCH, STRENGTHEN, AND ACTIVATE YOUR HANDS  
BY HEATH AND NICOLE REED

Find Your Floppy

# GET RID OF YOUR OWN TENSION WHILE YOU WORK

By David M. Lobenstine

*“The basic somatic task during our lifetime is to gain greater and greater control over ourselves, learning to flow with the stress and trauma of life, like a cork floating on top of the waves.”—Thomas Hanna<sup>1</sup>*

**T**hink about how you want your client to feel at the end of a session with you. Floating? Floppy? Full of ease? Now think about how you feel (more often than you would like) after giving a session. Frozen? Fixed? Full of tension? This is a terrible contradiction.

Our client's relaxation should not require the opposite in us. In my continuing education classes, therapists often shrug off their own tension as part of the job—as if feeling bad in our own bodies is the seemingly inevitable result of making our clients feel good in theirs. Indeed, some therapists are even proud of their tension, whether consciously or not. That tension, we seem to tell ourselves, is proof of how much we care about our clients. Proof that we are real therapists who are willing to sacrifice ourselves to make others feel better.

I believe the inevitability of our own tension—and idealizing that tension—is a fallacy. This ingrained idea is well-meaning, for sure, but it is wrong. You do not need to feel tense at the end of a session. And even more importantly, the amount of tension you feel is not proof you are a great therapist, and it is certainly not a prerequisite for a successful treatment. In fact, I think the opposite is true: You effect the most positive change for your clients when you feel good during the session.

The more relaxed we are while we work, the more relaxed our clients will be. In other words, we help our clients as much as we are able when we help ourselves as much as we can. I believe the best way to help our clients get rid of unnecessary tension is to get rid of our own unnecessary tension. Here, I want to offer a quick and specific way to do just that: As you work, make each joint in your arms as floppy as possible. Let me explain.

#### THE TIPS TELL US ABOUT TENSION

I have been writing in this magazine for close to a decade about how we have to pay attention to our own bodies if we want to be successful and satisfied therapists.<sup>2</sup> And I teach multiple continuing education classes that vary in their focus, but all emerge from the same idea: You will be happier, and your clients will too, if you pour with your body weight rather than push with your muscles. My principle of pouring, rather than pushing, offers a way to assess the entirety of your body during your sessions (not to mention the movement of your breath, and those ever-present rumblings of your heart and your head), so that you can attend to yourself while you take care of your clients. This kind of full-body self-awareness is very simple, and with sufficient practice, very gratifying. But when you are just beginning to increase your own self-awareness while you massage, paying attention to your whole body all at once can feel overwhelming, so I have developed a shortcut. A simple way to get a glimpse of how your whole body is doing is to just pay attention to one tiny part of your body. This is one way I monitor my own sense of ease in every session I give and is something you can start practicing as soon as your next client is on the table.

#### TENSION-MONITORING EXERCISE

The practice is simple: With each stroke you give during a session, notice your point of contact—the part of your body that is actually performing the stroke. For some strokes, this will be the tips of your fingers or your thumbs; other times, you'll be using your flat palm, a soft

fist, or the heel of your hand; and hopefully sometimes you'll also be using your forearm or even your elbow.

Once you've acknowledged your point of contact, observe each joint of your arm and hand that is distal to your point of contact (in other words, the part of your body after the point of contact, farther away from your shoulder and trunk). These distal joints are what I call "the area beyond the contact." So, for example, if you are doing a beautiful effleurage stroke along the paraspinal muscles and the heel of your hand is the point of contact, then the area beyond the contact would include your fingers and thumbs. (And specifically, all the joints therein: carpometacarpal, metacarpophalangeal, and interphalangeal including distal and proximal.)

Once you've identified that area beyond the point of contact, you want to observe the amount of tension in those joints that are beyond the contact. Once you start to observe this area, I'm guessing you'll start to notice that they are holding more tension than you are aware of—particularly if you are determined to be really, really good therapist and do really, really deep work.

