

# HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR MASSAGE CLIENTS

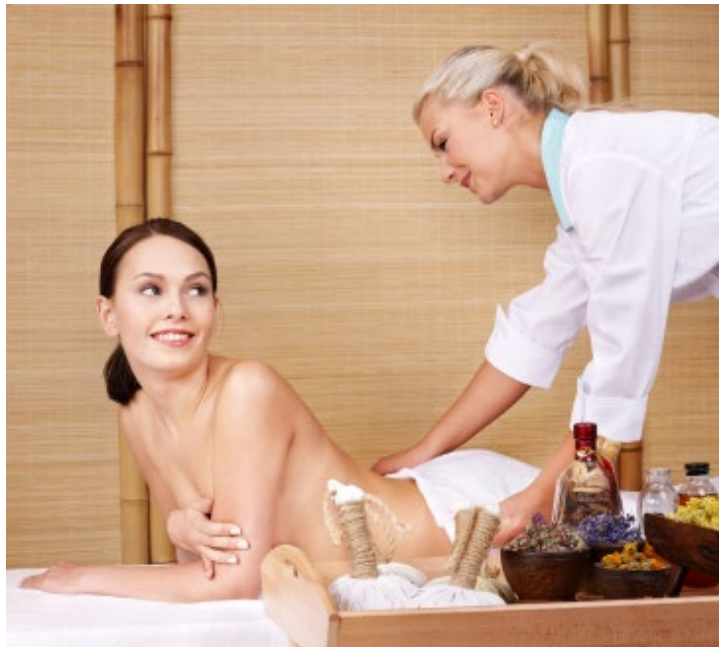
Continuing Education E-Book



**T E X A S**  
**M A S S A G E C E U**

Melissa Wood, ND, MTI, LMT

# HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR MASSAGE CLIENTS



6 HOUR CONTINUING EDUCATION UNIT CLASS

Approved by the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR)



## HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR MASSAGE CLIENTS

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**Welcome to the How to Effectively Communicate With Your Massage Clients Online Continuing Education Class!**

**Class Objective:** This online class has been developed to educate Licensed Massage Therapists on how to communicate effectively with their massage clients to eliminate the possibility of misunderstandings and to turn that “one-time” client into a “forever” client. It is my hope this material will be an interesting, informative and valuable resource to assist you in working with massage therapy clients. Learning how to effectively communicate will help you, not only with your massage clients, but also your massage therapy colleagues, friends and family.

## About the Instructor



My name is Melissa Wood and I am a Naturopathic Doctor, Massage Therapy Instructor and Licensed Massage Therapist located in Sherman, Texas. I have been studying alternative and natural medicine for over 25 years.

My mission is to enable everyone on this planet to be healthy and to be actively involved in their health and healing. My goal is to offer information that will provide you with new insights that are useful in your path to wellness. I envision a time when everyone will seek out herbs, essential oils, vitamins, minerals, nutritional supplements, and whole foods (not processed food!) to help heal themselves, as these are very powerful tools for enhancing your health and well-being.

### **APPROVED MASSAGE THERAPY INSTRUCTOR**

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## Disclaimer

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY LEARN ABOUT COMMUNICATION?

*“When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the ‘human essence,’ the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man.”*

**- Professor of Linguistics Noam Chomsky**

*“Without communication, each individual would merely be an island isolated from all other such islands.”*

**—The Language of Animals**



Communication is an essential part of life. From the age of three, experts in human development and linguistics marvel at the remarkable level of language structure and syntax that humans possess.

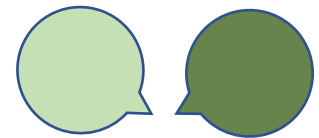
As massage therapists, communication is one of the most important skills in both developing **and maintaining** a successful career. But fine-tuning these skills is no easy task. Maybe you are a shy, introverted person who finds it difficult to converse with others, wondering, “What should I talk about with my massage clients?” or “How can I get the discussion started?” and then, “How can I keep it going?” Or perhaps you’re more of a confident, outgoing type who tends to dominate the conversation. You may find that you struggle to draw others out or focus on what the other person is saying when it’s their turn to speak.



An important note of caution regarding talking **during** a massage appointment: as therapists, being able to converse effectively with our massage clients is an essential job skill; however, talking excessively

during a massage is never advised. If there are important issues or concerns to be discussed, make sure to utilize the time before or after the massage, unless the client initiates the dialogue and makes it clear that they don't mind conversing during their treatment.

No matter what your personality type you can learn to become an excellent conversationalist. Communication involves an interchange with another person with a different background and style of speaking, which requires a combination of both skill and attention. A meaningful exchange that is a communion of two or more people requires that everyone involved in the dialogue listens and speaks skillfully, instead of just talking mindlessly. All of us then, whether we are shy or a complete chatterbox by nature, need to cultivate the art of conversation.



This class will help you to consider some of the essentials when it comes to mastering the art of communication. As we'll discuss in the chapters to follow, part of this skill includes learning when conversation is appropriate or not and appreciating that silence is an important aspect of successful communication. In addition to the technical aspects involved in human interactions, we'll see how qualities such as



friendliness, tact and a good sense of humor are also the fundamental building blocks of strong relationships.

No doubt your interest in people and their wellbeing were big factors in your decision to pursue a career in massage therapy. However, just as an artist who hones his skills over time to skillfully paint a masterpiece; this course will help you to understand how you can best invest your time and energy in developing skills that help in having positive experiences with your massage clients. Improving your interpersonal skills will help you to create strong, meaningful relationships with your massage clients, reduce conflict in the workplace and help you engage positively with other people you meet in your day-to-day activities.

## What is Communication?

Naturally, the first question that comes to mind is “What is communication?” It’s a term we use freely but understanding the real meaning of communication is essential in improving our interpersonal skills.

In a nutshell, communication is the transfer of a message between a source and a receiver. It is a complex process of creating meaning within an interpersonal relationship.

One research team was able to compile more than 126 published definitions of what it means to communicate!<sup>1</sup> In the broadest sense, communication is the process of acting on information.



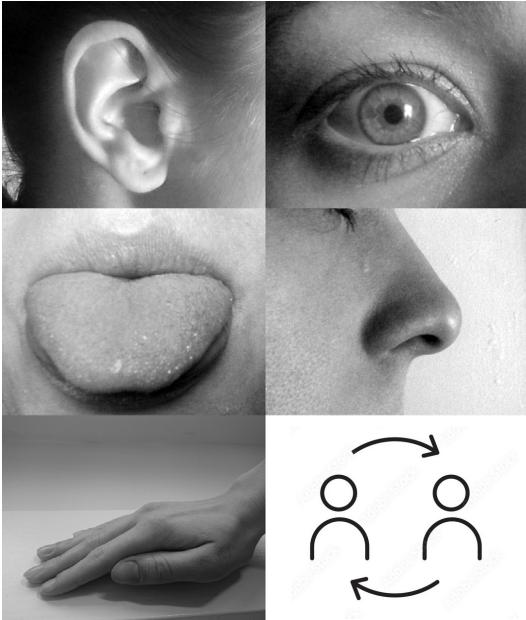
Human communication involves making sense of our surroundings and sharing those meanings with others through verbal or non-verbal messages. It is a unique, transactional process that involves mutual influence, normally with the purpose of managing the relationship. According to the book “How to do Things with Relationships...and How Relationships do Things to Us,”

interpersonal communication occurs not simply when you interact with someone, but *when you treat the other person as a unique human being.*<sup>2</sup>

There are five important principles of communication that you will want to keep in mind as you consider the information offered in this e-book:

- Communication connects us to other people
- It is permanent and irreversible
- Communication is a complicated process
- It is governed by unspoken rules that are unique to each culture and individual
- It involves both the content of the message and relationship of the people who are attempting to communicate.

## Why is Communication Important to Me in My Life and My Career in Massage Therapy?



Human communication is at the very core of our existence. We all learn about the world through our senses - by listening and observing, tasting, touching and smelling.

We then share our conclusions, thoughts and feelings with others we meet. Experts estimate that most people spend up to 90% of their waking hours

communicating with people.<sup>3</sup> It is through these interactions that we develop lasting relationships, gain knowledge and perform activities that give our lives depth and purpose.

As massage therapists, our workday involves constant communication - with our massage clients, coworkers, supervisors, and others. While we want to improve in all areas, interacting with clients is a vital component of a successful career. This requires constant effort and adaptability because every individual we interact with has his or her preferred style of communicating with others. In addition, with our unique histories and cultures, we all develop different strategies for communicating in different types of situations.

