

Body Mechanics Checklist

While most massage therapists receive body mechanics training in massage school, many do not incorporate awareness of their body into their ongoing massage work. Too often, massage therapists put all their attention on the client, forgetting themselves. Work injuries, due to repetitive strain, is the most common reason massage therapists leave the field.

To stay in the field of massage, massage therapists have to shift the focus of their awareness, while at work.

Body mechanics fundamentally is a practice of mindfulness of the body. It is not something that, once understood, can be put out of your mind. It is an **ongoing** practice. After 30 years in the massage field, I continue to practice awareness of body mechanics in every massage.

The checkpoints listed below will help keep your body safe and healthy while doing massage. I recommend that you practice a continued body scan, checking that these points are being practiced, throughout your day of doing massage. Fifty percent of your awareness should be on your body; while fifty percent is on your client's - really.

- While a parallel stance may be appropriate when doing energy, most often for massage, maintain a lunged stance: front foot is facing the direction of pressure of your stroke, back foot is turned out, spine is long and heart is lifted.
- Pressure is created by leading with your "center of weight," called the Hara in the Japanese tradition and the Dan Tien in the Chinese tradition. This is your **powerhouse** of Chi energy.
- To deepen pressure or energize your glide, move your center of weight forward by deepening your lunge (bending your front knee). Make sure your knee is facing in the direction of pressure or glide.
- Working from your center of weight enables you to power your work with your lower body and to allow your arms to "come along for the ride." Avoid powering your work from your upper body, composed of smaller muscles and much more susceptible to repetitive strains.
- Make sure you are set-up in your stance to transfer your body weight through your arms - always.
- To reverse your stroke, drop your center of weight back (as if you were to take a seat) as you gently pull your hands back to the beginning of your stroke. The

reverse stroke is always lighter than the forward stroke.

- Petrissage techniques, such as kneading, will require a wide parallel stance, with soft knees and toes turned out, as you shift weight from the right to left foot.
- Always engage your whole body!

For deeper work:

- Avoid using thumbs or fingers for deeper work; instead rely on your forearm and possible elbow.
- To use the forearm or elbow, lower your body by deepening your lunge: step your back foot even further back and hinge at your hips, keeping your spine neutral and elongated. Hinging from the waist or curling your back over will set you up for postural and low back challenges.
- Allow your pressure to deepen by slowing your pace way down. This allows your forearm time to sink into the tissue.
- Make sure your joints stay stacked: your shoulder over your elbow. If your elbow gets ahead of your shoulder, take a step to maintain proper stacking. This will protect your shoulder joint.
- Push off the ball of the back foot to increase the power or depth of your touch.

Protecting your Wrists:

- Composed of many tiny bones fitting together like a jigsaw puzzle, this joint is quite susceptible to strain or sprain. Protect your wrists by keeping them **neutral**.
- Use your **whole** palm, not just the heel of your hand or inner wrist, in effleurage or any long, gliding strokes.
- In more compressive techniques, such as Shiatsu presses, set your thumb up in opposition to your fingers to support a neutral wrist.
- Another way to deepen pressure is by using the back of a loose fist. Again, make sure you have a strong lunged stance, your wrist is neutral or in line with your forearm, and the pressure is generated when you bring your center of weight forward. Deepen the pressure further by pushing off the ball of the back foot.

Lifting:

- Always lift from your lower body. Bend your knees, keep your spine neutral and elongated, and lift your clients arms or legs by straightening your bent knees.
- If you push a limb, such as in a knee-to-chest stretch, make sure you are facing and lunging in the direction that you are pushing.
- If you are pulling a limb, as in a arm-overhead stretch, drop your center of weight back and down (as if you are taking a seat).
- Again, engage your whole body in the movement, so your arms, hands and fingers can remain soft and relaxed. If you tense-up or strain by gripping your clients limbs, that tension will be transferred through your hands to your client.

Sitting:

- In seated work, such as supine neck massage, make sure your stool height is set so that your knees are slightly below your hips, enabling a slight pelvic tilt and supporting the natural curve of the low back.
- Keep both feet grounded on the floor for optimal support.
- Continue to work from the whole body, hinging at the hips to avoid bending at the waist, keep the spine long and upright, and rock your body with every compression or stroke. The rocking will energize your work - and protect your hands from overuse.
- As always, keep your fingers soft and your hands relaxed, so the Chi can flow freely.

Lastly, continually **vary** how you use your hands, so you are not overusing them in one particular way. That means learning a wide variety of skills, so you can mix-up your techniques, as you work. You should be continually shifting or varying your techniques during a session, and among all your sessions, in a day of work in massage.

Open Pathways Institute for Integrative Massage is committed to giving you a wide range of massage skills, including practices in body awareness and healthy mechanics, so you can practice massage for decades.

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