Tension in the area beyond the contact should be an immediate red flag. Any time you see those joints are stiff, rigid, or tense, you are working harder than you need to, in two ways. First, contracting the muscles beyond where you are contacting the client doesn't make the stroke any better (and as we'll explore further, might make the stroke feel worse). Second, tension in this area beyond the contact is a sign there is excess tension elsewhere in your body too. Unnecessary muscle contraction beyond the contact is like the warning light on your dashboard telling you there is a larger problem with your car. And just like with your car, it is easy to ignore the warning light for a while. But the consequences are never good. Don't ignore the warning light. Your body—and your client's body—will thank you.

The more you pay attention, the more you will notice tension beyond the contact. It will feel like the warning light is constantly flashing! Luckily, the solution is easy (with apologies to Bobby McFerrin): *Don't worry. Be floppy.* That's it. Or another way to put it: *Think floppy, not fixed.* Let's explore what this means in practice.

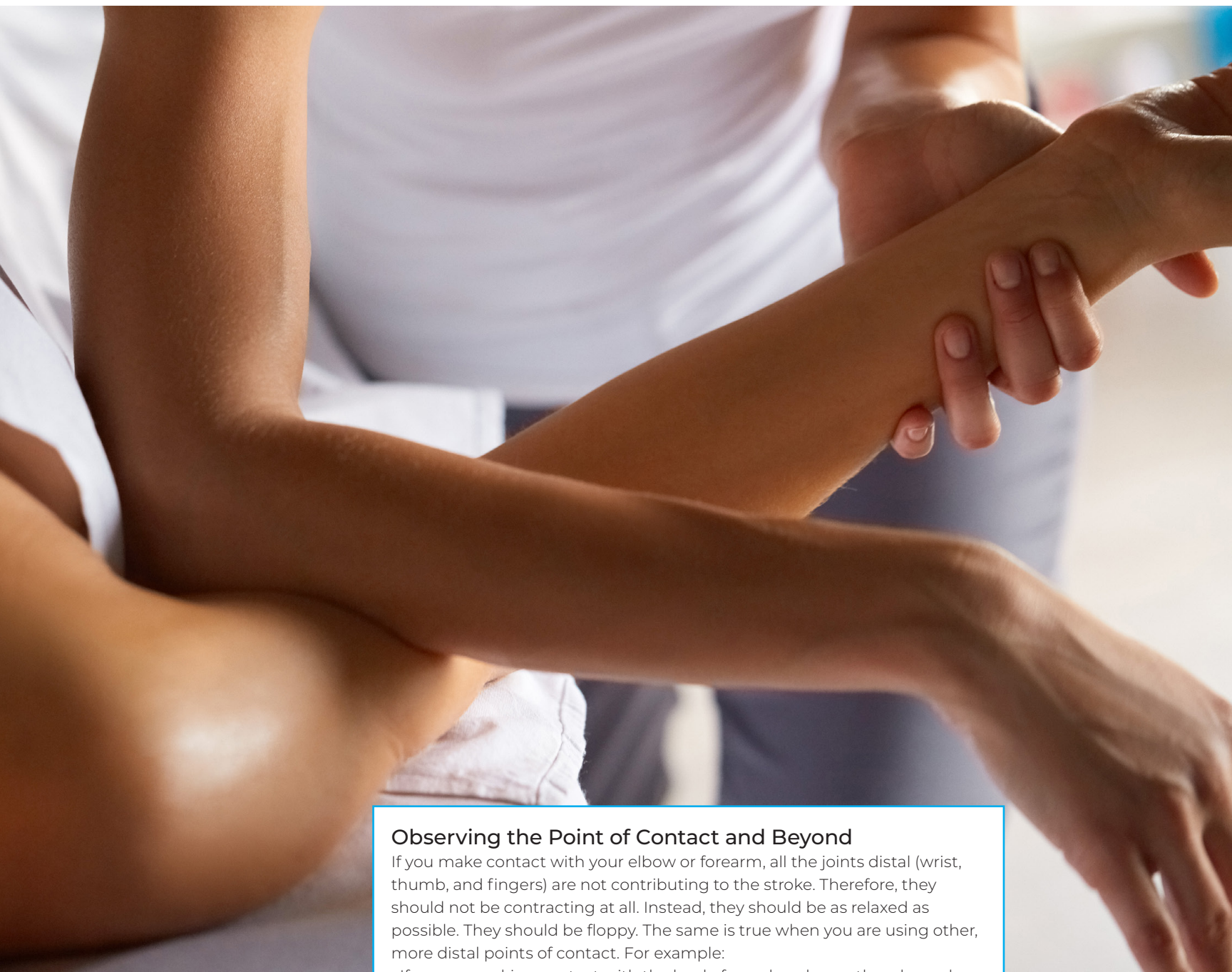
#### LOOK FOR EXCESS, RETURN TO EASE

In every continuing education class, I tell therapists my goal for every session: Do the minimum amount needed to create the maximum benefit for the client. When I say this in class, everyone nods their heads. Who wouldn't agree with this, after all? None of us want to work harder than we need to, right? But then, what happens when those participants go back to their tables and start to practice?

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TATJANA ZLATKOVIC/STOCKSY.COM



### Observing the Point of Contact and Beyond

If you make contact with your elbow or forearm, all the joints distal (wrist, thumb, and fingers) are not contributing to the stroke. Therefore, they should not be contracting at all. Instead, they should be as relaxed as possible. They should be floppy. The same is true when you are using other, more distal points of contact. For example:

- If you are making contact with the heel of your hand, your thumbs and fingers should be floppy.
- If you are making contact with your thumbs, your fingers should be floppy.
- If you are making contact with your fingers, your thumbs should be floppy.

If any of those joints are tense or fixed or locked or rigid, then you are working too hard.

