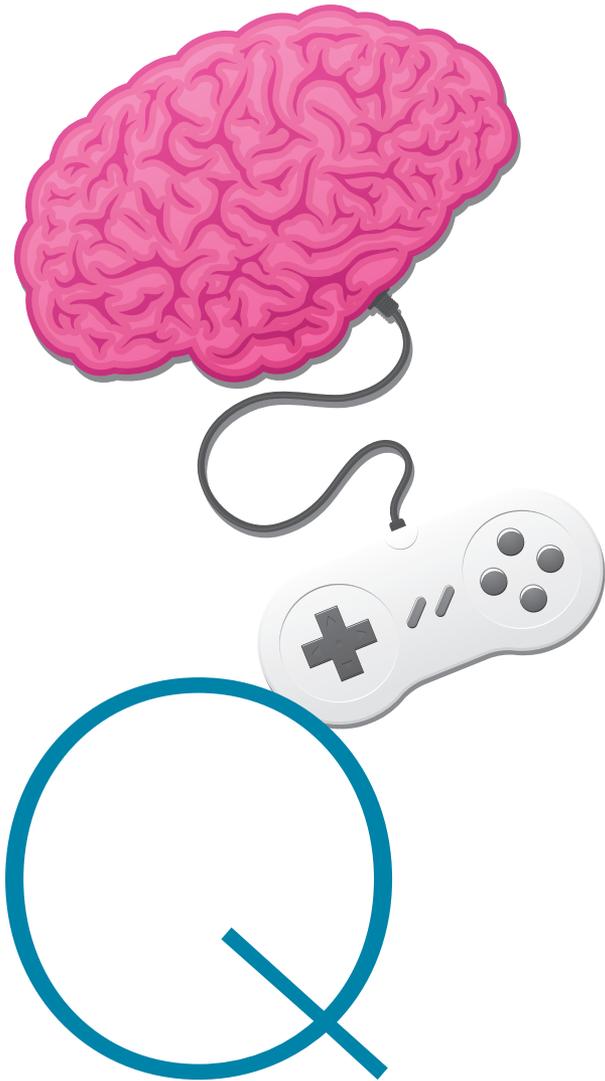


## AUTHENTIC EMOTION



DEAR ART,  
I'm taking an advanced continuing education (CE) class and the instructors are trying hard to elicit a strong emotional release when demonstrating on models. This upsets me. I feel this is unethical and potentially harmful, and it conflicts with my previous training. What is your opinion?

—FRANK

# A

DEAR FRANK,

I can empathize with your feelings—or rather, “I feel your pain.” Some teachers in my CE classes over the years appeared to be trying to impress practitioners with the power of their work by demonstrating their ability to initiate emotional release. Some therapists in the class reserved their spots in queue for a meltdown virtually every day so they could have their 15 minutes of fame in the center of the healing circle. My opinion is that expanding our skills is an important part of the profession, but it should be limited to our professional parameters.

You're correct: playing amateur psychologist is in conflict with our scope of practice as bodyworkers. I know several clients who expressed their distaste for what they consider to be intrusive and leading questions by some therapists attempting to steer the session into psychological encounters. If one wants to be a psychologist, then by all means pursue that goal with accredited academic training and a long period of supervision. But how would we bodyworkers feel if psychologists began offering massages without proper training?

The mind-body relationship is very real, though, and one of the wonderful gifts we can give our clients is the ability to feel and express their emotions within proper boundaries and in a safe environment. Spontaneous emotional reactions do happen during bodywork, and I will offer a few suggestions for dealing with them. However, there is a huge difference between allowing emotions to naturally occur and the manipulation of

those emotions, either verbally or physically. In the early days of the Human Potential Movement<sup>1</sup>, some therapists would perform painful work, exhausting clients until they would finally break down in tears or yell in anger, knowing that the therapist would be satisfied and lighten up.

An important principle in our work is to never attempt to induce any emotional response—sadness, anger, contact with an “inner child,” or repressed memories. When potential clients ask me if I do emotional bodywork, I tell them that I am very comfortable with anything that comes up in a session, but I do not consider myself to be an evocative therapist that attempts to manipulate the session.

Some clients will, of course, be looking for just such a relationship, and there will always be some well-meaning therapists who will serve these peoples’ needs. However, these practitioners are treading on thin ice. Often, the cathartic releases really aren’t therapeutic and can simply be unconscious reactions to play along with the therapist’s agenda, or a repeating drama without any real connections to deep emotions. Some clients practice a repeating cycle of several emotional release sessions until the routine seems repetitive, then move on to another therapist to start the cycle anew.

Superficial reactions are usually not problematic and may well serve a purpose for some clients, but amateur attempts to initiate emotional catharsis can amplify serious consequences such as transference, projection, and other quagmires. There is also the danger of releasing deeply held emotional trauma that the massage therapist is unable to deal with.

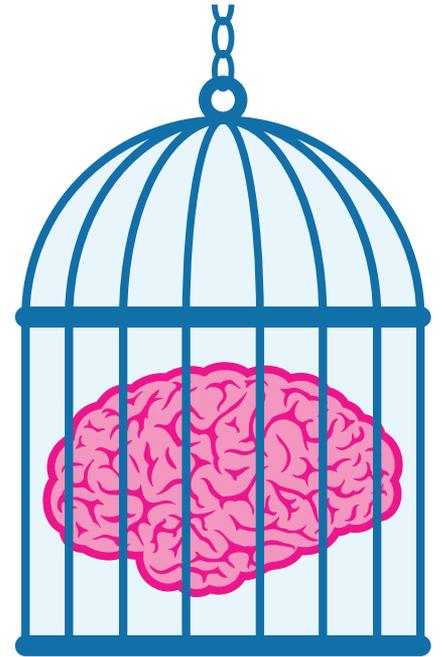
## GUIDELINES

A respected teacher and good friend, Lucy Rush, offers the following advice for dealing with clients who have an emotional reaction to your bodywork:

## Playing amateur psychologist is in conflict with our scope of practice as bodyworkers.



- Never try to create emotional release.
- Support a spontaneous release when it arises—whether it’s sadness, anger, or physical reactions like changes in breathing or muscle movements—by simply observing and allowing it to happen. Do not attempt to intensify or prolong reactions by saying “Let it all out,” or engage in dialogue asking them to explain their feelings.
- Always have a glass of water and a box of tissues nearby. Some reactions may build on themselves. If you feel that the reaction is escalating in an unhealthy manner, ask the client to sit up and offer water and a tissue.
- It is our job to maintain the safe shape of the session at all times. Avoid asking, “What would you like to do?” This may allow for some options that are not appropriate, such as the client asking you to leave the room or for close physical contact.
- Don’t give the perception that you are uncomfortable or that the response is inappropriate. After an appropriate amount of time, check in on the client and offer specific options, such as working in a different area,



sitting quietly, working with the breath to return to normal patterns, or winding down the session.

Frank, it is gratifying to see your ability to not look at everything that teachers say as written in stone. I hope you glean some useful techniques from the class, and I’m confident you can maintain your professionalism. **m&b**

**6** Art Riggs is the author of *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.deeptissuemassagemanual.com](http://www.deeptissuemassagemanual.com).

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The Human Potential Movement arose in the 1960s with the goal of cultivating what its advocates believed was the untapped potential for growth and change lying dormant in all people. Some examples include Werner Erhard’s EST training, Abraham Maslow’s theories of self-actualization, Transcendental Meditation, primal scream therapy, walking on hot coals, rebirthing, intense bodywork, and many other psychological and bodywork philosophies aimed at uniting the mind, body, and soul.