As you've probably experienced for yourself, these differences can lead to the very real possibility that when two people interact, misunderstandings arise, and they may be less effective at communicating with each other than they would like. Has this ever happened to you?

By developing the art of communication, you will avoid the most common pitfalls, increase your overall effectiveness and maybe even your job satisfaction as you learn new ways to meet the challenges of human interaction in your career. So, let's begin by learning how communication actually works....



# CHAPTER 1: HOW COMMUNICATION WORKS (AND HOW IT CAN WORK FOR YOU)

## Starting Conversations with Your Massage Clients

Consider this: If you have scheduled an appointment with a new massage client whom you've never met, he or she will come to the appointment viewing you as a stranger. So how can you put your clients at ease and



create an environment that will lead to open communication? A warm smile and a friendly greeting are always a good way to start. Good eye contact, a gentle handshake or touch on the arm and genuine sincerity is the next step. But there is much more to think about.

Of course, during an initial visit, it's both appropriate and important for you to discuss relevant information regarding the person's current health condition and medical history.

As you have your client fill out intake forms, you will of course ask about any possible contraindications that they may fail to remember or mention, such as recent surgeries, skin issues, pregnancy, etc. But as you work your way through the consultation portion of the appointment, keep in mind that during their busy life, your client may be preoccupied with any number of disquieting thoughts or concerns.

One of the most common reasons that individuals seek massage treatments is to help them to cope with stress. If you only discuss what is on *your* mind, as the therapist, without concern for what is on *their* mind, as a person seeking holistic health care, it becomes more challenging to provide a treatment that will enhance your client's health and wellbeing.



The best approach when you meet a client (especially for the first time) is to be observant. A perceptive therapist will be able to discern in

just a few seconds what people may be thinking about. You'll be able to discern if there is something that they would like to discuss before beginning the massage treatment. Does the person appear to be happy, sad, tired or anxious? Are they elderly, unwell or do they appear to be in pain? While you will never want to pry or ask overly personal questions, taking such things into account will help your clients to view you as someone who has a sincere interest in them. It will also help you to modify your treatment approach accordingly. You're more likely to tailor your massage to their immediate concerns or issues if you find out what is troubling them and then have the opportunity to address it.

If you live in a culturally diverse area where many of your clients speak languages other than yours, how can you interact with them in a positive

way? One simple and effective thing you can do is to learn short greetings in some of the most commonly spoken languages that you encounter. This small but meaningful gesture will help your clients to realize that you are interested in them and their culture. Hearing a familiar greeting will immediately put them at ease and may open the door for easier communication and dialogue. In addition, you might have the opportunity to learn several phrases in another language which is never a bad thing! If you have the interest, be sure to ask your client to help you with pronunciation and learning certain phrases. They will, once again, feel as though you are genuinely interested in them, and this will help to build the relationship with that person. Relating to people from diverse cultures will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 4.



#### HELPFUL TIPS for CONVERSATION OPENERS

- Be sure to follow local or cultural customs
- Offer a sincere compliment
- Start with a point of mutual interest
- Ask the person a question about their viewpoint on a topic

#### CAN'T-FAIL QUALITIES

- A cheerful, attentive attitude
- Warmth and sincerity
- Appropriate and professional personal interest
- Remembering that during a treatment, SILENCE is golden!

While the purpose of this e-book class is to provide practical applications for massage therapists to improve their communication skills, it's also worthwhile considering the basic scientific process behind human interactions. Understanding how our minds and bodies send and receive communication signals will help you to understand how the skills you are learning can all work together. It will also help you to adapt to new situations and ways of interacting with your clients.



### The Key Components in a Communication Model

**Source:** the person who originates a thought or idea and then expresses the concept in a code that can be understood by the receiver.

**Encoding:** is the way humans translate their ideas, feelings and thoughts into signals such as vocalizing words, gesturing or making eye contact. Using any number of these signals, we put our thoughts into a message that can be received by another person.



**Decoding:** is the opposite process of encoding. It occurs when a message made of either words or unspoken signals are received and interpreted.

**Message:** a written, verbal or non-verbal element of communication with a specific meaning. Messages can be sent intentionally or unintentionally.

**Channels:** are the pathways through which messages are sent by using our senses (auditory, visual, tactile or olfactory). For example, the smell of your favorite cookies baking as you enter your grandmother's home sends a non-verbal message regarding her feelings toward you.

**Receiver:** a person who decodes and attempts to understand what another person encoded. Human communication is complex because there are a number of factors that stand in between the source and the receiver. As people decode the signals they receive, they also subconsciously filter the messages through their past experiences, feelings, beliefs, values, and biases.

**Noise:** anything interfering with the accurate perception of a person's message preventing it from being understood or achieving the intended



effect. Unfortunately, in the world we live in, literal or psychological noise will always exist. Minimizing all types of noise is critical in keeping our messages from being distorted.

## Put the Focus on Other People

Now that we have a basic understanding of the communication model, a theme that we will emphasize is the need to be other-oriented. What does this involve? A massage therapist who is other-oriented is self-aware and sincere, but also is acutely aware of the people around them. This is accomplished by using a mindful process – which involves considering other people’s thoughts, feelings, interests and values.

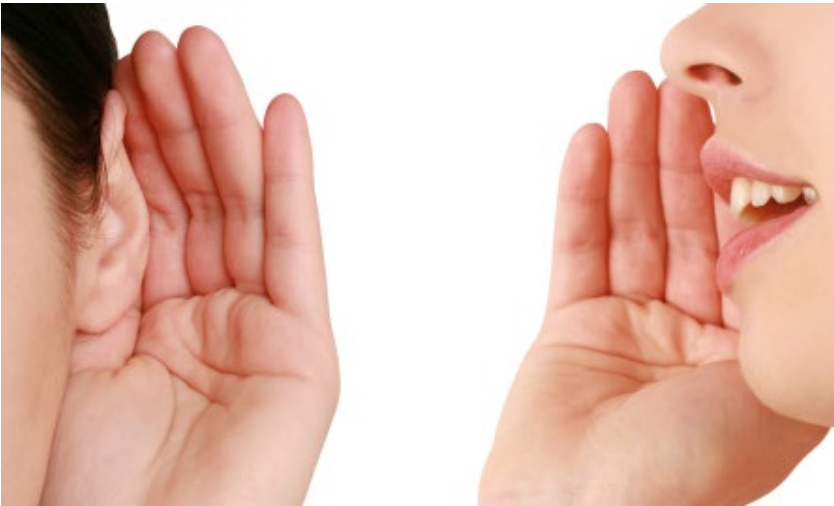
***The key to positive interpersonal relationships is an emphasis on others and as massage therapists, we should always strive to do this.***

### Did You Know?

Scientists note that the healthiest relationships are those in which both people have an agreed on and clear understanding of the relationship. This means that when we improve our communication skills, we improve our relationships across the board: with our family, loved ones, friends and colleagues. On a personal level, we also enhance our own physical and emotional health.



## What is Mutual Influence?



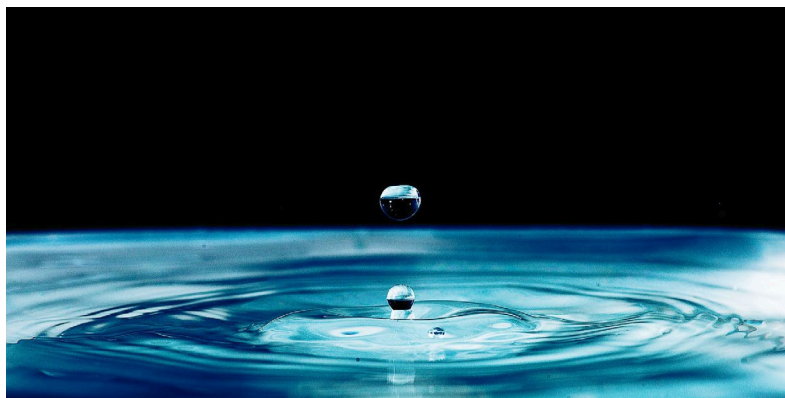
Mutual influence means that all of the people involved in a dialogue (one that may or may not involve the use of actual words) are affected by a

transaction. The type of interaction determines how much each person is influenced. To illustrate this: a nod of acknowledgement from a stranger in an elevator does not greatly impact a person's life. However, one short exchange of words between marriage mates on the verge of a divorce can have a profound and lasting effect on both individuals.

