

My spa offers deep-tissue massage at a higher price than regular massage. Can you explain the difference and why it costs more?



COURTESY OF ART RIGGS

Art Riggs responds:

I think there is a perception that the increased charge for a deep-tissue massage session is justified because the therapist is working harder; however, any extra charge for deep-tissue massage should be because the practitioner has taken advanced courses to learn new skills.

We will get into some specifics of the differences between deep-tissue and regular massage in a bit, but it is helpful to first dispel some misconceptions:

- **Deep-tissue massage is painful.** This comes from the no pain, no gain fallacy, and there is a big difference between working deeply and working hard. The emphasis is simply upon sinking to deeper levels of stress in the layers of the body with a bit more emphasis on therapeutic results while using some of the tools I will explain later.
- **Relaxation massage is for enjoyment, while deep-tissue work is for specific problems.** There are two misconceptions here: Relaxation massage is for much more than enjoyment. It is therapeutic for many reasons, including specific benefits to the muscles through increased circulation and health benefits that result from releasing general tension levels in the body that accumulate due to the stresses of life, physical and emotional. Conversely, many people find deep work extremely gratifying and enjoyable, not just for the long-lasting benefits or improvement of performance in activities or sports, but because it feels good.

- **Deep-tissue massage can be risky, unpleasant and not entirely safe.** Actually, proper training in deep-tissue skills goes into much more detail about contraindications and working safely than initial trainings and is quite safe.

There are many variations in how practitioners perform deep-tissue massage, in terms of both therapeutic goals for the work and how it is practiced.

Therapeutic goals

Both for treatment and prevention of a multitude of soft-tissue problems related to acute or chronic conditions, deep-tissue massage releases adhesions and improves muscle function for better alignment of muscles to help improve joint mobility and proper function.

- **Improvement of performance in activities.** Whether in sports, dance, yoga or everyday activities, the stresses of life result in short and tight muscles that limit mobility and cause pain or discomfort. Deep-tissue massage places more emphasis on grabbing and stretching short muscles and fascia that hinder performance instead of sliding over and compressing tissue as a more general massage that uses a lot of lubrication.
- **Improved posture.** This particular facet of deep-tissue massage, sometimes called structural integration, focuses on careful analysis and a systematic and structured plan to lengthen short muscles and fascia that adversely affect posture, so people can stand or sit erect and move more freely.
- **Emotional and psychological freedom.** Some theories of the personality emphasize the integration of the physical and emotional components of health. Many people tighten, or armor, their muscles into habitual



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patterns that reinforce emotional patterns, when they are stressed or don't feel safe. As these physical restraints are released, many people also report a profound emotional response.

Deep-tissue tools

The proper application of pressure in deep-tissue massage necessitates a broader range of tools than those used in conventional relaxation massage. Some people assume if an elbow is used, it must be intense, but the elbow often allows the therapist to use proper mechanics in her body, so she is not straining and is relaxed.

If your therapist is relaxed and not straining, then the work will feel better. To sink through superficial layers, she may use focused and precise tools, such as her knuckles or an elbow. For large muscles that require more pressure, she may choose to use the forearm or a fist to focus attention on a broader surface.

Practicing deep-tissue massage

The first thing you may notice in a deep-tissue massage session is much less lubrication is used. Just as trying to turn a doorknob with slippery hands is difficult, it is difficult to grab and stretch short tissue if too much lubrication is used. This may be the biggest distinction between regular massage and deep-tissue massage. Minimal lubrication requires less pressure to grip tissue, so profound work may actually be less intense than when the therapist works too hard to overcome the slipperiness of excess lubrication.

Deep-tissue massage does, indeed, work with deeper layers of the body by sinking through superficial layers. This does not mean substantially more pressure is needed, as the therapist sinks vertically until she senses the layer of tension and then moves obliquely to lengthen short muscles and fascia at this layer.

Strokes will be considerably slower and possibly shorter as the therapist waits for a slow release of tension, and may move quickly or even skip some areas so more time can be spent on specific areas of need.

Clients are often asked to be actively engaged in the process by moving to positions that stretch muscles

and joints to effect a release.

A session may not cover the entire body. Doing spot work allows for meticulous and careful attention to problem areas rather than spreading the work too thin.

Although it should not be painful, work may be more intense and utilize active cooperation of the client to consciously release areas of holding. However, a deep-tissue massage, whether full body or for spot work, should not attempt to coerce the body into submission.

Many people feel they get more benefits by scheduling a longer deep-tissue massage of 75 to 90 minutes. This allows for a more relaxed and enjoyable pace and attention to specific areas of holding.

No sharp line

The line between a deep-tissue massage and relaxation massage is not a sharp one. A good relaxation massage should slow down and pay particular attention to specific areas of restriction, and a good deep-tissue massage should also have relaxation and pleasure as a major goal. As in all bodywork, the key to a gratifying experience is largely a function of good communication and clarification of objectives.

Art Riggs is author of the textbook, *Deep Tissue Massage: A Visual Guide to Techniques*, which has been translated into seven languages, and the acclaimed seven-volume DVD series, *Deep Tissue Massage and Myofascial Release: A Video Guide to Techniques*. He also maintains a private bodywork practice in Oakland, California, and teaches deep-tissue massage, myofascial release and Rolf workshops. His website is www.deeptissuemassage.com. 