

# Chapter 1

## THE EDUCATED HEART: THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Our profession is still young. We are still exploring what it means to be a good **manual therapist**. We are learning that technical skill is only one aspect of a responsible and successful practice. For our work to be effective, we need solid professional relationships with our clients. We create such relationships by knowing what belongs in our interactions with our clients and what doesn't. Clients will appreciate our friendliness and warmth. But more than that, they need the security of sturdy professional boundaries.

Our work is unusually personal. To many people, what we do is unfamiliar, and the intimacy of the work can stir up deep emotional associations. We make this potentially confusing and highly charged situation safe for our clients and for ourselves by maintaining professional boundaries.

Attention to boundaries is also the key to a smoothly flowing work life. When we create a safe environment, our clients settle in and go deeper. We have more satisfied clients who come back and who tell their friends about us. We have fewer difficult clients and more clients who leave our treatment rooms with a lighter heart and a lighter step.

Most of us come to this work with good intentions and a genuine wish to serve others. These aspirations flourish best within the structure of good professional boundaries. To truly serve our clients, we need not just good hearts, but also educated hearts.

### *The Need for Educated Boundaries*

When we hear the word "professional," we may think of a clinical atmosphere or a distant and aloof therapist. But professionalism doesn't mean acting stuffy or keeping our clients at arm's length. It simply means that when we're working, our focus is on our clients. We pay attention to them; we're sensitive to their vulnerability. Being professional is just an educated way of being kind.

#### **Manual therapists:**

Trained professionals who touch the physical or energetic body of the client or who use a method of movement to affect the body of a client for the purpose of facilitating awareness, health, and well-being. As used here, the term is interchangeable with somatic practitioners and includes massage therapists, bodyworkers, movement educators, practitioners of Asian methods, and practitioners who work primarily with energy fields.

*Being professional is just an educated way of being kind.*

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### **Boundaries:**

In this context, a boundary is like a protective circle around the professional relationship that separates what is appropriate within that relationship from what is not.

The best way we can demonstrate this kindness is by keeping appropriate **boundaries**. Clients instinctively feel safer when we set clear boundaries. Maintaining good boundaries is also a kindness to practitioners. Not only do we feel more secure when expectations are clear, but also our work is more rewarding.

### *Understanding the Need for Boundaries*

Whether we work in a spa, in a doctor's office, or on our own, our success depends, to a large extent, on how we handle our professional relationships. No matter how technically skilled we may be, our clients won't get the full benefits of our work if they don't feel safe with us. A casual attitude toward boundaries can jar clients and make them uneasy. When people complain about a manual therapy session they received, their complaint is not usually about the practitioner's inability to name all the muscles in the foot or inadequate effleurage. Instead, they'll say, "She talked about her boyfriend the whole hour," or "I felt nervous going to a bodyworker who works out of a bedroom in his house."

To understand why safe boundaries are crucial, we have to be aware of the special circumstances of our work, particularly the physical intimacy, the effects of touch, and the power dynamics in our relationships with clients.

### *Keeping Clients Safe*

Much of the public does not have a clear idea of what we do, how we are trained, and what to expect from us. They may associate our work with the sexual overtones of massage parlors. They may be wary of our lack of traditional medical credentials or may fear that we will injure them or make a physical problem worse. It is up to us to make the situation a safe one in which they can relax and heal. It is up to us to show that we are serious about what we do and that we are genuinely concerned about our clients' welfare. Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is a crucial step in setting the right tone for safety.

For us, the intimacy of our work is something we can take for granted. It can be easy to forget how scary and potentially intrusive some clients may find physical touch. We live in a culture in which touch is often experienced as leading to seduction or violence. For many people, accidentally brushing up against someone they don't know is uncomfortable. Yet in our work, clients agree to be touched by a relative stranger, usually while they are naked or only partially clothed. Some clients may fear our negative judgments about their physical appearance. In a society obsessed with being trim and blemish free, clients are revealing their less-than-perfect bodies to us. No wonder some people have a hard time letting go.

