

Chapter 6

BOUNDARIES AND THE POWER OF WORDS

We communicate with clients in more than words; everything we do speaks volumes to our clients about our professional attitudes and values. Clean, warm offices and a welcoming smile say one thing, and their absence says another. The way we touch can communicate, “I’m so interested in working with you and helping you” or “Here’s just another bunch of tight muscles.”

There is a constant conversation between practitioner and client—much of it nonverbal—about the basic questions of intention and role: “What are the two of us doing in this room together?” This chapter is about the verbal side of that conversation: what we say to clients, and how we understand what are they saying to us.

The Power of Our Words

Two powerful influences give our words to clients more weight than they would ordinarily have:

- **Transference:** As explained in Chapter 4, clients are likely to see us as more powerful than they are and perhaps unconsciously relate to us as an authority or a parent figure.
- **Altered state:** During sessions, clients are more open than usual, less defended, and closer to their unconscious minds; our words can sink in more deeply.

Because of these two influences, clients may have a heightened sensitivity to what we say. Whether we’re in private practice or work for someone else, clients may be more affected by our words than they ordinarily would be. They may, for instance, hear us as being critical when that is not our intention. Our words can be deflating to a client if they sound negative or judgmental.

Here’s an example of a client’s reaction:

I’m never going back to that massage therapist. He made me feel fat and unattractive. While he was working near my stomach, he said, “I’m sure you’re aware of the unhealthy effects of being overweight.”

Altered state:
A state of consciousness in which we are more deeply relaxed, less aware of our thinking minds, and more open and vulnerable than we are in our day-to-day functioning.

Compassionate words can have an equally strong effect:

When my bodyworker said, “I know you’ve had a rough week. I hope I can be helpful to you,” I felt myself relax before she even touched me.

Our words can touch clients’ hearts or sink their spirits.

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Attitudes and Roles

This chapter gives suggestions for useful phrases for common problematic situations with clients. Although we can learn some words to say, no one can hand us a surefire script that will guarantee good results. The words we choose reflect our attitudes about both our clients and our roles. If we understand our roles, the right attitude and the right words will follow.

A client shows up 15 minutes late. One practitioner says, “You’re always late. My time is just as valuable as yours. I wish you would start coming on time.”

Another says, “We only have 45 minutes left in your hour, but I can help you get rid of lots of knots during that time.”

We can hear the difference in their attitudes and in their ideas about their roles. The second practitioner sounds like a professional talking with another adult who needs both education and nurturing. They manage to do two important things at once: set appropriate limits with the underlying message, “You don’t get a full hour if you show up late,” while showing concern for the client with the underlying message, “I want to help you feel better.” They take care of their professional needs by not letting the client take advantage of them while they also take care of the client’s legitimate needs for help.

The first practitioner starts out sounding like a martyred parent scolding a bad child and then ends up sounding like a whiny child herself. The practitioner’s statements focus on their own discomfort. They also sound caught up in countertransference: that is, they seem to be taking the client’s lateness personally and forgetting their professional role. Since the clearer we are about our role, the less likely we are to react in a personal way, we need to take another look at our professional role in light of communications.

The Professional Role: Dictator Versus Compassionate Practitioner

To better understand our role, we need to return to the basics of the therapeutic relationship: the concepts of paying attention to the contract, being client centered, being responsible for a safe environment, and maintaining our own rights. If we don't keep those in mind, we may end up sounding more like little dictators than compassionate professionals.

A common mistake for practitioners (like the first practitioner above) is inadvertently treating clients as if they were wayward children who need to be controlled and ordered around rather than as adults who have come for our professional care and concern. (Clients do need clear structure and information, but we can provide those things in a respectful way.) Here are some examples of the "little dictator" attitude:

Bodyworker Barbara relates, "I'm disgusted with my out-of-shape client who won't do any of the exercises I've given him. I need to tell him that just getting a massage won't help him much if he won't follow up at home."

Aside from being dismayed by Barbara's negative judgment about her client, our concern is whether Barbara has an agreement with the client to assign him exercises. If the client does not want any service other than a massage, then Barbara is doubly out of bounds, first by deciding what is "best" for him and then by being annoyed when he doesn't do what she thinks he should.

If a practitioner believes they have other services or expertise that would be helpful to the client, they can say, preferably during the initial intake, "You're already helping your health a great deal by coming to get a massage. Just to let you know what else is available, I also offer advice on home exercises (or whatever service) if you are interested."

Since saying even that little might come across as a negative judgment to an out-of-shape client, a better alternative may be to educate clients by spelling out our services in a brochure that we give to clients or by directing clients to our website, if we have one.

Somatic practitioner Sam says, "My client has such a control problem. She wants to tell me how to do the music, the lighting, even where I can touch her. I tell her that I can't do my best if she won't let me work the way I want to."

We do wonder who has the control problem here. Sam has forgotten that he is responsible for creating an emotionally and physically safe and comfortable environment for the client and that the client's needs are paramount. Certainly, this client has a right to her preferences about music and lighting, within reason, and she has a right to say that she would prefer that the bodyworker not work with some areas of her body.

Suppose a client had a request for where we should or shouldn't work and we think that honoring that request wouldn't serve her well. For instance, her shoulders and neck are hurting, and she wants us to focus most of the session there. We would then need to try to educate her: "Although you feel your tension in your shoulders and neck, they are part of a larger tension pattern. It would probably be more effective for your shoulders and neck pain if we take a whole-body approach."

Of course, if a client wants us not to work on a certain area for reasons of modesty or privacy, we are obligated to honor that request. We may not fully understand the reasons for a client's sensitivities, but we are obliged to comply cheerfully and without taking personal offense.

