

exploring today's touch therapies

# MASSAGE

ISSUE 220 • SEPTEMBER 2014 • [www.massagemag.com](http://www.massagemag.com)

BIOFREEZE® FALL PROMOTION  
Buy More  
and save!



SEE  
PAGE  
90

HOW STRESS AFFECTS  
BODY & BRAIN

**12 Tools**

TO IMPROVE SESSION  
OUTCOMES

NEW TECHNIQUE  
STRETCHES CLIENTS

**Herbal Infusion**  
MAKE YOUR OWN  
MASSAGE OILS!

6 STEPS TO FACEBOOK  
MARKETING MAGIC

MEDICAL CHAIR  
MASSAGE

APPLICATIONS OF  
CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

**A Better Brain  
With Bodywork**

*Massage Envy*  
SPA®

Career  
Opportunities!

Page 22



# Stretch Yourself

## Some Clients Are Different—and That's OK

by David M. Lobenstine, L.M.T.

**T**he first time I massaged a pregnant woman, I was terrified. She lumbered into the wellness center where I worked, exhausted and enormous. Her belly ballooned in every direction; it didn't seem possible that she was able to stand without falling over. I introduced myself. She sighed. She told me her legs felt like tree stumps, and the swelling was so bad in her wrists that it was hard to grip the doorknob

for her bathroom. Which was a particular problem because she had to go to the bathroom *constantly*. And, she sighed again, "Let's not even get started on my back."

We were already five minutes into our session time; I hadn't even explained how she should lie on the elaborate stack of pillows I was sure would topple over at any moment. I fumbled through an explanation and then fled the room to gather myself.

What could I possibly provide for this woman? Never had I been so aware that I am a man, that I am womb-less, that I will never know what it feels like to grow another human inside of me.

If I couldn't understand—if I could barely even imagine—what she was going through, how could I possibly help her?

Although I wouldn't appreciate it until years later, this anxiety-inducing client and her unfathomable belly represented one of the most exciting parts of my job: I get to work with people who are completely, often discomfotingly, different from myself. And the more we as massage therapists work with those clients who are somehow different from us, the more we learn a valuable lesson: The inability to understand what your client is going through can make you a better therapist.

### Difference = discomfort

Let's be honest. Each of us prefers working with some clients more than others. I suspect that each of us has a certain type of client we are drawn to; perhaps that granola-crunchy Earth mama who asks you about energy fields, or maybe that athletic-but-not-too-muscled businessman who falls asleep before you apply the oil.

The reverse is equally true: We all come across certain types of clients who we don't want to work on. Clients who make us feel nervous, uncomfortable or grossed out. Sometimes the reason for our response is painfully obvious. (Read: body odor.) But other times that knee-jerk withdrawal is far less transparent. You shy away from introducing yourself, you dread the prospect of working on them, or you feel your body resisting as you begin the session.

In some cases, that resistance is because of transference or countertransference between you and the client: The client reminds you of your dying mother, perhaps; or the client says she believes you are going to cure her of her endless ailments.

Here, though, I actually want to talk about a more mundane, but far more common, dilemma: the anxiety and discomfort that comes from working with those clients who make us uncomfortable. In my experience, that discomfort usually emerges because these types of clients are, in some basic way, *different* from us.

For some therapists, obese clients present a particular challenge, forcing us to confront our own biases,

stereotypes and judgments. Other therapists are terrified of working on pregnant women for fear of causing harm to the baby. Still others are made uneasy by cancer, and the unavoidable reality of death such clients embody.

Like most human beings, massage therapists don't like to talk about the things that make us uncomfortable. But what compounds the problem is that more than most people, massage therapists are supposed to be warm and fuzzy; meaning, we are supposed to want to help everyone. So, our fear, anxiety and distaste when faced with certain clients can be particularly troubling, making us feel guilty or inadequate, making us even less likely to want to talk about these feelings.

Yet, if we are to be satisfied and successful therapists, we must overcome that instinct to suppress our discomfort. We must do the opposite: We must bring our discomfort out into the open and reckon with it. So, let's be honest. What makes you uncomfortable? Men? Pregnancy? Clients with cancer? Overweight clients? The elderly?

