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ISSUE 253 • JUNE 2017

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Rock On!

Soothe Clients with Satisfying Contact



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

Do you ever get bored during sessions or find yourself doing the same routine over and over? Do you ever feel that you are putting in a lot of effort to help clients, yet nothing seems to be happening?

If you answered yes to any of the questions above then you might be engaging in one of the two problematic habits that massage therapists can tend to get stuck in.

The first habit involves digging

into the client with all our might, trying to force the client's knots into submission—all in the name of being therapeutic.

The second habit involves merely going through the motions, slathering

on oil and mindlessly massaging until the hour is up—all in the name of relaxation.

Neither of these approaches is ideal.

When we work too deeply, the client's tissue tenses even if the client says through gritted teeth that the pressure is good. On the opposite end, the client can feel when we are not engaged although she might say everything is fine. In that case, we leave the client with that awful sense of feeling tantalizingly close to real human contact without actually being touched in any meaningful way.

Rocking can help us avoid both of these bad habits. Rocking offers a

contact that feels satisfying without being overwhelming.

You've known about rocking since you were a baby. Chances are you learned about rocking in massage school, briefly—and chances are you don't ever do it. It seems too simple, right? We all want to learn fancy new protocols and advanced techniques and get certified in new and more specialized things. Rocking is the opposite. Rocking is, quite literally, baby stuff—and that is precisely why you should do it.

Rocking is simple

Let's start with the basics. According to authors Linda Ludwig and Fiona Rattray in their book *Clinical Massage Therapy: Understanding, Assessing and Treating Over 70 Conditions*, "The therapist moves the client's body part in a rhythmic manner and then allows it to return to its original position. The rocking motion is continued, allowing the adjacent joints to move. The rate is variable, from gentle to vigorous."

That's it. No advanced training required.

Rocking is simple. You move your body back and forth ever so slightly while maintaining a gentle contact with the client whether with your fingertips or heel of hand, soft fist or forearm. The back-and-forth of your own body translates into your client's tissue, and that part of the body you are contacting shifts back and forth at the same tempo.

However, simple does not mean easy. Indeed, to rock effectively we need to overcome a fundamental misconception in our field—that working hard and relentlessly engaging our hard-working muscles is what make us good therapists. Instead, rocking requires a basic shift in how you use your body.

Rocking encourages a deep calm, but that only happens if we rock from our whole bodies, and we rarely use our whole bodies while we massage. In a typical massage too many therapists ignore our lower body

almost completely; we work with our knees locked, pushing each stroke into the client by contracting our upper back and arms more than we need to.

If you rock from this position, with the lower body locked and the upper body tensed, it will feel aggressive. It will feel like the way you shake your stubborn teenager when she doesn't want to wake up for school. As you know, your teenager does not like this feeling. Neither will your client.

But there is another option, a strategy that I teach in my "Pour Don't Push" workshops: You create each stroke from your feet and hips rather than shoulders and arms.

How to Rock

Try it: Point your feet in the direction you want the stroke to go and then bend your knees slightly. When you contact the client, keep your upper body stationary, and create the stroke by leaning your hips forward. As you lean the rest of your body follows so you are using the weight of your body—just as much or as little as the client needs—to create the stroke, rather than using the contractile effort of your upper body.

Rocking is merely a subtler version of this use of your whole body. I use the word rocking because it is familiar to us, but even more accurate words might be undulating or pulsing. Just like the steady movement of blood through the body or the endless back-and-forth of the tides, what matters is not muscle strength but effortless movement.

Rocking is more effective when you use your whole body – knees bent, upper body long and leaning into the client (Image 1) — as opposed to keeping the lower body locked and just pressing into the client with the upper body (Image 2).



Each wave in the ocean laps against the shore, and that contact with the shore creates its own recoil and thus returns the water to the sea. Rocking should be similarly effortless.

Now let's feel rocking in action. Stand on one side of the table, level with the client's sacrum, about a foot away from the table's edge. Place your feet hip-width apart, parallel to each other—the horse-riding stance—and then bend your knees a few inches, as if you are beginning to squat down.

Place the heel of one palm on the sacrum or lower lumbar vertebrae. (For general rocking the exact placement doesn't matter, as long as you are comfortable and your client is comfortable.) Your arms should be straight, although they don't need to be locked, and you should be tipped forward a bit from the hips.

In other words, your head should be further forward than your hips. If your head is still stacked directly above your hips, then step another six inches away from the table. Keep your entire upper body stationary: your back long, your body tipped forward at the hips and your arms straight throughout the rocking.

The actual effort happens merely by moving your hips ever so slightly, an inch or two, toward the client. That's it.

Since your upper body is maintaining its position the shift in your hips will pour through your upper body and into the client. Feel your hips rocking forward slightly then back to their starting point then forward again; repeat that undulation.

