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Rubbing People the Right Way

How to find the perfect massage therapist

By Lois Barth



Over the years, I've heard countless scenarios about the "bad massage experience that turned me off." And this always surprises me, considering all the gifted therapists I know. Amidst the occasionally comic tales of the "massage from hell," what I often discover is that most of the time, there's nothing wrong with the therapists. They simply were not the appropriate practitioners for that client.

Needless to say, I am a full-fledged member of the massage fan club and am fully aware of both the psychological as well as physiological benefits of it. I believe that prospective clients who more about massage techniques and pinpoint what they are looking for in a massage therapist will benefit more from treatments and experience fewer disappointments.

Here's a brief description of different bodywork techniques:

Swedish

Uses a combination of several types of strokes, with oil or cream, in the direction of the heart. Benefits include improved circulation, the removal of toxins, breaking up muscle adhesions and increasing range of motion of joints and ligaments. Swedish is done on a massage table, with the client disrobed and draped with a sheet and towel. Overall intention: soothe and relax the client's muscles, joints and fascia.

Shiatsu (Japanese for "finger pressure")

The body is divided into energy pathways (meridians) that correlate to different organs of the body. Along those meridians are individual pressure points. These points are pressed to stimulate balance as well as aid organ function. Overall intention: balance on both a muscular and organ level.

Sports Massage

Uses a foundation of Swedish but adds other techniques, such as passive and resistive stretches, deep-tissue works and trigger points. Focus: accelerate injury-related recovery.

Foot Reflexology

This technique uses a "map" of the body on the soles of the feet-different areas correspond to various organs. By massaging the sole of the foot, the whole body benefits.

Polarity

Using a series of gentle hand positions, the practitioner balances both the positive and negative electromagnetic fields of the body. Don't let the subtlety of this work fool you. It can be exceedingly powerful. Focus: deep relaxation and centering.

Questions to ask yourself?

Why are you getting body work? Obviously, massage feels great. But what is your personal interest in it? Below are three of the most common reasons I hear from patients for their interest in massage.

The "feel-good touch"

It's your basic soothing, relaxing, sometimes invigorating, massage. It's mostly based on a Swedish technique, (although it can combine different techniques) and its primary focus is to relax, relieve aching muscles and make you feel like a giant wet noodle afterward.

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"I'm in pain and need specific spot work massage"

This need arises from an injury (sports-related or otherwise), and needs more adept attention from a skilled massage therapist. Massage therapists *never* diagnose, nor are they a substitute for medical attention. However, a knowledgeable practitioner can usually pinpoint the area of discomfort and facilitate some relief. When you're in need of this kind of treatment, it's best to work with someone who has a strong medical and sports massage background.

"The massage mobile"

I say this with tongue in cheek, but I mean it in all earnestness. Massage can be an important vehicle in one's healing and learning. There are those who are on a spiritual as well as emotional journey and who see bodywork as an opportunity to make a body-mind-spirit connection. If you are seeking massage for this purpose, the different techniques usually matter less than the intention of the practitioner does.

In all three categories discussed above, these are important things to look for in a therapist:

Professionalism

Does the therapist ask you pertinent questions? Questions should be in regard to your health background, if you've had massage before, and if so, what modalities seem to work best for your body.

Presence

Does the therapist seem "present" or just going through the motions? Does he or she answer the questions you ask specifically and to your satisfaction? Does he or she maintain eye contact with you? If they shake hands with you, how does their touch feel? Does the therapist's space work for you? No matter how good a therapist is, you won't reap all the benefits, if you don't feel comfortable, at ease and safe in his or her space.

Where to find a therapist

Obviously, the best way to find a therapist is through a referral from a friend you trust and share sensibilities with. However, if you are new to an area or haven't gotten any specific recommendations, these are some other resources you can use.

Chiropractors and osteopaths usually work hand in hand (no pun intended, I assure you) with massage therapists. If they don't have someone in their office, they usually have someone to which they can refer you. Bonus: if you work with a massage therapist in a doctor's office, it can often be billed through your insurance.

Health magazines: Most major cities have either new age or health publications that cater to the alternative folks. Read them. Perhaps there will be an article from a massage therapist that resonates with you.

Massage schools: Most massage schools and institutes have an alumni placement and referral center. Tell the school what you are looking for. Ask for several names and make sure to have a brief conversation with each therapist before making your decision.

Enjoy!

Ms. Barth has been a licensed massage therapist and in private practice since 1986. She has been on staff on four different chiropractic centers in New York City and had an on-site massage company, Healingworks On-Site Services. As a source expert she was interviewed in *Classical Singers Magazine* on the benefits of massage for opera singers. Her personal essays have been published in the *New York Times* and the *New Jersey Herald*. For an appointment call 212-682-5225.