

No-Hands Massage

by Gerry Pyves

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Beginning Practitioner

When I completed my massage training in 1984, I felt so inspired by my teachers that I gave up 'the day job' and went into massage full time. For the first three years I did well, and built up a good practice. Occasionally, I got the odd twinge or ache in my hands and wrists but these soon passed and I thought nothing of it. Towards the end of my third year, when I was just getting known by some very successful (and demanding) international musicians, these pains became more persistent and were noticeable outside the massage session.

I started to find that everyday activities, like turning a door handle or riding my bicycle, were causing me pain in my wrist. One morning, as I was lifting my mug of tea, I cried out as a sharp pain shot through my arm from my wrist like an electric shock. That day I had eight clients to massage.

I write about that day in the introduction to my book *No-Hands Massage*.¹ I tried all the 'solutions' I could think of, but unfortunately my first client of the day, Anton, hadn't cancelled, did not want light work, nor did he want hypnotic relaxation or visualization techniques. He was specifically asking for deep structural massage.

Anton was a bear of a man, and he was clearly not impressed by the sole use of my non-injured left hand in the first few minutes of the session! Nor was I, actually, as this one also developed a shooting pain almost immediately.

I could not go back in time and find out what was missing in my training or what I was doing wrong with my technique. I could not afford to take time out as I had a young family to support, a mortgage and no personal injury insurance (how many bodyworkers earn enough to pay the atrocious dividends on this type of insurance?). I did not want anyone telling me about the pathology of my condition, or how I should take up this activity or give up another. No, what I wanted was a solution. There was none. Apparently.

In despair, I slumped. Quite literally and without realizing it, I slumped onto Anton's back whilst thinking of the words I would use to explain stopping the session. And out of the dark pit of my despair, as if from far away, I heard Anton saying, "Mmmm...that feels really good". Puzzled, I came back into the 'here and now' and found that most of my body weight was slumped onto Anton's back, and he was literally purring! I started to lean again, and he moaned with pleasure. More leaning. More groans. I put oil over my arms and started to sweep Anton's back with my forearms, thinking furiously of my bodyweight and the potential risk of injury to Anton. I had started to 'think into my body'.

Redecision

Out of sheer necessity, in that moment I determined that any strokes that applied pressure through my hands were clinically redundant. I had started dancing the dance of No-Hands Massage.

I was not interested in the theory of injury at this point, nor of blaming my training or trainers for being 'good' or 'bad'. Nor was I prepared to go into the role of a victim and glorify my injury or blame my bad 'luck'. I was only interested in a workable clinical solution so that I could pay my mortgage and do what I loved doing...bodywork!

As I began sweeping Anton's back with my forearms, trying to remember anything I had ever seen or heard about using other body parts to apply massage strokes, I had no idea what I was starting. The immediate result was that I managed to complete my massage sessions that day with only a couple of my clients noticing that anything was different, except to comment that my work seemed 'deeper'.

As time wore on and I began to allow my creativity to flow, I found that not only was I enjoying my massage sessions more, but also that I had more and more energy at the end of each day. Another peculiar thing also began to happen – my sessions were finishing sooner and sooner with clients unable to think of any more bodywork they needed from the session. They were satisfied. I found myself massaging clients for only thirty to forty minutes – instead of over an hour. I often wanted to continue and give more, but they were so obviously complete in their sessions that further work would have destroyed the calm contentment they were experiencing.

I reserved my hands for light-pressure touch only. I found that my wrists got better. This was only partly due to the rest they were getting. It was also due to the fact that I was using the soft anterior surface of my forearm to apply over 50% of my strokes. The clients were, in effect, massaging my forearms with their bodies!

Abolishing the use of my hands for any stroke that involved pressure meant that I had to find other body surfaces that would adequately replace the versatile hand. I found seven surfaces in my forearm and fifteen in the rest of my body. In effect I also lost the use of my wrist joint, which is the most versatile joint in the body. To compensate for this and to apply my alternative contact-surfaces, I found myself moving my body more like a dancer every session.

As a result, I became healthier. At my Centre there are photographs of me from before I started developing No-Hands Massage. Nowadays, in almost every group I teach, someone comments on how much healthier I look in comparison with these photos.

Stroke Laboratory

Over the years, as my clinical experience and reputation grew locally, other bodyworkers sought me out for supervision and advanced clinical training. Many of them were either struggling with injury or complaining of occasional pains. I passed on my ideas regarding injury-free massage and they gave me their feedback. Eventually I formed monthly Professional Development (PD) groups in which we combined clinical supervision with training and other professional and personal issues.

The twenty or so bodyworkers who joined these groups took my ideas out to their clients and reported their own findings after using my strain-free alternatives. Their feedback was very encouraging. Each stroke I developed was offered to them and feedback was given both from their clients and from their experiences as bodyworkers.

A case study from a bodywork practitioner – Geraldine

“It is now hard to remember how I used to work – trying to release the tension in good, broad shoulders like rocks with what pressure I could find in my fingers and thumbs!! So often at the end of a session I would be sure that the difference, if any, was minimal, and whilst the clients would always say that was ‘good’ or ‘that feels much better’ I was sure that it could be better still but felt powerless to improve what I was doing.

“Then I met ‘No-Hands Massage’.

“Initially, even with just a few strokes in my vocabulary, I found that the increased power behind each stroke (from my body weight not muscle power) made each stroke noticeably more effective than my previous work and so there was then less need for potentially damaging prolonged use of fingers and thumbs. Already typing two to three days a week, the last thing I needed was further damaging work.

“As time has gone on and I have become familiar and confident with an increasing number of ‘No-Hands’ strokes, I have found no need for the use of fingers and thumbs for powerful work. The vast number of strokes which can be combined in a variety of ways makes all my work more varied and creative than before and considerably more potent.