You guessed it: They start working harder than they need to. In other words, your brain might agree with the idea of using the minimum effort needed, but chances are your body is going to start working harder as soon as you stop reading this. As always, I say this without judgment.

Recognizing the disconnect between brain and body is a crucial aspect of our longevity (or lack thereof) as therapists, and it is something we are not very good at. The longer I teach, the more obvious it becomes. Most therapists don't have a clear sense of how much effort they expend.

We are bodyworkers. Our whole job revolves around helping other people's muscles. And yet, unless you have a well-developed practice of body awareness (tai chi, Alexander technique, and Feldenkrais are the ones that have been most helpful for me), chances are you don't have a clear sense of how much you are contracting your own musculature! With practice, however, you can learn to monitor your muscles. And you can start in the next session you give, with the clue that is literally right in front of you: your arms.

If you are doing a stroke with your forearm, and you are trying really hard to make that stroke great, chances are (at some point) one of two things will start to happen: Your hand will clench into a fist, or your fingers will rise up toward the ceiling. Either of these mean you are exerting more effort than needed. You are working with more than the minimum effort necessary.

I often see the same counterproductive habit when a therapist uses the heel of their hand as the point of contact. If you are pushing rather than pouring with the heel of your hand, then your fingers will begin to rise up toward the ceiling. The same is true with our thumbs. When we are exerting more than the minimum effort as we use our thumbs, then the fingers tend to straighten and tense.

Some tension—whether in your fingertips, thumbs, or wrists—may not seem like a big deal, but it is. Remember the warning light analogy from earlier? The problem is not the tension in your hands. The problem is that tension in any

one part of the body is, in my experience, an indication of tension elsewhere.

Excess effort in the hands likely means the muscles of the forearm, upper arm, and shoulder are also working harder than they need to. There is a good chance the muscles of your trunk are joining in with their own excess effort.

