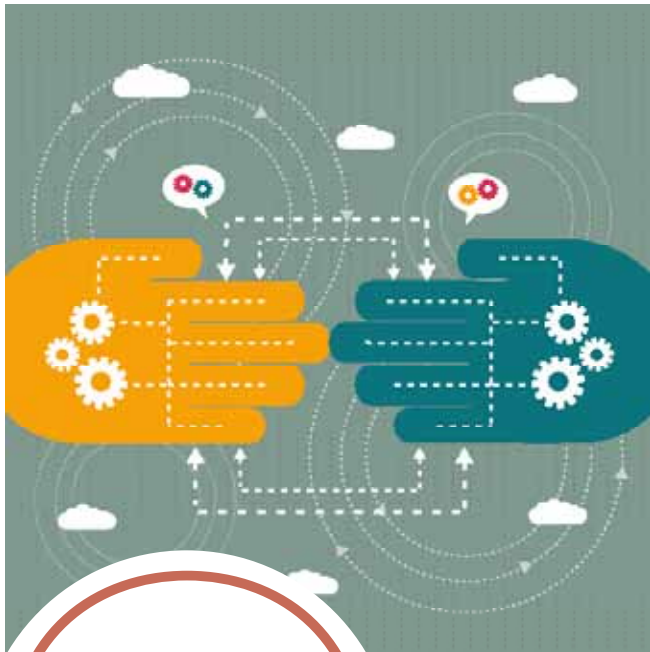


The Language of Touch

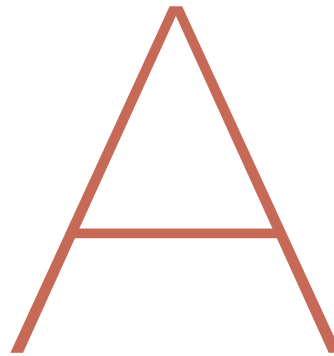
9 Communication Skills to Improve Therapeutic Outcomes

By Art Riggs



DEAR ART,
I continue to take continuing education classes and learn new techniques, but my work remains essentially the same. Do you have any suggestions to help me find a new level of expertise?

—EAGER TO ELEVATE



DEAR ELEVATE,

I'm a great advocate of taking classes to expand our skills. And although learning specific, quantifiable techniques may give a temporary boost to our confidence, it may not necessarily transform our work at a deep level in the nonquantifiable aspects of touch. It can be like a golfer who continues to buy new clubs in hopes of transforming his game instead of focusing on the basics of his swing.

The most important breakthroughs in my bodywork have not come from learning new techniques, but from a constant internal quest to communicate my therapeutic goals through a conversation between my hands and the client.

Let's analyze our touch by comparing it to speech:

1. Therapeutic Goals

The goals of our session, be they relaxation and enjoyment, better function, alleviation of pain, etc., are the subject that we attempt to communicate to our clients. What do we want to happen in the body? We need to have a clear intention of the message we want to convey and a realistic plan for achieving our goals. Rote strokes or routines can seem as insincere as the scripted spiel of a used car salesman.

2. Strokes and Techniques

This language of our touch is the basic and all-important vocabulary we use to convey our therapeutic goals. The skill is to choose the simplest, most effective, and most pleasing strokes and techniques to clearly get our point across. Just as every word in speech or poetry should have a precise purpose, every stroke should have the same.



One slow and focused stroke is often better than four or five quick strokes, allowing the body to listen to our message and us to receive feedback.

3. Pacing Our Sessions

Any good speaker will not try to cover too much in her speech, ensuring that important thoughts will not be diluted. Rather than spreading ourselves too thin over the whole body, concentrate on two or three major areas to leave a lasting impression.

4. Speed and Repetition

We want to speak at a pace that allows our thoughts to sink in to the listener. Many therapists work with repetitive fast strokes or give too much input for the client to really hear what we are saying. One slow and focused stroke is often better than four or five quick strokes, allowing the body to listen to our message and us to receive feedback.

5. Intense and Deep Work

This translates to volume in speech. Just as it is unproductive to yell in an attempt to make someone understand a complex idea, pushing harder rarely helps get our point across to resistant tissue. When explaining a difficult subject, sometimes the best course with bodywork is to slow down and lighten up so the body can listen and not resist. The key to this is to feel the voluntary melting as tissue responds to our touch, not attempt to coerce it.

6. Reading the Body's Messages

We all know certain people who consider communication a one-sided lecture rather than a reciprocal exchange. Some therapists are so intent on their output that they really don't listen to what their clients' bodies are trying to tell them. Melding with the tissue to feel its response is absolutely crucial, not only to know what to do, but also to know when we have been successful with our goals. A recent student of mine suddenly got this feeling and joked, "I'm reborn! I feel one with the fascia!"

7. Precision in Focus

This would be compared to how clearly a speaker enunciates his words. Our touch should be clear and precise, particularly with regard to the depth and intention required to effect the best release—not too broad or superficial, but not too myopic so that work can be integrated over large areas.


8. Intangibles of Touch

Just as a mellifluous voice can immediately grab our attention and put us at ease, most anyone can tell how good a session will be in the first two minutes of work. A pleasing yet relaxed, powerful but focused touch is more important than employing many specific techniques.

9. Interesting Touch

We must keep our client engaged. Just as a monotone voice can bore a listener, lack of variation and contrast in our touch can hamper getting our point across. So if you have been working with quick strokes, draw out your stroke on resistant tissue (or vice versa) to add impact. Catch the attention of clients by varying the intensity and depth of our work rather than "speaking" at just one volume. After particularly intense work, gentle relaxation strokes are an excellent way to let the body respond to our message and relax in readiness for our next lesson.

Dear Elevate, infinite combinations of these skills are possible, which makes our internal quest for a better touch a rewarding lifelong journey. Aspire to have an eloquent touch, and that goal will translate into the transformation in your work that you seek. **m&b**

 Art Riggs teaches at the San Francisco School of Massage and is the author of the textbook *Deep Tissue Massage: A Visual Guide to Techniques* (North Atlantic Books, 2007), which has been translated into seven languages, and the seven-volume DVD series *Deep Tissue Massage and Myofascial Release: A Video Guide to Techniques*. Visit his website at www.deeptissuemassage.com.