### *Uncovered Feelings and Memories*

Touch can bring up long-buried feelings and memories that clients may find surprising or even alarming. Even in the most caring of families, certain feelings or aspects of ourselves can meet with disapproval from those around us. As children, we unconsciously learn to hold back these feelings. We may also protect ourselves by blocking out unpleasant or traumatic memories. Without being conscious of it, we may hide uncomfortable experiences or emotions—perhaps even from ourselves.

When we hold back our feelings, aspects of ourselves, or memories, we literally do so with our muscles. What is held back can get locked into our tissue, creating tension. This is true whether the holding began last week or decades ago. When clients are touched, especially as their muscles relax, those memories and feelings may emerge.

Sometimes the results are dramatic:

A 60-year-old client tells his massage therapist that he's never had any injuries. However, when his therapist works with his lower leg, memories come flooding back of falling out of a tree and spraining his ankle when he was 10 years old. As if it were yesterday, the client remembers how it happened, how his father reacted, and how scared he felt.

But more often, the tie between the muscle relaxing and the memory emerging may be so subtle, it goes unnoticed:

After her massage therapist loosens up her tight shoulder muscles, a client suddenly remembers last week's argument with her boss and how angry she felt.

As her rib cage opens up, a client begins to cry, realizing how much grief she is feeling over the recent death of a friend.

Such releases of feeling are normal and usually beneficial to the client. We don't need to be concerned about them or feel that we need to do anything more than provide a sympathetic ear or a tissue. (If clients have tears, we might ask if they want us to continue with the massage or give them a moment.)

Clients bring all of their held-back memories and feelings to the table, usually without realizing it. Although many clients come to us basically for

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relaxation and can easily appreciate the simple pleasure of being touched without having such memories intrude, others who have experienced trauma may have a more difficult time letting go. Most often, clients won't become consciously aware of suppressed feelings during the session; however, they may express those feelings in unconscious ways. For instance, a client who was physically or sexually abused may be wary of his practitioner or may expect to be harmed without knowing why. Even if potentially scary or unpleasant material doesn't emerge, our touch may nudge the edge of it. We can't judge by superficial appearances how emotionally fragile any one client might be. Because of that, we need to provide safe and reassuring boundaries for *all* our clients.

### *Acknowledging Power and Responsibility*

The dynamics of the client–practitioner relationship are complex and often subtle. Our clients automatically give us more power than they would, for instance, if they met us on the street. They are often looking to us to alleviate their physical or emotional stress or discomfort, which puts them in a vulnerable and often dependent position. Consequently, our words and actions tend to carry more weight and authority for them. Even though they may not be conscious of it, we can become bigger in their eyes—more like a doctor or parent figure. Clients may put us on a pedestal, thinking we can do no wrong. For practitioners, our relationship with clients brings with it built-in authority and responsibilities. Our task is to meet our clients' vulnerability with respect and kindness, and we do that by maintaining secure boundaries.

### *Seven Common Misconceptions about Boundaries*

As much as we want to be respectful and kind, many somatic practitioners haven't been trained in either the whys or the how-tos of being professional. The dynamics of the professional relationship can be intricate, and the best course of action is not always clear. We may not even realize some of the mistakes that have arisen from our lack of education and awareness.

Some errors are more serious than others. Probably no client will haul us into court for talking too much during the session about the movie we saw last night, but discussing a client's problems with an outsider could land us in front of an ethics committee. Sometimes we can't gauge how big a problem our boundary mistake will be. The client who heard too much about last night's movie may not sue, but he may decide not to come back. Then again, he might be a longtime client who forgives the disruption of his relaxation—this time.



*If we talk too much, we may lose a client.*

Some of us have learned about the importance of good boundaries through painful experience. Here's what a colleague said:

A couple of years into my practice, I realized it was a mess. Clients became friends, friends became clients, and I was putting a good deal of energy into sorting it out. Sometimes sessions became social visits, and my clients weren't able to get the full benefits of the work. Sometimes friends who had become clients didn't want to pay my usual fees or respect my time. It helped a lot when I started being firmer about boundaries. When I stopped socializing during sessions, clients were able to settle down and take in the work, and when I became clearer about what I expected and expressed those expectations to my clients, friends stopped taking advantage of me.