**Plan on investing at least 15 percent of your time in marketing to maintain your practice—and more than that to expand it.**

### Difference = inevitable

I think most massage therapists are empathic, meaning we want to understand what our clients are feeling. We pride ourselves in being able to sense tension or tightness in other people. We observe posture and assess range of motion and strive to piece together the puzzle of another person's body. And yet there is a larger truth we must acknowledge: It is impossible to know how someone else feels in his or her own body. That reality may seem depressing, but ultimately it is a great asset to our work.

We are all astonishingly similar: The same many muscles, give or take a few, laid over the same skeletal frame. And yet from that fundamental sameness emerges one simple fact that makes our work endlessly challenging: We are utterly different from one another. All those fibers and tendons that we share with every other human function differently for every one of us. And even more importantly, we each *experience* our bodies differently from everyone else. That absurdly complex interplay of the musculoskeletal, nervous and

## When building your clientele, keep in mind that the most effective means of marketing message is through a personal approach.

endocrine systems means that pulling a hamstring, or getting a flu shot, or receiving a massage, resonates a little differently inside each of us.

When a client describes something I have experienced—a tight iliotibial band, for example, or soreness in the forearms—my first response is to think, “I know just how you feel. I’ve felt that too!” But that instinct is an illusion. I know what *my* iliotibial bands feel like; that’s it. We may be familiar with a client’s symptoms, but we cannot fully grasp the actual experience of those symptoms in her body. We cannot fully know, no matter how much a client tells us, the full depth of how a client is feeling, and of the meanings those feelings carry.

This inability to understand is to our benefit. This inability is a reminder that our own experiences should not color our treatment. Just because you get cluster headaches does not mean the treatment you want for yourself is the treatment that will be best for your client. We must honor that boundary between ourselves and our clients. We can understand the condition, we can have some broad concept of sensations—but we cannot know the full depth of what our clients feel, and what those feelings mean for them. That inability to fully comprehend reminds us of the importance of asking questions, of not making assumptions and of honoring the uniqueness of each human being.

### Difference = opportunity

As we acknowledge that uniqueness, we realize something else: *Every client is different from us.* Some differences are more obvious—the client missing a limb, the client with spina bifida—and more anxiety-producing. But if we strive to be exceptional therapists, we must remind ourselves of the exceptional, if subtle, differences that exist between every one of us. Seen from this perspective, difference is less intimidating and more liberating. Ironically, once we acknowledge that each of us is different, in some fundamental way, from every other one of us, then that client with cancer doesn’t seem quite

so different, or quite so intimidating. As we look more closely, we see that difference is always a matter of degree. There are no clients whose somatic experience we can fully understand or imagine; but just as important, there are no clients whose experience is so unfathomable, so different from our own, that we cannot help in one way or another.

For your relationship with that type of client who makes you particularly uncomfortable, there is one very clear solution: Continue learning. My own work has been transformed by studying with pregnancy and perinatal massage expert Carole Osborne, and now pregnancy and perinatal massage is a cornerstone of my private practice. Advanced training is a great means of allaying anxiety. But acknowledging the difference that continues to exist between us all, no matter our level of training, is no less important.

Indeed, that recognition will also make us better therapists—even to that client who we feel akin to, whose body feels instantly familiar. It is easy to assume that we know what that client is going through, but we don’t. The person whose experience is obviously different than ours—who is pregnant when we are not, who is skinny when we are obese, who is dying when we are healthy—is just a more vivid illustration of the difference that exists between any two human beings.

We will be more effective therapists if we honor that gap that exists between each and every one of us, if we honor the uniqueness of each and every one of our clients. That way, we can prevent ourselves from making assumptions about the body on our table. We can avoid the fallacy of believing we know what our client needs. Instead, we can listen to the particulars of what each and every client’s voice, and body, needs to tell us.

David M. Lobenstine, L.M.T., is a massage therapist, continuing education teacher and owner of Full Breath Massage ([www.fullbreathmassage.com](http://www.fullbreathmassage.com)) in New York, New York. 