Clients are a good reminder of how excess tension spreads. Think about that client who is glued to his computer. His shoulders and neck are hunched and taut, obviously, but does the tension stop there? Of course not. You can trace the consequences of his keyboard over-efforting all the way down the trunk and even into the lower body. Your client is probably carrying excess tension in his gluteal muscles, his internal and external rotators, and even his hamstrings—even though he is just sitting all day. The nature of tension is that it never exists in isolation. Excess effort is contagious.

Because the body's tension is so good at spreading, we should identify it wherever and whenever we can. You can use this tiny, and seemingly inconsequential, signal from the end of your arms to become aware of the overwork that is happening along the entirety of the kinetic chain. Even better, the signal itself contains the solution. It can be daunting (even when we do recognize the whole arm is working harder than necessary) to actually try and reduce excess effort in the neck, shoulder, arm, and hand all at once. But if you start just with the most distal joints—that area beyond the contact—you'll find a reflexive effect.

### FLOPPINESS WORKS BOTH WAYS

Once you get used to the idea of observing the area beyond the contact, you can start expanding your awareness in the opposite direction. Instead of only observing the more distal joints of the body, you can also start to observe the more proximal joints—the joints before the contact.

Start with your wrist, elbow, and shoulder joints. Then, as you are ready, you can spread your awareness even further up through your cervical spine, down

REMOVING  
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INCORPORATING  
FANCY NEW  
TECHNIQUES,  
OR ADDING HOT  
TOWELS AND  
ESSENTIAL OILS  
—TO MAKE YOUR  
SESSIONS MORE  
EFFECTIVE.



### Relax the Rigidity

Each time you notice rigidity in your distal joints, try the following.

1. Notice this counterproductive habit, but try not to judge yourself for it. Blame does nothing. Instead, think of that excess effort as a gift from your body, a reminder that you are working harder than is helpful.
2. Continue the stroke, but focus on lengthening your next exhalation. A breath out that is long, slow, and effortless is one of the best ways to overcome the over-efforting.
3. Think of those distal joints drooping, flopping, or sinking into a neutral position as you exhale.
4. Feel the floppiness in the area beyond the contact, and imagine it spreading up the kinetic chain.
5. Feel yourself continue the stroke, but rather than pushing, pour the contact into the client. You'll still be able to deliver just as much pressure with the point of contact itself, but you will be using your whole body more, and those specific muscles around the point of contact less. Using these steps will allow your quality of contact to be different. It will feel like less work for you, and it will feel less strained to the client.

along your thoracic and lumbar spine, across and around your rib cage, and eventually down into your pelvis. Indeed, when using your fingertips or thumbs to create a stroke, there is no part of the body beyond the point of contact. In this case, the point of contact is already the most distal part of the arm. But the idea of being floppy still applies. And in some ways, it is more important than ever here.

When you start observing the larger part of the body—the area before the contact—things get a little trickier. Unlike our fingers or wrists, we can't simply let these more proximal joints flop completely. If we did, we would turn into the Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*, and we would fall over onto our client on the table. Not a good idea.

So while we don't want to just go completely limp, we do want to use the same essential concept: Identify excess tension, and then let it go. That way, we can do the same strokes but with just the minimum amount of effort. A simple exercise will help make this concept clear:

- Pick up a magazine or a thin book.
- Raise the magazine in front of you, arm straight, until your arm is parallel with the floor.
- Stay in that position for a minute, and notice what happens in your body.
- Observe that your first instinct is to grip the magazine hard with your fingers so it doesn't fall. And then your next instinct is to clench various muscles in your shoulder, back, and glutes to keep yourself in this awkward position.

Now, let's examine holding the magazine in this annoying position without it being so annoying.

- Experiment with loosening your grip on the magazine.
- Try lengthening your exhalation slightly, and with each slow, effortless exhale, imagine your muscles are sinking as your breath empties. Doing this allows the flexor muscles of your fingers, palm, and thumb to contract with a little less force.