In the best relationships, whether personal or professional, one person does not always give while another takes, but a feeling of mutual equality exists. Both parties listen and respond with respect for the other person. There is no attempt to dominate the conversation or manipulate the other person. How can this type of communication be achieved? First of all, it requires that **both** people involved are fully present and focused when communicating with each other. This means giving your full and undivided attention to the other person – which in a world of constant interruptions, distractions and electronic notifications is often easier said than done!

Although we can all improve when it comes to eliminating distractions, do your best to give your clients as much of your attention as possible when conversing with them—especially at times when they are sharing their health history or other personal information. Turn your cell phone off or to silent mode during massage sessions and work hard to minimize any other possible interruptions. Remember, ***successful massage therapy careers are built on relationships***, not just appointments, which is why it is important to make sure your clients can tell that you are focused on them and in tune with what they are trying to tell you.

Also, keep in mind that the old adage “silence is golden” often applies once the massage begins. Avoid unnecessary chatting or questioning or any other interruption that may prevent your client from getting the maximum enjoyment and therapeutic benefit from your massage session.



### Understanding the Impact of our Words

Language, and how it is used, can have profound effects on our thinking, behavior, and even quality of life. It lies at the heart of every human experience. And since language and culture are so inter-connected, values like individualism and personal achievement (which are emphasized in

mainstream American culture) are reflected in our Standard English vocabulary. To illustrate: a typical American English dictionary lists more than 150 expressions that are compounded with the word self, including self-centered, self-absorbed and self-confidence. The number of English words that relate to an individual is much higher than in the languages of cultures that put more value on the importance of groups, society and family. And often you'll notice that among the very first words an English-speaking child learns are "mine," "I" and "me"!

As you interact with people from another culture, be aware that many people were raised with much less focus on SELF (and on ego) than most



Americans. Being overly self assertive and overusing the word "I" can come across in a way that is completely different than what you had intended and may make the other person see you as insensitive, self promoting, or even aggressive!

In the United States and Canada, we also tend to put a lot of emphasis on "straight-talk"—words that are direct, precise and eloquent. We are proud to be able to "tell it like it is" and we find it frustrating to listen to someone who tends to tell long, drawn out stories or "beats around the bush." However, in many cultures, nonverbal communication and social context play a much larger role than words do in communicating ideas.

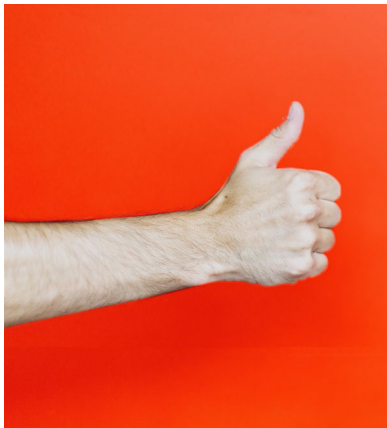


**Nonverbal communication** is the way we send and receive messages without using words. For example, by using gestures, facial expressions,

eye contact, personal space, body language and touching we can add weight to what we say or change the meaning of our words altogether.

Think about the meaning behind actions like kneeling on the ground, giving someone “the cold shoulder,” patting a small child on the head or towering over another person. Although verbal and non-verbal signals work together, non-verbal communication is the most important way that we express feelings, emotions and attitudes.

Learning to use and interpret non-verbal cues effectively is essential for massage therapists since our daily interactions involve so much of this type of communication. Experts in human interaction theorize that we respond



not only to what people say, but also to their non-verbal messages in order to navigate our way through conversations. If you watch any two people conversing, you’ll notice that as their conversation becomes lively, their body language and gestures appear like an intricate dance, with each one responding to the other’s actions.

Researchers have also noted that being expressive and supportive through non-verbal actions is an important way to help people cope with stress and anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

The biggest challenge presented by non-verbal communication is the difficulty in interpreting cues accurately, as unspoken messages are often ambiguous. Some people you meet may have serious facial expressions

or a mannerism (like crossing their arms) that may cause you to interpret their message in a negative way.

Culture also dictates specific rules that people follow to display and interpret body language. While some signals seem to be universally used by every culture (raising eyebrows when we meet someone, a child sucking their thumb for comfort, frowning when we are upset and smiling when we are happy), certain signals are culture based and may take more effort for you to learn to decode.

### **How Can You Check Your Interpretation of Others' Non-Verbal Cues?**

If you're unsure that you're interpreting someone's unspoken behavior correctly, there are three steps you can follow:

First, observe the person's non-verbal actions, such as eye contact, tone of voice and posture. Perform a quick mental checklist:

- Are they making eye contact?
- Are they scowling or frowning?
- Are their arms crossed?
- What is their posture?
- What tone of voice are they using?

Next, form a general idea of what you think the person means by their behavior. For example, do you think the person feels happy, worried or frustrated? And do their non-verbal messages seem to contradict what they are saying?

Finally, wait for an appropriate moment to ask questions that will help you to check whether your perception is accurate or not. You can simply ask something along the lines of: “Is something upsetting you? You look frustrated.” Asking about a specific non-verbal cue can help you to understand and interpret the person’s behavior in future interactions as well. Be careful not to overdo it with the process of checking your perception (you don’t want to drive your clients crazy with constant questioning!) but when you are unsure of how someone feels about something that is important, this skill can be an extremely beneficial strategy to prevent misunderstandings.



The same principle holds true during a massage session. For therapists, the ability to accurately interpret a client’s reaction to the massage is essential. Keep in mind that clients will often hesitate to “speak up” (especially if they are a brand-new client) to tell you that they are feeling pain or discomfort. You will need to develop sensitivity to feelings of “flinching,” tensing, or sounds of a client holding their breath or moaning,



which are subtle clues that the person feels uncomfortable. If a client does this and the therapist isn't paying attention and is simply "going through the motion" of giving the massage, or, even worse, thinking about what they're going to fix for dinner that night, they will totally miss those cues. And ultimately, the massage will not be a good experience for the client, and they will not return. To overcome this challenge, ask all of your clients periodically throughout the massage if the pressure is too intense (or sometimes not deep enough for their liking). It's better to ask and adapt your technique accordingly than to have a client who feels misunderstood and never comes back again!

Another way to ensure that your client has a positive experience is to be conscious of the room temperature. Since you are doing physically demanding work, you may feel warm and prefer to keep the room at a cooler temperature. But remember that the client is lying naked under a very thin sheet and not moving, so they will get chilled very easily. Checking in with them to ensure they are comfortable is an important part of communication. And obviously, if you're feeling goosebumps on someone when you're massaging them, or you notice that they are shivering, they are too cold! Keep a light blanket or some large towels nearby so you can easily cover them without having to leave them during the middle of a massage to go get them additional cover.



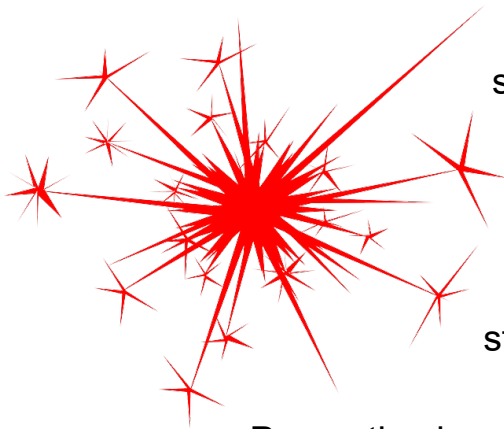
## Communicating Through Touch

Here in the United States, and in many Western cultures, touching is the most personal and intimate form of nonverbal communication that we use in our everyday life. We communicate through touch by shaking hands, hugging, kissing and slapping each other on the back. As massage therapists, we also appreciate the healing value of touch as we use our hands to ease pain and tension. However, since our country is so diverse, as therapists, we also must keep in mind that each culture has very clearly defined rules connected with touching – such as which people can touch each other, where on the body and in which situations. Some cultures tend to be “high-touch” societies and others are decidedly “low- touch” cultures.



To show consideration for your client’s feelings regarding touch (no matter what their culture or background), take a few simple steps to put them at ease: when treating a new client (especially if you are a male therapist treating a female client) provide a light blanket in addition to a sheet to ensure that they feel comfortable and protected. Clear communication involves explaining which areas you will be massaging and which areas you won’t (like breasts, genital areas and buttocks). Make sure to ask if there are any areas that you should focus on and if there are any areas that you should avoid. These simple measures will go a long way in making sure all of your clients feel secure, safe and relaxed!