Make the movement slower and smaller than you think you need to. The key is to do as little as possible and to keep your upper body completely still, which is a profoundly unusual feeling for our eager-to-help

shoulders and arms. Your upper body is merely the conduit for the pulsing of the hips but not actually *doing* anything at all.

Think of it this way: Each wave in the ocean laps against the shore, and that contact with the shore creates its own recoil and thus returns the water to the sea. Rocking should be similarly effortless. There is no distinction between moving in and out, forward and backward; each half is both the beginning and the ending of the other half.

This is how you create a rocking that feels, to the client, effortless rather than strained. It won't feel that you are doing something to her, or forcing her to do something, but that you are lulling her into a state of ease.

Why to Rock

Rocking, as mentioned, creates a sense of safety and ease for the client. Some bodywork modalities have embraced the benefits of rocking. These include dynamic spinal therapy, insight bodywork, *Nuat Thai*, Trager Approach, Feldenkrais, Sensory Repatterning, Watsu and some forms of myofascial release.

Bodywork educator Carole Osborne has been rocking in various ways for more than four decades. "For the client, small amplitude, slowly paced movements create a meditative alertness, increased sensation, and trust," she told me. "These rhythmic, gentle gestures stimulate a neurological willingness to let go of habitual patterns and renew their repertoire of available movements and feelings." When we are tense, we

cannot heal; but when we are at ease, all sorts of things become possible.

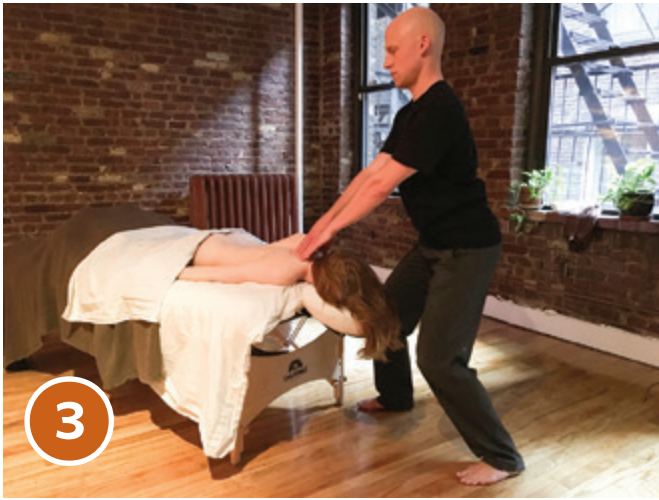
The other reason to rock is that it can make our sessions more effective, and that can help us get out of those bad habits mentioned at the beginning of this article.

When you rock using your whole body, you are engaged with the client's whole body, neither waiting for the hour to end or forcing the client to submit. You are working with the client's body rather than ignoring it or working against it. You are compressing the tissue, but just as importantly, you are giving the tissue the chance to rebound against your hands. You are moving the tissue but then allowing it to move back on its own.

In essence, you are signaling to the client's body that it should move however feels right and into whatever position feels best. You are not forcing change, merely suggesting the possibility of it. Rocking encourages the client's musculature to recognize its own tension, its own instinctive patterns of holding, and to release as it is ready.

Simple and elastic

I encourage you to experiment with rocking. In addition to being very simple, rocking has the advantage of being endlessly elastic: We can rock nearly every part of the client's body, and at a variety of tempos. You can integrate rocking into your initial compression down the back, before you've even undraped the client, as a way to introduce your touch, as gentle as the client needs, or as deep as the client wants.



Rocking can be broad and general, or very specific — here, using just fingertips to rock into the erectors.

Then you can rock virtually at any point during the session, directly on the skin, either with or without oil. You can integrate rocking into petrissage or effleurage strokes, so that you are moving along the skin with an undulating or pulsing motion, and thus encouraging a broad span of tissue to lengthen and loosen.

Or you can rock much more specifically. You can stand at the head of the table, for example, and rock with just your fingertips into the erectors or the rotator cuff attachments,

so that rocking becomes nearly like cross-fiber friction—but a version that feels good instead of painful. Indeed, the more I use rocking with my own clients, the less I use cross-fiber friction; both my joints and my clients' muscles are happier.

Soothe the client

Rocking is instinctive and profoundly calming. When we hold a fussy baby we start to bounce up and down or slide side to side without even thinking about it. This works for grown-ups, too. You can use rocking to soothe your client's fussy musculature and ultimately soothe his fussy nervous system.

Start rocking and see how much good can come from the simplest of techniques. **M**

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Watch a video demonstration of David Lobenstine, L.M.T.'s rocking technique at massagemag.com/rocking.

Read "Rhythmic Rocking in Practice," by Carole Osborne, at massagemag.com/practicerocking.

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