- Allow the flexors and extensors of your forearm, as well as your biceps and triceps, to soften just slightly. You can still hold your arm parallel to the ground without your arm being quite so rigid.
- Let the muscles around your shoulder joint soften. Same with your glutes. Notice how your body is still accomplishing its task but with less tension throughout your body. The same subtle shift is possible as you massage.

While the concept of excess effort is easiest to see—and to feel—in the distal joints of the hand, the same idea applies throughout your whole body. As you become more aware of excess tension in your hands, expand that awareness further up the arms. Notice, as you work, how often the joints of your elbows, shoulders, or spine are locked and straining. Practice finding, instead, a position for your upper body that is stable but not rigid—you want to stabilize but not strain.

Throughout your client sessions, see if you can do the same work with less effort, and gain the maximum benefit with minimum effort. Your body will thank you. And your client will thank you. They will feel the difference, even though they won't be able to articulate it.

The other problem with excess effort, as should be obvious by now, is that it doesn't do any good for the client, just as it doesn't do any good for us. It is rare that a client can actually identify when we are over-efforting, and yet the client's body can—consciously or not—feel that excess tension. Any excess tension in your body will feel to your client like you are pushing or poking, instead of pouring and sinking.

Excess effort causes clients to guard and hold rather than sink and soften. Thus, removing excess effort is probably the single best thing you can do—better than learning a new modality, incorporating fancy new techniques, or adding hot towels and essential oils—to make your sessions more effective. Create the possibility of ease in your treatment room, starting with your own body, and your clients will embrace that possibility in theirs.

### ADAPTING TO EASE

The idea of observing the joints beyond the point of contact might seem laughably simple, but often the best habits are the simplest. When therapists practice on each other in my continuing education classes, one of the most useful things I do is to walk from therapist to therapist, without saying a word, and place my relaxed hand atop their stiffened fingers, or around the shoulder that is climbing up toward the ear. Nearly always, the therapist smiles, shakes their head, or rolls their eyes.

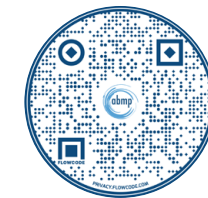
Excess effort seems so obvious once I point it out, and yet the therapist was, most likely, completely oblivious to it just a moment prior. Tension so easily creeps, unnoticed, into the body—even when you are taking a CE class that is all about becoming aware of tension! But the beautiful part happens next: Once they get over their embarrassment, the awareness spreads elsewhere in their body. I see them soften a little, like they are settling into their stroke, able to contact their partner both with greater ease and with a renewed sense of purpose. That is what your client wants. And that is also what you want.

It is hard to let yourself work less hard. It is difficult to let yourself find ease. So start small. Just observe the joints beyond the contact. And then allow yourself the freedom that comes with being floppy. **m&b**

### NOTES

1. Thomas Hanna, *Somatics: Reawakening the Mind's Control of Movement, Flexibility, and Health* (Cambridge: Da Capo Life Long, 1988), 15.
2. Find all of Lobenstine's articles in the digital editions of *Massage & Bodywork* magazine. "Under Pressure for More Pressure: The Client Who Demands Deeper," May/June 2020, page 68; "Less is More: A More Effective Way to Use Lubricant," January/February 2020, page 80; "The Solution is the Sides: Approach the Body from New Angles," March/April 2017, page 58; "Breath: Your Most Powerful Tool," May/June 2016, page 74; "Pour, Don't Push: How to Massage with Greater Depth and Ease," November/December 2016, page 64.

**Q** David M. Lobenstine, BA, LMT, BCTMB, has been massaging, teaching, writing, and editing for over 15 years in New York City, with a focus on clients at all stages of childbearing. He is a co-author of *Pre- and Perinatal Massage Therapy* (3rd ed.), and also designs and teaches his own continuing education workshops, both across the US and online at Body Brain Breath. For more information, visit [bodybrainbreath.com](http://bodybrainbreath.com).



### SCAN AND WATCH "Find Your Floppy"

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