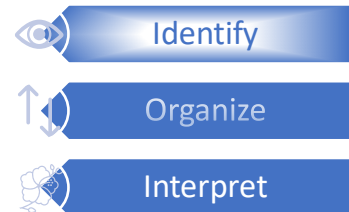
## CHAPTER 2: POSITIVE COMMUNICATION STARTS WITH YOU



Our brain is constantly at work, taking in sensory information about our environment in order to organize itself and make sense of the world around us. The conclusions our minds come to about our experiences become the starting point for what we share with others.

Perception is an active process that happens as we take in our surroundings and then make sense out of our experiences. There are a number of factors that affect how perceptions vary from one person to the next, including our physiology, past roles and experiences, our culture and our present feelings. **Interpersonal perception** is the way we observe other people and then determine how we feel about them.<sup>5</sup>

To illustrate this point, let's consider how this process works when you meet a massage client for the first time:



From the moment you observe the person entering your office your brain rapidly processes input from your senses to *identify* specific information for you to respond to. You may notice the person's appearance, gender, tone of voice, accent and/or any other personal information (*She is calling her husband to remind him to pick the kids up from school.*)

Next, the brain begins to *organize* the information into a predetermined category: “*Busy Soccer Mom.*” Instinctively, our brain seeks to organize our world by creating categories, connecting the categories that go together and then filling in the gaps. When you meet someone your brain searches for patterns that apply to your perception of that person.

The labels or categories like “*Soccer Mom,*” “*Retired Professional,*” etc. represent a pattern of qualities or behaviors that help you to relate to someone on a personal level.

The final stage is when we *interpret* the categorized perceptions that our brain collects into judgments: *This client is friendly, hardworking and in need of relaxation time.*



Learning to accurately perceive others will give you a head start in establishing good relationships with your clients and other people you meet. Most of this process happens within seconds and below our level of awareness. The next time you

meet someone for the first time, remember to slow down enough to monitor your thought progression. As you fine-tune each stage of the perception process, you’ll learn to interpret cues more accurately and respond more sensitively to the needs of the people around you.



Our perceptions can affect how we communicate with other people, just as their perception of us influences the way they act and respond in turn. Communication experts tell us that whenever you communicate with another person there are actually up to *six* people involved:<sup>6</sup>

- Who you think you are.
- Who you think the other person is.
- Who you think the other person thinks you are.
- Who the other person thinks he or she is.
- Who the other person thinks you are.
- Who the other person thinks you think he or she is.

Each collection of perceptions develops into a specific **impression** that we hold of an individual.

The pitfall with the process of perceptions and impressions is that they are formed very quickly, often before we have much actual information about the person. We often tend to hold on to this first impression (whether it's accurate or not) throughout our relationship.

Perceptions and impressions are significant factors when it comes to communicating at work and in our personal life. What is the most important thing you can do to create positive communication in your work environment and prevent misunderstandings or inaccurate impressions? The answer is simple: LISTEN.

Let's take a closer look at the skills involved with listening and responding during dialogue.

## Active Listening

Active listening is a fundamental communication skill for people who have elevated levels of human interaction in their career. As massage therapists, we would probably place near the top of the list of careers involving communication! The core of this skill is for the listener to constantly try to



understand the speaker's point of view or experience. Remember: humans speak at an average rate of 125 to 150 words per minute, but we think at the rate of 400 to 700 words per minute.<sup>7</sup> This means that we may find ourselves so busy thinking ahead or trying to decide what we'll say in response that we are not really listening to what is being said.

### **3 Easy Steps to Being a Good Listener:**

When someone starts speaking, remember that you can become a better listener by following these three simple steps:

#### ***Stop, Look and Listen.***

At appropriate intervals, ask appropriate questions or paraphrase the person's message to make sure that you understand. Being a good listener involves more than just hearing the message—as you listen, try to distinguish facts from inferences and respond with understanding for the person's feelings.



Massage therapists who develop good listening skills will get better information from their clients, maximize their time, avoid problems, and reduce errors. Those who do not develop these skills will often make mistakes, develop misunderstandings, waste time and even lose clients. As health care professionals, we take listening very seriously because mistakes have the potential to cause harm to the people we treat.

How can you improve in your efforts to grasp what a speaker is saying, even if you struggle to understand them when they are speaking? The following tips can be helpful in a number of situations.

### **Listening Tips That Improve Understanding**

The following tips will help you as you interact with massage clients and in your everyday life as well. Try to put them into practice during all of your conversations with people and you'll reap the benefits of being a good listener!

**Choose to listen (or postpone until you can):** Do not try to have a serious discussion while managing several tasks. If you are not able to listen at a certain moment, but are willing to have the conversation later, set an appropriate time when you will be able to give your undivided attention. It's all too easy to fall into a habit of "half-listening" all of the time!

**Create a good conversation space:**

Ideally this should be in a quiet place where it is easy to talk without distractions (turn your cell phone off!) and with privacy so your clients will be able to speak freely.



**Show personal interest:** Establish good eye contact early on; always focus on the person when they are speaking. Never interrupt or break eye contact in order to answer your phone, check the time, send a text message or look at your email.

**Take your time:** Allow plenty of opportunity for the other person to share their story, ask questions and consider what they would like to say. Patiently allow the person to open up, especially if you sense that they struggle to express themselves.

**Respond (instead of reacting):** Let the person know you are sincerely listening by attentive body language, tone, and intention. Make an effort to look your client in the eye and avoid reviewing their forms while they are talking.



**Make sure that you get the message clearly:** Even without any cultural or language barriers, it is completely normal to miss some words or not understand another person's expressions. Don't be shy or afraid to stop and ask for more information or if you've missed a few words, "Could you say that again?" or "Do you mean.....?"

**Be alert for both content AND emotion:** There can be strong underlying feelings that a person may be trying to convey along with their words. If you notice this, in a tactful and professional way, it may be appropriate to ask, "How do you feel about this?"



**Seek to Learn Something New:** As you listen, be open-minded to the other person's point of view. Listen for their experience and learn from it. You may discover a new way of seeing, doing or understanding something.

**Follow their lead:** Allow the other person to guide the conversation in the way they want it to go. Don't change the subject (unless of course the topic becomes inappropriate, and you feel it's advisable to redirect the conversation).

**Show sincere consideration and be kind:** Listen to your clients with an open heart and mind.

## CHAPTER 3: OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO POSITIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION



Before our modern age of travel and discovery...

People told tales of a West African people who had gold to trade. A ship's captain from Portugal reported at the time: "Two hundred leagues beyond [the] kingdom of [Mali], one finds a country the inhabitants of which have the heads and teeth of dogs and tails like dogs. These are the Blacks who refuse to enter into conversation because they do not wish to see other men."<sup>8</sup>

Others told stories of a race of people who had no mouth and therefore were not able to eat or drink. They were said to survive by smelling, mostly apples. A bad odor would kill them.<sup>9</sup>

Sound ridiculous? Those were just a few of the strange ideas and stories that were taken seriously for hundreds of years. It was not until explorers

charted the globe that we realized there really were no apple-sniffing, dog-tailed tribes of people. Today our world is smaller than ever with the globalization of the internet, GPS and satellite technology. Right in our own neighborhoods, air travel has made it possible for people to become recreational explorers and travel the globe within a day or less.



Millions of people are also on the move for personal, economic or political reasons. The United Nations Population Fund recently reported: “On a scale unknown in history—and certain to grow—people around the world are uprooting themselves and migrating in search of a better life.” An estimated 100 million people now live outside the country in which they were born.<sup>10</sup>

The world truly has become a global village and there is relatively little we *don't* know about the people who live on our planet. As ideas, information, and technology are exchanged through massive global communication, our cultures also begin to merge and adapt to each other. The more that millions of people of the world come together, the more we notice what some call “an emerging world culture”. The irony is, however, that even with all of this intermingling in a global melting pot people still seem to be divided, segregated and suspicious of each other.

## Defining Culture

**Culture** can be defined as a learned system of shared ideas, behaviors, customs, beliefs, and knowledge that characterize a way of life. A person's culture impacts their worldview and shapes almost everything they do—as



well as their thoughts, speech and actions.