“Clients who have been around during the changeover have all reported an improvement since the change and a preference for this work, and new clients readily accept the ‘No-Hands’ work.”

Some techniques were found to be ineffective, and so we discarded them. Some were only partially effective, so we developed them further. This went on for over a decade. We built up a sort of stroke laboratory. As part of this exploration I also started running workshops in the north of England. I wanted to meet more bodyworkers and find out if my ideas were useful to them also. They were.

Many of the bodyworkers who attended these short workshops were also developing or had already developed serious injuries. I suspected that many of those who hadn’t developed injury would soon develop them once their practice became more than a few massages a week.

Although I was keen to let as many bodyworkers as possible know about the dangers and the clinical alternatives available, I saw little point in publicizing ideas that had not been thoroughly tried out in the treatment room. After ten years of monthly PD groups and workshops that over 100 other bodyworkers have attended, I believe this has now happened. I can say this because very few changes or additions have been made to these new techniques over the past three years. We now have over 70 massage strokes, many of which are undocumented. They all achieve the wonderful effects of traditional bodywork strokes without any damage to the practitioner. The practice of many of these techniques can also lead to an improvement in the health of the practitioner, rather like Tai Chi.

Discoveries

Along the way I discovered some important information:

1 Whatever the stroke there seem to be at least seven postural principles behind every movement the bodyworker makes.

2 Research into occupational injury shows seven clear stages of injury that stem from the type of repetitive movements made by bodyworkers. Of these seven stages of injury, pain only becomes evident in the final three stages when the damage is serious and possibly already permanent. (See diagram above of the seven stages of injury²) This means that by the time bodyworkers notice they have pain they are already at the fifth stage of injury. I write about this in more detail in my article *Massage Techniques are Damaging Practitioners' Hands*.³

3 More recently, Watson,⁴ in a groundbreaking study, has shown that in excess of 75% of massage practitioners have sustained injury to their hands through massage.

4 The massage techniques taught by Per Henrik Ling (1776-1839), who is generally regarded as the father of Western massage, never intended these strokes to be used in the intensive way that they are now used. Ling himself only used massage as an adjunct to exercise and stretching in his 'Swedish Movement Cure'. These strokes comprised less than one sixth of 'The Cure'. Nowadays, practitioners are using the same massage techniques consistently and exclusively for up to 50-90 minutes at a time throughout the day. In my article *Massage History – From Technique to Therapy*,⁵ I explore some of the historical and social reasons why this has happened. I also point out that these techniques were known to be intrinsically damaging as early as the late 1850s in America. Two of the great founding fathers of American Massage, George Henry Taylor and Sondar, simultaneously created machines to duplicate the effects of massage strokes. The reason given by Taylor was that these techniques were proving "debilitating to the practitioner".

5 Finally, I discovered that much of the subtle work that I had assumed could only be performed through the hands was actually possible through the whole body movements of the practitioner. Whilst the hands are amazingly sensitive tools for fine palpation, the kinaesthetic awareness of the practitioner is enhanced through practising the movements that comprise No-Hands Massage. I write about this in my book and in my article entitled *No-Hands Massage, A New Bodywork Technology*.⁶

Case study from a client No Hands Massage – Annette

"I have received massage fairly regularly over the years, as I am aware that I hold a lot of tension in my neck and shoulders, aggravated by the fact I drive a lot as part of my job.

"It was not until I was introduced to No-Hands Massage that a lifetime of control reflected in my body was recognized, especially head, neck and shoulders. Over eight sessions this 'control' was stripped away.

"As a client, it is impossible to differentiate whether or not the hands are being used. The practitioner's own body movements during the massage strokes increased the power and effectiveness of the strokes enormously, so much so that following the first three sessions I felt very unsteady. The practitioner appeared to become part of the strokes. The strokes encompass a much larger area with each movement and so the No-Hands Massage felt much more integrated compared with regular massage.

"The knowledge that such a deep and powerful massage does not cause injury to the practitioner helped me to relax into the sessions, as I would not like to think that any treatment I was being given would have a detrimental effect on the giver in the long term."

Summary

So a journey that began with a bodyworker, a mug of tea, shooting pains, and a demanding bear of a client has ended in a revolutionary rethink of the way that massage strokes can be applied – the first such rethink in over 200 years.

I look back and see nothing has been lost – except tiring and damaging bodywork. And the gains? – potent bodywork, healthier bodyworkers, happier clients, happier and revitalized bodyworkers, not to mention oodles of creativity and fun. This seems a good trade, and my aim now is to make such a transition much quicker and easier for other bodyworkers than it was for me. Most bodyworkers can now achieve in only ten days of intense training what took me and my students over ten years: zero-strain bodywork.

References

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About the Author

Gerry Pyves MA (Oxon) TA(UKCP) Dip M (APNT) PGCE is a registered transactional analysis psychotherapist and a qualified and experienced massage therapist. Gerry has been a freelance bodyworker over the last 15 years during which time he has been developing advanced bodywork techniques to help overcome injuries and damage that many bodyworkers experience. Gerry is also the development director for a company called Shi'Zen. Shi'Zen's aim is to provide a balance between the mind, the body and the environment by bringing together the worlds of bodywork and psychotherapy in holistic treatments.

Further Information

A copy of Gerry's book, **No-Hands Massage** or information about his training courses in No-Hands Massage, or copies of any of the articles or reports mentioned can be obtained through Shi'Zen, Parkton Grove, Hangingstone Road, Huddersfield HD4 7QU or visit the website at

www.shizen.co.uk

<http://www.positivehealth.com/permit/Articles/Massage/pyves58.htm>