

## Say It Ethically: Table Talk (Part Two)

Think about what you say to clients—and how you say it—during a session.



Opening our discussion on verbal communication and ethics, Part One of this series [Fall 2003] focused on the sensitive issue of reporting and sharing information about the sexual misconduct of clients or practitioners. This writing addresses an even more commonly encountered conversational challenge—ethical table talk.

### Introduction

“Table talk” refers to the verbal communication that occurs between a practitioner and his or her client during “table time.” Table time is the specific segment of the bodywork session during which the client is actually lying on the table.

While client vulnerability exists throughout all phases of the session, it is especially heightened during table time. So, what we say and how we say it during this time period requires particular ethical scrutiny.

### Influencing Factors

Consider these three significant factors that contribute to the increase in client vulnerability during table time:

1. **Positional defenselessness.** The mere fact that the practitioner is standing and fully clothed while the client is lying down and partially, or completely, undressed under the draping insinuates the client’s vulnerability and defenselessness. Lying down willingly, with the intent of receiving, physically expresses surrender, submission and trust.

2. **Presence of pain.** Clients seek the services of massage therapists and body-

workers for numerous reasons, including pain. The experience of pain, whether it is emotional or physical, can increase feelings of vulnerability. Clients whose lives have been altered by pain and injury can become desperate to resolve their problem, making them more receptive to suggestions and promises a practitioner may make. Furthermore, they may experience an increase in their painful symptoms when the problem area is being treated.

Think about the last time that you had a painful procedure done, and how you might have been affected by words spoken during that procedure. Ethically weighed words could have been comforting and helpful; a careless comment or apathetic remark could have increased the experience of injury and trauma.

3. **The hypnotic effect of massage and bodywork.** The rhythmic flow of movement, the calming effect of the strokes, the relaxing music and the parasympathetic response of the nervous system all contribute to the deep relaxation induced by massage therapy. In the relaxed, mesmerized state that can be induced by massage and other forms of bodywork, the client’s vulnerability is amplified because of the increase in suggestibility that accompanies a trance state.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the following quote by Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar, a multidisciplinary body-centered psychotherapist:

“It is amazing to realize that touch therapies induce spontaneous trance in most people. Should the therapist suc-

ceed in conveying the unconditional positive regard in her touch—many a times will the client automatically drift into trance, often a deep somnambulistic trance.

“Trance is a hyper-attentive state, which usually involves relaxation and self-absorption. In Trance, the ability to communicate with inner processes is enhanced and intensified.”<sup>2</sup>

### Think Before You Speak

Different circumstances call for different parameters regarding how much verbal communication is required during the session. For example, an hour-long relaxation massage would call for a different amount of verbal exchange than a regional deep-friction massage. Whether the situation requires occasional or frequent communication, the subject matter, our wording, tone, inflection and timing are crucial during table time.

The following reminders can enhance appropriate conversational exchange and ethical delivery of information and feedback to clients:

1. Provide a framework for how much conversation is suitable and preferable with each client during table time.

Bring up the subject of talking during the massage before the client gets on the table. Many times, first-time clients do not know what is appropriate or expected, so discussing the issue directly eliminates their uncertainty. If the session requires communicating in terms of a pain scale, clearly explain the terminology to be used.

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The following statements offer various ways to broach the subject, depending on what the particular situation calls for:

“I will not be talking during the massage, except to check in about your comfort. Feel free to talk if you would like to, and it is always appropriate to speak up if you are uncomfortable with any part of the massage.

“I prefer quietness during the massage to enhance relaxation, so try to breathe deeply, relax and clear your mind by tuning in to where I am working. It’s fine to ask questions or make requests to adjust your comfort.

“The work I am doing requires that we communicate about when I am approaching ‘the spot,’ so I will be checking in with you frequently.

“Talking uses face and neck muscles, so please refrain from talking while I am working in those areas, except to give me information about your comfort.”

2. Avoid being a “chatty” practitioner, and use discernment regarding self-disclosure.

During the intake of new clients, I always ask them about their previous massage and bodywork experience. If they report having significant experience with other practitioners, I ask them if they are comfortable explaining why they discontinued seeing the therapist(s). Straightaway, the majority of my clients report that the practitioner talked too much during the massage, explaining that it ruined the enjoyment of the experience, and that it caused more stress than relaxation.

Remember: Table time is the client’s time, not the practitioner’s time. No matter how well we know the person lying on our table, it is best not to use table time to talk about your private lives or personal issues. It would be more appropriate to set up time after the massage to socialize with clients who are also our friends or relatives.

3. Avoid making comments about a client’s body or physical appearance.

Any comment about a client’s physical characteristics or appearance, even if it is a complimentary one, can insinuate flirtation, scrutiny or judgment, none of which are appropriate, particularly during table time. For example, to speak

with admiration about a tattoo or a client’s noticeable weight loss is to also declare that you are observing the client’s body beyond the scope of your professional role. While some clients may feel flattered by such comments, others may feel self-conscious and exposed, and it can intensify their vulnerability.

An assessment can help you determine if a comment is appropriate to make to a client. Ask yourself if it’s appropriate to say the exact opposite of what you are thinking. In other words, if you consider making a comment about liking a client’s tattoo, would it be ethical to say the opposite, that you don’t like it? Or better yet, if you want to compliment a client about losing weight, would you also comment about them gaining weight? Chances are, if the opposite comment could be injurious, then the compliment is best left unsaid.

4. Report your objective findings using “clean” language.

While comments about appearance are best avoided, it is appropriate—and necessary—to inform clients about our palpatory findings, as well as our other observations that are pertinent to their therapy. Use clear, professional terminology to report findings, such as tissue tension, asymmetry, restricted movement, skin discolorations, temperature changes and open lesions.

Avoid using terminology that can be perceived as diagnostic, such as “lump” or “rash.” The word lump can panic a client, since it is often used to describe cancerous conditions. If you palpate a lump while working on a client, a suitable way to express it is, “My hands have come across a change in tissue integrity in this area.” If you want the client to have it examined by a medical professional, you can add, “Since this is something I cannot address with massage, I suggest that you see your doctor about it before you see me again.”

The word rash can insinuate the presence of a communicable condition, which also can be alarming to a client. A less suggestive phrase to inform a client about the presence of a rash is, “I notice a red, raised area on your leg.”

Upon palpation, care must be taken not to respond to your findings of tissue tension and adhered areas with remarks such as, “You’re a mess!” or “Holy smokes, what have you been doing?” As obvious as it seems in this context that such statements are unprofessional, they easily can flow out of lackadaisical conversation during table time.

### Final Thoughts

Spontaneity in speech, though easy to fall into and beneficial in establishing rapport, can take a toll on our ethical effectiveness with clients during table time. It is not that we must weigh and measure our words as much as it matters that we strive to bring conscientious awareness to the possible impact our words can have on our clients’ experience. To say it ethically is to say it with the intent to create and maintain a safe space, even with our words. ❏



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### References

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