Culture differs slightly from **ethnicity**, which describes a person according to their racial, national, tribal, religious or linguistic association.

A person learns many of their cultural values through direct teaching during their upbringing, but they also absorb much of it subconsciously. One researcher put it this way: “From the moment of [a child’s] birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behavior. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities.”<sup>11</sup>

Although we often hear the word culture in a negative context, culture clash, culture shock, etc., there are many benefits of culture. As a child grows up she quickly realizes how to please her parents and as she gets older she instinctively understands the accepted social norms and customs, which help her to succeed in life, as she makes decisions and learns how to deal with people.

Of course, what makes each individual unique does not depend only on their cultural background. Within every race, culture and subculture, there are endless variations among people. There are also a number of other contributors, such as our genetics, life experiences and emotional makeup that help to determine what makes each person the way they are. Nevertheless, our culture becomes like a lens through which each of us sees the world.

**Web Resource:** [www.yforum.com](http://www.yforum.com) is a national forum dedicated to understanding people's differences and celebrating diversity. On this site, you can ask questions regarding specific cultures, religions or lifestyles that you would like to learn about that may be uncomfortable for you to ask in person.

Here are a few examples that will help to broaden your world view and your understanding of a few cultures that you may encounter among your massage therapy clients:

### How Culture Affects Language

Culture dictates to us not only the language we speak, but how we speak it. For example, in the Middle East, people value the ability to speak with a colorful array of words and expressions, using skillful repetition and metaphors to express their viewpoints.



However, in several Asian cultures, people are taught to keep their communication succinct and to express themselves only when necessary. A Japanese proverb states: “By your mouth you shall perish.”<sup>12</sup>

In the United States, the term *elderspeak* has emerged to define a well-meaning, but belittling form of speech that caregivers and medical professionals use when talking to their elderly patients. <sup>13</sup>More specifically, elderspeak involves:

- talking more slowly and loudly than usual.
- repeating statements.
- simplifying complex sentences.
- addressing people by their first name or overly familiar terms such as “sweetie,” “honey,” or “young lady.”
- using a sing-song voice, limited vocabulary, and statements that sound like questions.



Even though elderspeak is meant to be helpful and supportive, older people often believe it is patronizing and demeaning. Researchers are now finding that the use of elderspeak can have negative consequences on the psychological and physical health of older people.

Susan Kemper, a gerontologist from the University of Kansas, found that elderspeak influences an older person’s evaluation of his or her cognitive

abilities by reinforcing negative stereotypes about aging and subsequently eroding the person's self-esteem. In fact, the use of elderspeak actually has the effect of *decreasing* cognitive functioning in the elderly.<sup>14</sup>

This example of elderspeak should remind us that language, and how it is used can have profound affects on our thinking, behavior, physical health, and even longevity. If your clientele includes people of advanced age, make sure to speak in a way that dignifies them. The same principles apply when speaking to someone from another culture – be mindful not to speak in a condescending or overly simplistic way, or even worse, shout at someone who can hear perfectly well. All you need to do is to speak calmly and clearly. If the person needs you to speak in a louder voice or to repeat something, they will let you know!

### Cultural Approaches to Time Management



Our culture also influences how we manage our time. In most European cultures, the custom is to arrive early for appointments and to apologize if you are late. However, in many other parts of the world, a person can miss an appointment completely or arrive an hour or two late with little acknowledgement or apology! How can you deal with a difference in cultural approach to time management if it becomes an issue in your massage practice? A tactful way to cope with massage clients who tend to be chronically late for their appointments is to post a friendly sign in the

reception area. If possible, make a call to remind them of an upcoming appointment and confirm the time. If you have a client that is chronically late for their appointments, it may be best to have a “heart-to-heart” conversation about the importance of being on time. Let the person know how much you appreciate having them as a client but help them to understand that your livelihood is involved in maintaining a set schedule of

As a courtesy to others,  
we reserve the right  
to reschedule your  
appointment if you  
are more than 15  
minutes late.

appointments. Some therapists set a policy to charge a fee for missed appointments and others will cut the client’s time short but still charge the full amount when they arrive late.

### **Did you know?**

When researchers asked people to identify their general rules for relationship development and maintenance, they found that the following values remain constant among almost all people, regardless of their race, religion or culture:

- respect each other's privacy
- don't reveal each other's secrets
- make eye contact with the other person during conversation
- don't criticize or embarrass the other person in front of others

Although there may be cultural variations or situations where people mutually agree to modify these rules, these are words to live by – in your work life as a massage therapist and beyond!



## Understanding Cultural Values and Customs

A person's culture also shapes their values and acceptance of social norms. Here in the U.S., think of how you would feel if someone said to you: "Wow, I've noticed that you're putting on a lot of weight. You are really getting fat!" You would probably be



shocked as well as offended! But if you had been raised in an African or some Latin cultures where heftiness is valued, you would probably accept the person's remark as a wonderful compliment! So, before you react to something that may sound shocking at first, stop and consider for a moment or two whether the person you're speaking to comes from a different culture – remember we all interpret messages in a unique way!

## The Trap of Ethnocentric Thinking

More than 2000 years ago, a Greek playwright observed: "Everyone's quick to blame the alien."<sup>15</sup> Have you ever thought that it seems odd that people of differing ethnic groups find it so difficult to trust and appreciate each other? In general, humans enjoy variety and diversity - most of us appreciate experiencing a rich variety of food, music, and scenery when we travel. But somehow our appreciation of variety often ends when we meet people in our own neighborhood who do not think or act or look the same way we do. There is even a name for this problem: **xenophobia** –

the fear of foreign things.<sup>16</sup> Strangely enough, the more Western countries (like the United States) become intertwined in the global economy, the more this fear appears to be on the rise.



Of course, it does not fall within the scope of this e-book class to discuss all of the possible solutions to ethnic conflicts. And although we can't completely eliminate ethnocentrism, we can all do our part to limit it.

**Ethnocentrism** is the tendency we all have to judge other individuals through our own cultural “lens” – a set of values that correspond to the group or culture that we're accustomed to.<sup>17</sup> The New Encyclopedia Britannica notes: “***Ethnocentrism . . . may be said to be almost universal. Members of nearly all the world's cultures regard their own way of life as superior to that of even closely related neighbors.***”<sup>18</sup>

What's the problem with strong ethnocentric thinking? History has shown that narrow worldviews can easily become a gateway to discrimination, hostility and conflict. A prosecutor who investigated war crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia observed: “This sort of thing can happen anywhere. Here are two separate lands, with distinct cultures and histories, yet similar atrocities [are] committed by neighbor against neighbor. This kind of brutal ethnic or religious warfare is just discrimination taken to a violent phase. The victimized group must be dehumanized or demonized. Once this is done, it frees ordinary people from the moral restraints that would normally inhibit them [from] doing such terrible things.”<sup>19</sup>

We all can do our part to reduce tension between people of diverse cultures. Many of us, whether in our work as massage therapists, or in our private lives, cope with problems that come from a lack of communication or misunderstandings with people of a different race. These conflicts may involve neighbors, workmates or even our clients.



As massage therapists, we're especially called upon in our work to have close personal interactions with people from all walks of life. Therefore, minimizing any misunderstandings is a priority for career success. When we meet someone from a culture that is new to us, being aware of our own ethnocentrism reminds us to take a break from making judgements and make room for us to learn about and appreciate new cultures. If this seems difficult to put into practice, or if you were raised in an area where diversity is not valued, it may be helpful to keep in mind that you do not have to give up your own culture to appreciate another one. But in order to relate to the people you live and work with and to understand human behavior, it can help to identify the logic that exists behind specific ideas and customs that are common in your area.

**Cultural relativism** is the idea that an individual's beliefs and activities are understood by others in terms of the person's own unique culture. In 1887 the father of anthropology, Franz Boas, remarked that: "...civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes."<sup>20</sup>

## CHAPTER 4: EMBRACING DIVERSITY– LEARNING TO ADAPT TO OTHERS



The goal of this chapter is to help you in your massage therapy practice to consider the positive aspects of diversity, especially among your clients and other people you work with. Instead of focusing on the differences and making them a point of contention, we can all benefit

from reaching out to people whose culture differs from our own. By proactively breaking down walls to communication and bridging the gaps, you will be better equipped to address those issues and learn practical ways to deal with these 21st century challenges in your career.

