

Eric Stephenson

I have spent the better part of the last fifteen years obsessed with the subject of body mechanics as it relates to massage therapy. It is a healthy obsession, as I am always looking for a better or easier way for not only massage therapists but also other spa service providers to work optimally.

There are two main reasons for a diligent pursuit of optimal mechanics. The first may seem obvious- it helps preserve your physical body and energetic resources. It is no secret physical injury is a major cause of compromised daily life for practitioners and forced premature exit from the spa profession. The second is possibly not as obvious but I would contend, is as crucial- it vastly improves the quality of touch that a client experiences.

Moving from the body's core and maintaining spinal alignment are the biggest postural challenges we face in providing a service whether it is a massage, facial or a pedicure. Without continual, conscious awareness, we fall into habitual movement from our shoulders. The effects of gravity pull our head and shoulders forward as our torso moves into flexion, taxing the lumbar vertebrae and the spinal extensors. The practice becomes paying attention to mechanics- every session.

The best example of this is the well documented effect of forward-head posture. According to Rene Cailliet, M.D., if the head weighs ten pounds and the center of the ear sits directly over the center of the shoulder, the load on the spine and its tissue is only 10 pounds. However, if the head is translated forward, its weight increases 10 pounds for every inch forward. From my own observation, the majority of spa practitioners have between 3 to 5 inches of forward head posture when performing a service. How can we best prevent this? By remembering to bring our head back to a neutral position, bringing our spine back into alignment and trusting our palpation skills to guide us.

For a massage therapist, palpation skills don't require much help from our eyes. In fact, habitually looking down at our work not only has detrimental effects on our spine, it compromises our sensitivity. That sensitivity is exactly what enables a great therapist to feel muscle contraction, fascial adhesion and potential trigger point activity. So the idea becomes to concentrate on staying as relaxed as you can through the joints, so that your proprioception picks up on the tension in the client's body, rather than the tension in your own.

So the idea of perfecting your body mechanics becomes in reality, a daily practice. It is only through constant awareness that your body informs you of what is not working, either through discomfort or decreased sensitivity underneath your hands. Armed with the knowledge of forward head posture in the front of your mind, paying utmost attention to spinal alignment will go a long way toward your career longevity.

Upward,

Eric