

Deep Tissue, The Peace and Good Things Way

I've often been asked what massage technique I practice. The easiest answer is deep tissue, since my focus is on finding muscles that have become tight or "sticky" and releasing them. But I hesitate to say deep tissue for two reasons:

1. Many people have the erroneous idea that deep tissue is necessarily painful.
2. The phrase "deep tissue" really doesn't do the concept justice.

Let me explain.

To begin with, deep tissue massage should not be incredibly painful. Intense perhaps, but not painful. And it certainly should not bruise. Think about it. If you bruise an already painful area, aren't you just adding injury to injury? Yes! Scientifically, what you are doing is pushing the pain-spasm-ischemia cycle deeper into your body. Massage is not about "no pain, no gain." It is about going slowly and respectfully through the body. And this is how a practitioner creates effective, deep tissue change in the body without intense pain.

What does this look like?

First, one needs to respect every layer of the body. We are not just muscle. We also are composed of skin, fascia, muscle, ligament, tendon, nerve and bone. If the only part that is concentrated on is the muscle, therapy will not be as effective. For example, many people's superficial fascia, which lies under the skin, over the muscle and extends uninterrupted from the head to the toes, must be released before the muscle can be entered into. In some cases, it forms an almost impenetrable armor over the muscle. If the fascia is overlooked and pushed through to reach the muscle, the client will feel pain and will likely bruise. But perhaps more importantly, something that most definitely needs to be released has been ignored. Though it may psychologically feel beneficial to wear a skin-armor, it is not physically useful. It inhibits ease and grace of movement, causing pain and leaving you with a host of problems, including greater susceptibility to injury.

Another important aspect is the speed and the depth with which a practitioner moves through the body. The goal is not to force the muscle open, but to gently and patiently ask the muscle to release. If a practitioner goes in too fast and too deep, the muscle will push back. But if a practitioner sets his/her tool (hand, arm, elbow) into the muscle, lets it sink in and then simply hangs out, the muscle will naturally open and the tool will, with little to no pressure, slide through. True deep tissue requires patience and sensitivity.

Lastly, you should also consider deep tissue to be a conversation. No practitioner is perfect. There are things we don't feel. There are times we get over-invested in releasing the pain. There are times when we get impatient and want results NOW. There are subtleties to your body that will be a mystery long into the therapeutic relationship. Besides that, it's your body. You know it better than anyone else. You know when it hurts and when something feels like it is creating an amazing release. Communicating what you are experiencing is invaluable. Not that every massage or every minute of any massage needs to involve conversation. Massage can be a deep meditation of silence and breath. But never be afraid to exercise your voice! A well-trained practitioner won't be offended and will be grateful for the opportunity to grow and be better able to serve.

So if you ever find yourself wanting to say to your therapist, "it's okay if it hurts...you've got to work it out, right?" maybe try instead, "Hey there! That's a little too deep."

Peace and Good Things.