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Because our profession is a relatively new one, many of us have had to piece together our own ideas of professional conduct without the benefit of specific training or education in that aspect of our practice. As a result, some common misconceptions have been born out of understandable confusion. Clarifying these misconceptions can help remove any doubts about the importance of healthy professional boundaries.

### *Misconception #1: “I want to be natural with clients; boundaries create barriers.”*

This concern about maintaining appropriate boundaries comes in many forms, such as, “I want to be authentic with my clients,” and “I don’t want to put myself above my clients.” This is often how we justify talking about our own issues with clients or letting them see the off-duty side of us, confiding to them and complaining to them as if they were friends.

However, being professional means that we are careful about what we reveal to our clients, not out of a sense of superiority, but out of a wish to keep the focus on the client. When we share personal information with clients, they may feel obligated to take care of us in the way that friends tend to do for each other. At the least, it takes attention away from the reason they are there—to have us pay attention to *their* needs. It’s misguided to think that letting our hair down with clients is always therapeutic for them. When we are tempted to complain about our love lives, share our political beliefs, or tell clients how tired we are, we have to stop and wonder how that will add to their feelings of security.

In rare instances, it can be helpful to let clients know that we too have struggled with the same kinds of issues. If we know a client well, we might want to reassure or inspire her by remarking that we once had the same problem. However, such sharing should be carefully thought out. Unless clients already respect us and know our strength, talking about our struggles could make them question our capabilities, expect less of us, or feel obliged to help us. For the same reasons, we should mention only those issues that we have already resolved, not current problems.

The truth is that we do have more power in our relationships with clients; recognizing that fact is being responsible, not arrogant. But having good boundaries doesn’t mean that we can’t be genuinely caring people in our practices. Authenticity is reassuring and appropriate when we are down to earth in how we present ourselves and when we do not mystify what we are doing or pretend to be all-knowing. It can be healing to allow clients to see the compassion we feel toward them. We can, for instance, let clients see that their stories have touched us, and we can sympathize with them about *their* concerns—but it’s not appropriate to ask them to do the same for us.

Boundaries aren’t elitist or intended to make a client feel “less than” us or disrespected. Quite the opposite; boundaries are a gift to clients.

### *Misconception #2: “I’ll just use my common sense.”*

We may think that professional boundaries are just common sense, but it’s not that simple. Making good judgments doesn’t necessarily come naturally. After we’ve practiced long enough, we can begin to look and feel like naturals, but that’s not the same as “just being ourselves” or only using common sense.

Without clear, thought-out guidelines, our decisions about boundaries and ethics are likely to be based on a hodgepodge of conflicting influences. We are affected by what our upbringing has taught us about pain, dependency, sex, and intimacy. We’re swayed by our own biases and prejudices. Our judgment can be clouded by our egos and by the all-too-human need to be in control, right, or important. Or we may imitate mentors and teachers who themselves didn’t understand the need for good boundaries. We may rely on advice from our friends or partners. And when in doubt, we may throw in a random piece of wisdom from the latest self-help book we’ve read.

To make good judgment calls, we need to know ourselves well. Unless we are self-aware, our personal histories or trauma can interfere with making wise choices. If, for instance, our own boundaries have been violated as children—sexually, emotionally, or physically—then what comes “naturally” to us may be off-kilter.

We all have blind spots that interfere with our effectiveness. Even if we have had no significant childhood trauma, we bring to our work all of our personal history. We have rough patches in our behavior in which we do things that don’t make sense or fail to see what’s in front of us. We may deny, rationalize, and project the things we dislike about ourselves onto other people. Such failings are just human nature.