In addition to our culture, we all develop a unique worldview or perspective on important issues such as the meaning of life, death and other spiritual matters. A person's worldview affects their thoughts, speech and actions and it influences how a person interacts with others.

### **Communication Strategies for Bridging Differences in Relationships**

To live comfortably and successfully in the 21st-century, we all need to learn to appreciate and understand our differences instead of ignoring them, suffering from them, or wishing they would just disappear.

### **Did You Know?**

While waiting to cross the street in Mumbai, India, an American tourist stood next to a local resident, who proceeded to blow his nose, without a handkerchief or tissue, into the street. The tourist's reaction was instantaneous and unequivocal: *How disgusting!* he thought.

He responded to this cross-cultural incident by evaluating the Indian's behavior based on standards of etiquette established by his own culture. According to those standards, it is considered proper to use a handkerchief in such a situation. But if the man from Mumbai were to see the American tourist blowing his nose into a handkerchief, he would be equally repulsed, thinking it strange indeed for the man to blow his nose into a handkerchief and then put the handkerchief back into his pocket and carry it around for the rest of the day.

Both the American and the Indian are evaluating each other's behavior based on the standards of their own cultural assumptions and practices. This way of responding to culturally different behavior is known as **ethnocentrism**: the belief that one's own culture is superior to all others. In other words, it means viewing the rest of the world through the narrow lens of one's own culture.

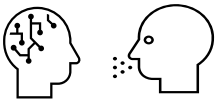
***From: Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective by Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta***



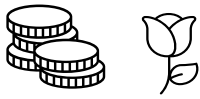
Interestingly, researchers in the field of human behavior have pinpointed six fundamental dimensions of culture. Each unique culture emphasizes the following dimensions in differing degrees:



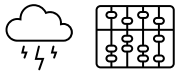
**1. Individualism (or an emphasis on the individual) versus collectivism (which is an emphasis on the group).** Societies such as the United States, Great Britain, Sweden and France tend to put greater value on individual accomplishment than they do on collaborative achievements.



**2. Context: Emphasis on the surrounding context, including nonverbal behaviors, versus little emphasis on context.** High-context societies including Japan, Saudi Arabia and Greece generally draw information from the background of a situation and follow unspoken rules of dress, conduct and communication. In these areas, non-verbal messages will be given more attention. In low-context societies like Australia, Germany and the United States, people prefer to have information presented in an explicit way using words instead of non-verbal cues.



**3. Masculine values that emphasize accomplishment, versus feminine values that emphasize nurturing.** People from masculine cultures tend to value wealth, achievement, and assertiveness and distinctive gender roles are emphasized. Ireland, Mexico and Jamaica are examples of countries that place more emphasis on masculine values. People from more feminine cultures, such as Chile, Thailand and Portugal tend to focus more on sensitivity, caring, and quality of life.



**4. Degree of tolerance for uncertainty:** Some societies are able to tolerate more uncertainty and ambiguity than others. People from India, the United States, Canada and Singapore for example, have less formal expectations of others and can “go with the flow” in times of uncertainty. In societies like Peru, Belgium and Japan, people need certainty to feel secure; therefore, there are more rigid codes of conduct and rules for behavior.



**5. Approaches to power or authority:** Some cultures prefer an equal distribution of power, whereas others are comfortable living under a hierarchical government. China, France and Russia are all countries where centralized power is accepted, and people generally expect that certain individuals will have more power than others. People from societies like Switzerland, Israel and New Zealand often strive for greater equality of power and control.



## 6. Short or long-term approaches to time and time management.

A culture's orientation on time tends to focus on either short-term or long-term values. People in societies with long-term orientation value perseverance and savings, because these will pay off in the long run. A long-term approach also encourages people to work for the good of society instead of focusing on personal accomplishment. Examples of long-term societies are Taiwan, Vietnam, Brazil and Hungary. Cultures with short-term values place greater emphasis on tradition and social obligations and encourage spending in order to obtain immediate results. Nigeria, Canada, the United States and Spain are examples of societies that lean towards short-term orientation rather than long term.

As you can imagine, even within these six dimensions, there is room for an endless variation among cultures. And there is no “right” or “wrong” way to approach them. What often hinders communication between people of two different cultures (or what blocks it altogether) is the tendency that people everywhere tend to assume that their own culture is superior (also known as **ethnocentrism**). Most people naturally believe that their own values, customs, beliefs, religion, lifestyles, and ideas are correct, proper, and better. Or as Rudyard Kipling said, “All nice people like Us, are We, and everyone else is They.”<sup>21</sup>





## Did You Know?

There are an estimated 5,000 unique cultures (groups of people who speak mutually unintelligible languages) around the globe. 850 of them are found on the continent of Africa alone! And in addition to language differences, there are hundreds of variations among values, religions, possessions and behavioral tendencies.

As we grow up in a given culture, we unwittingly acquire our ideas, values, and behavior patterns. In fact, almost everything we do during our daily life is a learned behavior that is influenced by culture. Behaviors like: Wearing shoes, combing our hair, sitting down to eat meals, obeying traffic laws, sleeping in a bed, and shaking hands are all learned responses that are appropriate to our cultural environment. But they may or may not be part of the cultural norms of the people you work with, so if in doubt...ask (tactfully)!



## Broadening Your Outlook

As humans, we are all naturally drawn to people who seem to be much like ourselves, and who share our attitudes and values. This helps us to trust and understand them and to develop friendships. So, you might ask, what do we stand to gain by improving our intercultural communication skills? For one thing, good communication often reveals the underlying reasons why other people think and act the way they do. An improved mutual understanding of each other's cultural background can do much to remove social prejudice by helping us to see how much we really do have in common, regardless of our culture.



Writer Thomas Abercrombie pinpointed one of the best ways to change our perspective: “One never seduced by a foreign culture can never appreciate the fetters of his own.”<sup>22</sup> As

massage therapists who deal with the public on a daily basis, we would never want to fall into the trap of thinking that we (or our culture) have a monopoly on everything that is good. It is all too easy to fall into thinking that our personal beliefs, religion or habits are the only correct ones; again, this is to behave in an ethnocentric fashion. To counteract this tendency, do what you can to be open minded and enthusiastic when you encounter clients or coworkers in your massage therapy practice who have a different culture or background than the one you are used to.

Developing an appreciation for new cultures enriches our lives by expanding our outlook on the world. It also helps us to understand ourselves better as well as the people we meet. If you live in a diverse area, think of it as an opportunity to travel the globe without leaving your hometown!



### Practical Ways to Sharpen Your Intercultural Communication Skills

*"If we understand each other's languages, but not their cultures, we can make fluent fools of ourselves." -William Gudykunst*

No one will deny the fact that the process of listening and responding between cultural backgrounds can present enormous challenges. The greater the difference in culture between two people, the greater the potential there is for misunderstanding and mistrust.

**Prejudice** is a judgment of another person formed on the basis of stereotypes before knowing all of the facts. It inhibits effective communication, especially if these labels are inaccurate or assume superiority on one person's part. Communication author and consultant Leslie Aguilar notes that without realizing it, people often perpetuate judgments in ways that may seem harmless.<sup>23</sup> If you monitor your day-to-day conversations with clients or the comments among your coworkers in

between appointments you may identify jokes, generalizations and rigid descriptions that are surprisingly full of unfair prejudices. For example:

“A priest and a rabbi are sitting at a bar....”

“All of my clients this afternoon are blue-haired ladies....”

“She was definitely having a blonde moment!”

**Intercultural communication competence** is the antidote to prejudice. It is the ability to adapt your behavior toward others in ways that are sensitive and acceptable to the other person’s culture. We can break this skill down into three basic steps:

**1. Learn:** As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, it is especially important to gain knowledge about the rest of the world. To our parent’s and grandparent’s generations it made very little difference whether they spoke a second language, knew the name of world leaders or even had a valid passport. But today, as Americans, we make up a nation whose actions send ripples throughout the rest of the world. An old cliché started by an Austrian aristocrat says: “When America sneezes, the world catches cold.”<sup>24</sup>

**2. Build the motivation to do it:** Try to be mentally ready to respond to the needs of others. As you begin each workday, make a concerted effort



to be positive, non-judgmental, and open to new ways of thinking. These attitudes are vital for success in a career in massage therapy, where you will meet people from just about every culture and walk of life.

