

A Guide to Receiving Tension-Release Massage

This form of massage has a single objective:

To find and release pain-producing tension in the physical body

Releasing tension from the body is not a simple task. Patterns of tension in the body can be complex and deeply rooted. They are energy 'blocks' in physical form, and restrict the flow of life force. We don't usually feel these tension patterns, but if ignored they can produce stiffness, restrict breathing, increase proneness to injury (especially in the joints) and cause or sustain spinal misalignment. Eventually range of movement is restricted, joint pain and arthritis occurs, and pain increases as blood flow is restricted.

A modest amount of tension is required in the musculature, even when the client is lying relaxed on the healing table, to keep all the bones in correct alignment. This good tension is called muscle 'tone'. Anything more than this minimum amount while at rest represents unwanted tension (hypertonic).

Most people don't think they have much (or any) excess tension in their bodies, until the therapist presses a little more firmly in certain places, and gets down below the surface level. The client may experience excess tension as a sharp pain, and will typically recoil from it. This will not usually release the tension.

A more useful response is to allow the pressure to increase to a level of pain just before the body tightens up - perhaps 8 on a scale of 0-10. At this level the pain is sharply felt, but the body does not freeze or clench up, and the client can still breathe. The client then 'breathes into' the painful place and invites the tension to release, then 'breathes out' to release the tension.

The client needs to learn the skill of tolerating this level of discomfort for a few moments at a time, and encouraging his/her tight places to release. Initially it can be challenging, but as the client experiences the deep relaxation afterwards, there is increased appetite for working at this deeper level to clear tension.

There is an important distinction between 'good pain' and 'bad pain'. *Good pain* is when the therapist presses into a tight place, there is some pain, but the area softens and the pain reduces. The tension has been rubbed away. The therapist will know this has happened because the fingers sink deeper into the muscle, and the pain decreases even when higher pressure is applied. *Bad pain* is where the tight place stays at the same level of pain and nothing changes. It is pointless to persist rubbing an area of 'bad pain' because it will only cause bruising and stiffness afterwards. Another approach is required by the therapist.

Tension often forms a network in the body, rather like the root system of a tree. All parts of the body are connected by a web of connective tissue. Imagine the trunk of a tree as the spine of the body, and the roots reach out all the way to the fingers and toes. Tension in the lower back or the belly can be traced down the legs to the knees, ankles, feet and toes, and tension in the chest and upper back traced out to the fingertips or up to the crown of the head. To uproot a tree you need to dig the roots out all the way to the extremities before the trunk will come loose. So in this style of bodywork a lot of work is done on the hands and feet to 'loosen' the tension pattern so the large muscles in the legs, back, shoulders and belly can be helped to release more easily. It may seem odd to work around the little toe in order to help release down the outside of the thigh, but it seems to work!

The client is quite active during a session, focusing inwardly on the tight places, breathing into them and inviting them to release. It definitely takes practice, and the client and therapist need to find ways to communicate about the level of pressure/pain the client is able to work with, especially at the beginning.

Afterwards the body can feel soft and rubbery like that of a young baby, and there is a great relaxing over the area that has been worked (re-lax = bring back to a state of looseness). Occasionally the client may feel a little worse for a day or so afterwards - this is not an indication that the work was ineffective. After this kind of tension has been cleared you feel fantastic!