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After gaining unwanted weight, a colleague found himself mentally judging his overweight clients. When he realized what he was doing and how it was related to his judgment about his own extra pounds, he was able to address and eventually change his negative feelings.

A massage therapist with a history of being sexually abused by a relative routinely overlapped her social and professional lives, often urging people she found attractive to come to her for massage so that she could get to know them better. Until she sought professional help, she didn’t realize the connection between how her abuser had overstepped family boundaries and how she was overstepping boundaries in her practice. Because being careless with boundaries felt familiar to her, she hadn’t been aware that it was a problem.

None of us is perfect, but it's our responsibility to learn what professional boundaries are and maintain them. Good boundaries are too crucial to leave to just our common sense.

*Misconception #3: "I've learned technique, and that's all I need to know."*

Until recently, medical schools focused on teaching only anatomy and medical techniques, as if human relationships with patients don't matter. Perhaps, without thinking, we have used that same model in our profession. Until recently, many of our own schools have stressed anatomy and technique, ignoring the importance of relationship dynamics. Although that omission is understandable, it's important that we now realize that there's more to our work than physical mechanics. It's heartening to see that many massage and manual therapy schools (along with many medical schools) have added courses on boundaries, ethics, relationship dynamics, and the importance of a healing alliance between practitioner and client. It's hoped that we're moving past the idea that a client is simply a mass of muscles to be manipulated.

As manual therapists, we may need to pay even more attention to boundaries than doctors do. People don't expect to be able to let go and have a blissful, transcendent experience when they see their physician. But when people come to us (even if we work in a doctor's office), they hope to be able to relax and drop their defenses. They want to leave feeling more centered, more alive, more themselves. To set the stage for that experience, we need a good deal more education and training than just learning the name of the erector spinae, for example. No technique, no matter how state-of-the-art it is, can ensure that a client will trust us. (Impeccable boundaries will not ensure trust either, but they will improve the odds.)

How people heal is a mystery. Humans are a complicated mix of psyche, spirit, body, and emotions, and we can't really know where one of these elements stops and another begins. We can learn a hundred new techniques and still not understand why people hurt. But we can create an atmosphere within which healing can take place.

*Misconception #4: "I don't need to know anything about psychological dynamics; I'm not a psychotherapist."*

Some of us feel it's not our business to try to understand our relationships with our clients. Perhaps we fear that it will lead to "playing psychologist" with clients or trying to analyze them.

We're right to avoid analyzing clients' psychological problems and airing our opinions—that would be intrusive and a violation of boundaries.





However, it is very much our business to learn how to create a safe emotional environment for our clients. And we can do that without inappropriately dabbling in psychological counseling.

All health-care professionals could probably benefit from knowing more about their relationships with clients. Only by understanding the more hidden dimensions of the client–practitioner relationship can we have a deeper appreciation for the vulnerability of clients and their need for safety. We don’t have to be psychotherapists to want to be sensitive to our clients’ needs.

### *Misconception #5: “I have needs, too.”*

A massage therapist who canceled a session at the last minute to attend to minor personal business didn’t appreciate why her client was so upset. The therapist said, “My clients have to understand that I have needs, too.”

Of course that massage therapist has personal needs—we all do. But it’s inappropriate to allow those needs to interfere with our work. We’re there to focus on our clients’ needs, which means putting our personal lives aside. Although we cannot avoid the occasional intrusion of a personal situation into our work, we have to realize that being *professional* means that the show must go on, and, when it cannot, we let our clients down. (We can consider offering a free session when we are forced to cancel without the standard 24-hour notice.) At the same time, it’s perfectly fine, and even desirable, to be concerned with our professional needs. We should ask our clients—or our employers—to treat us as *professionals* and respect our professional boundaries. For instance, if we work for ourselves, we have the right to ask our clients to arrive on time, pay at each session, and give adequate cancellation notice. Ideally, we would want to work for an employer who upholds similar standards. If clients are allowed to take

advantage of us, it can lead to resentment on our part and confusion on the part of the client.