When interacting with clients or coworkers from a different ethnicity or culture, you may find that you need to keep your ego in check. You may also have to let go of old thoughts or feelings that have developed from a negative past experience. Do what you can to treat each interaction as a fresh start and avoid making any evaluations of the person or their character until you learn more facts about them. Improving your intercultural communication competence does NOT mean that you will have to give up your own cultural values in favor of others. But it does require that you learn to see things from another perspective – by learning how other cultures view our culture and understanding the internal logic of a person who was raised in a different environment.



When you encounter cultural contradictions or conflicts with clients or coworkers, try to see the situation as an opportunity, not as a liability that you will have to deal with. The more you develop motivation and learn about new cultures, the better you will be at coping with differences and the more adept you will become at putting them to work for the benefit of you and your clients.

**3. Sharpen Your Skills:** As you learn to put your knowledge and motivation into action you can improve the effectiveness of your communication with people of cultures that differ from your own.

So, don't be afraid to break out of the mold! Try food from a culture that is new to you, borrow books from the library about a cultural destination you'd like to visit and work to develop friendships with people who were raised in a different cultural context. You'll never regret learning more about people and expanding your horizons.

Start by paying close attention to the other person's non-verbal cues whenever you begin a conversation. If you notice that the person looks confused, distracted or uneasy, take action by adjusting your style of talking and your choice of words accordingly. Listen and respond attentively.

### **Did You Know?**

In a 2006 survey conducted by National Geographic and Roper Public Affairs, young Americans (ages 18–24) could only answer questions correctly about other nations and cultures 54% of the time. The study showed that 63% of those young Americans could not locate Iraq on a map, even though it is a country the United States had been at war with for several years.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, the United States continues to be the only country in the world where students are allowed to earn a college degree without taking courses in a foreign language. Most university students in the United States graduate without any functional knowledge of a language other than English.

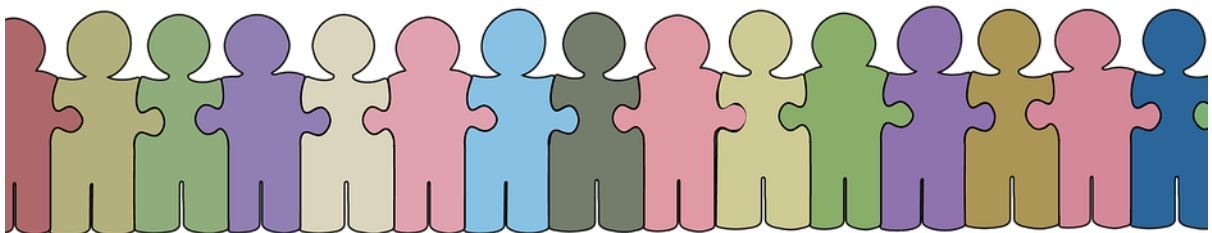
If you're interacting with someone from a culture that is completely new to you, work hard to create a "third culture" that you both can become part of. Developing this skill can be especially advantageous for therapists to develop. Creating a calm, inviting environment (or "culture") where your clients feel welcome, safe and comfortable will enhance the quality of your relationship with them. (Try to do this with ALL of your clients - whether they are of the same cultural background or not – doesn't everyone appreciate spending time in this type of atmosphere?) Not to mention, this is a wonderful way to ensure you will be successful in your practice—when a client feels comfortable, they are sure to return for more massages!



## **Food for Thought**

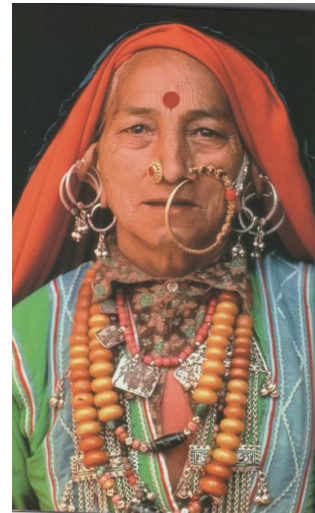
As members of a global human family, we have so many things in common. Looking for these things and discussing them with your clients (no matter what their background or culture) makes communication easier and helps to build relationships.

Just a few examples: all of us want good friends and have the emotional needs of being loved and respected. Everyone tries to protect themselves and their loved ones from physical and emotional pain. People of all cultures love music, art and food, tell jokes, believe in being kind and civil to one another, and search for ways to be happy and secure. Try to think of a few more during your next conversation with a massage client. Finding common ground and sharing interests with your clients (no matter what their culture) will help the person to feel heard, understood and valued, which is a bond that will help them to become a long-term client.

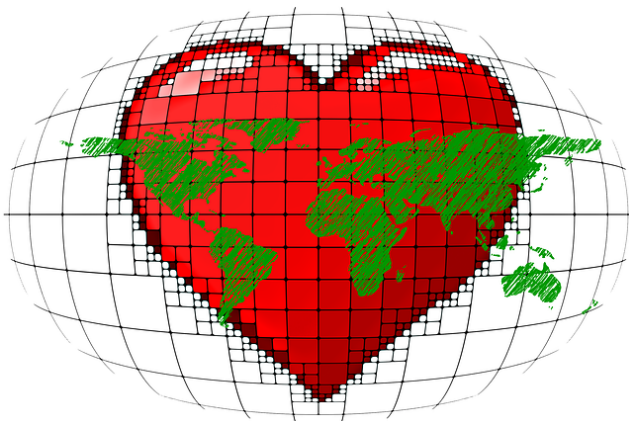




As you get to know each of your clients better you will learn specific patterns that will help them to feel at ease – such as the amount of eye contact, conversation and personal touch that they prefer. You will need to be creative and flexible because no matter how many people you meet during the course of your career, there will always be new customs and cultures to adapt to. So, you will have to be able to learn to be flexible and adapt as you go.

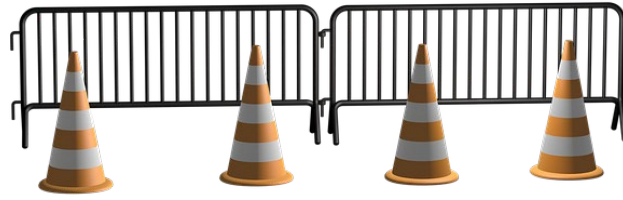


Most importantly, don't allow yourself to work on "auto-pilot" when you meet with your massage clients, going through the motions without thinking or responding, *especially* when dealing with someone from a different cultural upbringing.



At your first appointment with a person from a background that is new to you, it's helpful to ask the client if there is something you can do to get to know them better. They may share some simple ways for you to modify your behavior that will

lead to a more positive and beneficial experience. Creating opportunities for open dialogue from the very beginning of your relationship will really help your client to feel comfortable and appreciated, which in turn, will result in repeat visits.



## Identify Behaviors That Build Barriers

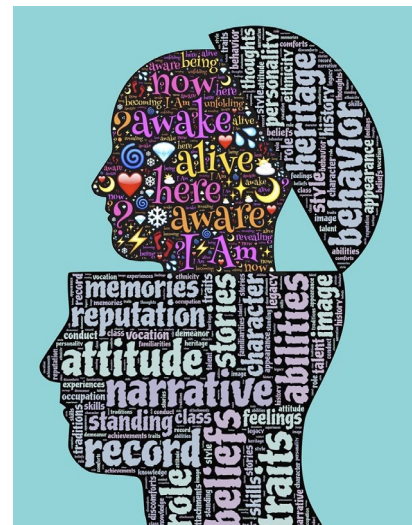
When dealing with the public, there are several behaviors that we all should avoid because they can cause us to draw incorrect conclusions about people we meet:

### Ignoring Information

Giving too much attention to information that is obvious and superficial can cause us to miss what's truly important or to judge other people's motives based on their physical appearance.

### Stereotyping

Placing an oversimplified, rigid category to a person based on preconceived ideas is a way of stereotyping. When we make snap judgments about someone, with only a small amount of information, we may put unfair expectations on them or treat them inappropriately.



### Imposing Consistency

Although all of us have behavior that varies from day-to-day, we may assume that the way another person acts is constant and consistent. We tend to believe that the way someone acts on one occasion is the way they

will always act in the future, but this is not always the case. Each of us might have “bad days” and so it is important to get past our own issues in order to see someone else for who they really are and not judge them based on one experience.

### **Focusing on the Negative**

Giving more weight to negative information than to the positive. Just one piece of negative information may skew our impression or override any positive input we may receive about a person.

### **Blaming Others by Assuming They Have Control**

There are always things happening that are outside of a person’s control; however, when a problem arises, it’s easier to blame the person instead of the external factors that actually cause things to go wrong.

### **Avoiding Responsibility:**

When we make a mistake, we save face by telling ourselves that other people, not ourselves, are to blame for the problem. Then when things go well, we attribute it to our own behavior and skills, rather than giving credit to the people who have helped us.



## CHAPTER 5: MANAGING CONFLICTS SUCCESSFULLY

You are now equipped with new tools to become a better communicator, a good listener and a responsive and sensitive massage therapist. Starting today, as you begin a new workday, you can start putting these skills into practice - and not only with your massage clients, but with everyone else that you meet and interact with.



But what if, despite your best efforts and your new-found skills, suddenly, it happens: you find yourself in the middle of a heated discussion or misunderstanding with someone, perhaps one of your long-time clients. What should you do? This chapter will help you to put communication strategies to work when it really counts so that you can speak and act in a way that may help to salvage the

relationship. And of course, we know that conflicts are not limited to our work life. In our everyday relationships, misunderstandings are bound to happen from time-to-time. No matter how well you communicate, interpersonal conflict is simply a fact of life!

## How Conflicts Arise

There are generally four elements that are involved in conflict:

- An expressed struggle or difference of opinion
- Two (or more) unique people who have a relationship that causes them to depend on each other
- The attempt to reach a specific goal
- The perception that one person's objectives or resources are incompatible



You'll know immediately when a conflict is developing because of your body's instinctive response: you'll feel your heart rate increasing, your muscles tensing, you may notice your voice rising in pitch and volume and you might notice that you are "reacting" and getting defensive. You'll most likely notice the same indication from the other person involved in the conflict as well. Feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, frustration or outright anger can suddenly rush in, making it much more challenging to deal with the conflict in a rational way.

But believe it or not, conflict can actually be a constructive process that leads to a positive outcome. The key is using the strategies we'll discuss in this chapter that you can fall back on during times of heated emotional interactions. These strategies will help you to make the best decisions and keep any anger that you may feel focused on the resolution, rather than on the personalities involved. When they are managed effectively, conflicts with others can help you to gain new perspectives and can develop healthy patterns in a relationship. Opening up about your differences in a calm clear way actually can strengthen a relationship and ensure that future interactions are more satisfying for everyone involved. Experts tell us that the following benefits come from conflict:

- Conflict helps you to increase your understanding of the other person involved
- It focuses both people's attention on the issue that needs to be resolved and what may need to be changed
- It allows you to express your personal values and beliefs
- Conflict reveals what is truly important
- It keeps relationships (and life!) interesting
- Once resolved, conflicts strengthen a relationship and demonstrate to both parties that together you can successfully manage and overcome disagreements

Conflict only becomes destructive when people view the situation as a win or lose battle instead of looking for mutually satisfying solutions where everyone involved benefits. A tell-tale sign of a person who tends to have destructive conflicts with others is their unyielding way of responding to the people involved in the situation.

## Positive and Practical Approaches for Conflict Management



If a conflict arises during your interaction with a massage client, the best approach is damage control – taking action so that a relatively simple misunderstanding doesn't escalate into a heated confrontation. As you gain experience in your massage therapy career, you will start to notice potential triggers and ways to deal with sensitive issues effectively.

The two most common causes of conflict are the same ones we encounter first in our childhood playground battles: issues of entitlement and fairness. In your massage therapy work, if a client feels that they are entitled to something but are then denied it (for example: if a client feels they were not given a massage treatment for the full amount of time they paid for), they will be much more likely to enter into a confrontation or conflict. Or if a massage therapist feels they have been dealt with unfairly (by a client who misses several appointments and refuses to pay a non-cancellation fee) it's not hard to imagine how these issues of entitlement and fairness can easily ignite into a conflict.

## ***Did You Know?***



### Gender, Culture and Conflict

Research suggests that there are distinct differences in the ways people with feminine communication styles and masculine styles tend to react to conflict. For example, if you have a more feminine style, you are more likely to pay attention to relationship issues, and you tend to interact with others in order to develop closeness and interdependence. If you are more inclined towards a masculine approach, you are more likely to focus on tasks and how they interact with the intent of achieving goals while keeping your distance from others.

In addition to gender differences, a person's culture also influences the way they manage conflicts. In many cultures, conflict tends to be highly expressive, meaning that it focuses on the quality of the relationship and on controlling feelings of tension or hostility. In other cultures, however, conflict has a more instrumental effect, which is less concerned with relationships and is focused on achieving a specific goal or outcome.



Unfortunately, there are no magic skills or phrases you can use that will simply melt the tension away from a heated situation. However, if you are concerned with salvaging a relationship with a massage client or anyone else you interact with, you may want to consider using one or more of the following strategies:

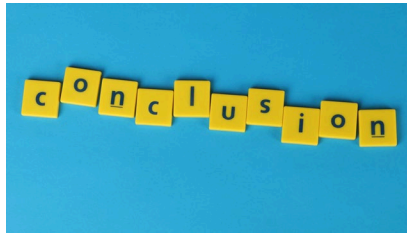
1. Clarify everyone's understanding of the issues that are the source of the disagreement.
2. Avoid derogatory language, name calling or attacks on a person's character.
3. Focus the discussion on the facts, without bringing up any past conflicts or old grudges.
4. Allow time to develop a positive emotional environment instead of diving into a heated discussion.
5. Be willing to work beyond the most obvious solutions. Offer your own ideas and be open to options that the other person suggests – you may come up with something innovative that meets both of your needs!
6. Don't try to resolve several complex issues at once. Choose the most pressing part of the situation and address the related issues head on.

7. Find common ground and acknowledge any truth that you hear in what the other person is saying.
8. If egos get in the way, or the discussion becomes heated, take a break. Allow each other time to cool off and revisit the matter when everyone has had a chance to regroup.

Using these approaches to manage a conflict is an excellent way to keep strong emotions in check. Whenever a conflict arises (as they inevitably do) try to implement problem-solving approaches along with empathy and good judgment. Taking these steps will help you to chart a course that leads to a mutually agreeable solution without causing damage to the relationship.



As you reflect on your experience, try to take whatever good can come from the situation and learn from it to prevent future misunderstandings. For some more information on communicating, visit this website: <https://hr.mit.edu/learning-topics/comm>



## CONCLUSION – PUTTING SKILLS INTO ACTION

Relationships and communication are at the heart of almost every human experience. As massage therapists, we are in constant contact with clients and coworkers from all walks of life. If, like most massage therapists, you would like to:

1. Succeed in your career
2. Derive the most joy from your work
3. Develop long-lasting relationships with your massage clients



Then be committed to continually developing your communication skills!

Don't forget that development of your interpersonal skills will be a life-long challenge. Rather than overwhelming yourself by trying to improve every aspect that is discussed in this class all at once, pick out one new skill, put it into practice, (anticipate having some awkward moments along the way), learn from your mistakes and celebrate your achievements! Always keep an open heart and mind to meeting new people and learning new ways of thinking. By doing this you'll find success in your massage therapy career and enrich your life with much more meaning.

These skills can reach much further than just your work life, too! We all have an innate desire to communicate with the people around us and to build relationships. Unfortunately, while it brings certain conveniences, the trap of modern technologies that are designed to enhance communication—like social networking, text messaging and emails—are actually very limited in their ability to let us relate to one another. Make sure you keep your phone and computer in their proper place and never use them to the point that your face-to-face conversation skills become rusty!

Communicating with each other in our modern world will always take effort and will present challenges and even conflicts from time-to-time. Putting the skills you've learned into action and constantly working to sharpen them, will allow you to navigate through your interactions with people successfully. As you improve your interpersonal communication, you'll also notice how it positively impacts your relationships with friends, family, and your life partner. In addition, you will find that conflicts with co-workers lessen, and your massage therapy practice will be filled with happy and relaxed clients! And since communication is such an essential part of life you will personally feel the benefit of how good communication enhances your health—physically, emotionally and spiritually!



In summary, I hope you now have an appreciation for how important it is to improve our interpersonal communication skills, not only with our massage clients, but also in our everyday dealings with coworkers, colleagues, family and friends! Happy Communicating!



**THANK YOU for taking this e-book class. I hope you found this e-book class to be informative and helpful.**

**I am available to offer support to you, so please don't hesitate to get in contact with me if you have any questions!**



# ENDNOTES, REFERENCES, AND RESOURCES

## Endnotes

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