Professional boundaries define the relationship as having limits and standards that both practitioner and client will honor. These standards benefit both parties by helping everyone feel more secure in what is a uniquely intimate situation.

*Misconception #6: “My connection with my clients is through the healing energy in my hands, and that’s what’s important.”*

Having “healing energy” is a good start, but is it enough? Our work is intuitive, and sometimes our hands feel magically drawn to just the right place. We can have a subtle bond with our clients that is hard to define. But that isn’t all there is to it. If we get too caught up in the mystery of our work, we can overlook our clients’ basic needs. We can gaze into the distance with misty eyes and speak of our magical connection with our clients, but if that is our only focus, our clients will be wondering why the room is so cold, why we were 10 minutes late, and why we keep forgetting their names.

*Misconception #7: “But I know practitioners who are careless about boundaries and still are successful.”*

In a certain respect, this statement isn’t completely a misconception. It’s true that there are successful practitioners who disregard many professional standards and boundary concerns—maybe they frequently make friends with their clients, they’re careless about confidentiality, or their treatment rooms are a mess. Most of these are well-meaning practitioners who never learned the importance of good boundaries. They benefit from the fact that clients will forgive a great deal if a practitioner has a good heart and “good hands.” A careful look at their practices, however, generally reveals that they could make their clients much happier and their work lives much easier by paying closer attention to professional boundaries.

A successful practitioner gave a great massage but always started her sessions late. As her clients waited on the table sometimes 5 or 10 minutes, they could hear her making phone calls or talking with her business partner. Although many of her clients were annoyed, few said anything. The practitioner noticed how hard she had to work to help her clients relax and trust her at the beginning of each massage, but she didn’t realize how much her own behavior contributed to their tension. She just thought that all her clients were very uptight.

## Coming of Age

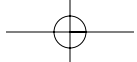
Good boundaries don't occur naturally. They need to be studied and practiced in the same way that we learn anatomy, physiology, or technique. The art of setting boundaries is the intangible element that brings out the best in both practitioner and client.

Although setting clear boundaries may, at first glance, seem to distance us from our clients, the opposite is actually true. Good boundaries don't create walls between client and practitioner; rather, they create a safe space within which we can touch clients' hearts and ease their spirits.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 In as much detail as you can, remember a particularly great massage you have had as a client or imagine what one would be like. What elements made it (would make it) a great experience? Are all of these elements related to the practitioner's knowledge of technique and anatomy? How many components are related to the professional atmosphere and the attitude of the practitioner?
- 2 Have you ever experienced a release of feelings and memories during a bodywork session or a massage? If it's hard to conceptualize how emotions and memories can be stored in our bodies, try this exercise: The next time you receive a massage, observe the thoughts and feelings that float through your mind during the session. Consider how these thoughts and feelings may be related to the tension and holding in your body that is being released.
- 3 Misconception #1 is about the concern that keeping professional boundaries leads to a less natural relationship with clients. Think about what has been true for you as a client or a patient. Has a health professional (doctor, chiropractor, massage therapist, or other bodyworker) ever been casual with you or self-revealing in a way that wasn't helpful? Has the opposite ever been true for you—that a health professional's behavior wasn't strictly professional, but you found it to be helpful? If you've experienced both of these, what made the one helpful and the other not?
- 4 As you were growing up, did you come to believe anything about pain, dependency, or intimacy that might interfere with your having



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a nonjudgmental attitude toward your clients? For instance, perhaps you were brought up to believe that only weaklings complain when they are hurt. How would that belief affect your attitude toward clients who (appropriately) tell you about their aches and pains? How might you unlearn attitudes that aren't useful to you as a manual therapist?

- 5 How easy is it for you to set limits? Do you tend to give in to extra requests from friends and family or business colleagues? Do you dread having to tell someone that you can't do something they want you to do? Conversely, do you find it easy to set limits but find that you can sound critical or harsh when you do so? Try to observe your limit-setting style, and, if necessary, find a way to practice setting limits kindly but firmly.