Communicating with Clients

In light of the basics of the professional relationship, here are general guidelines and suggestions for talking with clients. Of course, you want to find your own style and words.

USE THE CLIENT'S WORDS

When you ask clients during your intake procedure what they want to get from the massage, note how they talk about their bodies, their discomfort, or their lives. Using their own words and images when talking with them will have more impact than using yours. This is a simple but very effective way to quickly establish a connection with clients and to let them know you are listening to them and value their input.

TALK IN TERMS OF WHAT THE CLIENT'S VALUES ARE

Clients are usually motivated by one of three goals: looking better, feeling better, or performing better—or by some combination of those three. For example, you could tell a ballplayer that if he is less tense, he may be able to throw the ball more easily; you could tell a client struggling with illness that lowering stress can help overall health; and you can tell a client concerned about appearance that people often look younger when they are carrying less tension.

TALK TO CLIENTS IN WORDS THEY UNDERSTAND

In particular, you want to avoid New Age jargon if these words are unfamiliar to your audience. For instance, you probably wouldn't tell a banker that



Talk to clients in words they understand.

you want to release the negative vibrations from their third chakra. You might instead ask them if they ever feel like they have a knot in the pit of their stomach.

Talking with Clients During Sessions

Talking with clients who are on the table takes special sensitivity. During the hands-on work, you want to use a different tone of voice or manner than you would use in normal conversation.

There are a couple of reasons for this extra care. For one, clients on the table are exposed—although protected by draping, they are often naked. Even if they have their clothes on, they are in a passive position. Also, many

people have negative judgments about their bodies. Many clients come to you having been told all their lives by their perhaps well-meaning parents, loved ones, and certainly by the culture that they are too fat or too thin, too flabby, too short, too hairy, and so forth. Unless they are unusually confident, clients may feel some degree of inadequacy, unhappiness, or even shame about their bodies. You don't want to stand there from the safety of being fully clothed and add to their discouragement with careless words. When clients are on the table, the practitioner's words should be reassuring and positive.

Aside from being sensitive to their vulnerability, you also want to provide a space within which clients can turn off their thinking minds and drop into a state of deep relaxation.

In light of those two conditions—wishing to honor clients' vulnerability and allowing a deeply relaxed state—here are some guidelines for talking with clients during the actual session.

SPEAK AS IF TO A PERSON WHO IS ABOUT TO FALL ASLEEP

Use a lighter tone and softer volume than normal conversation. Take care not to say anything that might be upsetting or jarring. Remember that you want to be soothing. If you talk at all, think in terms of using your voice as if it were a third hand.

KEEP YOUR OWN TALKING TO A MINIMUM

Keep in mind that a yakking practitioner is a major complaint of all clients. A good general policy is to keep your talking to a minimum and keep it focused on the client. (A little chatting can be OK if you sense that the client will think you are rude or cold if you are too silent.) As much as possible, avoid bringing up subjects unrelated to the massage and avoid initiating conversation.

DON'T ASK QUESTIONS OR TALK IN SUCH A WAY THAT CLIENTS HAVE TO THINK TO RESPOND TO YOU

Even though you want to educate your clients, you don't want to engage peoples' brains with long explanations, speeches, or stories. Don't ask them questions that take thought (except very early on in the session before they are deeply relaxed), such as, "How many times have you hurt this foot?" If you need feedback, for instance, to find the right amount of pressure for trigger point massage, your goal is still to help them relax as much as possible by keeping questions simple.

You want to limit the amount of time spent in left-brain activity, such as counting or analyzing. Try to ask them questions that involve the right brain, such as questions about feelings or sensations: "How does this feel?" or "How is this pressure?"

KEEP INSTRUCTIONS SIMPLE

To avoid getting people to think, you want to keep instructions simple. For example, some people have trouble distinguishing between right and left, and most people, when they are deeply relaxed, have to think to remember which is which. It can be helpful just to tap lightly on the appropriate side and say, “Would you turn over on this side, please?”

SAY THE OBVIOUS

It’s surprising how effective it can be to simply say what seems obvious to you. “You seem to be having a hard time letting go of your right hand. It’s been in a fist for much of the session.” You don’t have to make up fancy explanations or add interpretations. Sometimes just bringing a bodily habit or pattern to a client’s awareness makes a big difference.

USE IMAGES THAT CONVEY THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

You want to let clients know that they can get better, not give the idea they are stuck in an uncomfortable condition. As an example, rather than saying, “This shoulder is like concrete,” you can say, “This shoulder joint seems to need more flexibility.” Or if an area doesn’t have much movement in it, don’t say that it looks dead. You can say that it looks “quiet,” “asleep,” or “as if it wants to move.”

FIND SOMETHING POSITIVE TO SAY ABOUT CLIENTS OR ABOUT HOW THEY ARE TAKING CARE OF THEIR BODIES

Compliment your clients for their self-care. They’re coming to get a massage or bodywork, aren’t they? That’s a good start. However, don’t comment on how attractive they are. Doing so could sound as if you’re sexually interested in them. Speak of “healthy-looking tissue” and legs that “look strong,” for example.

Just as your positive words can sink in deeper, so can your negative ones. A friend reports:

I didn’t appreciate when a massage therapist told me, “You have the tightest shoulders I’ve ever seen.” That’s a title I didn’t want to have.

BE CREATIVE WITH IMAGES

Images can help clients stop thinking and let go. Images can touch clients more deeply and stay with the client longer than dry instructions can. For example, you could say, “What if this shoulder were as loose as a rag doll’s?” or “Think of your back as a vast Montana sky.” Tailor the images to the client’s background and interests.

USE ONLY GENTLE HUMOR

Teasing and sarcasm have a hidden hostility, whereas gentle humor can work well. For instance, to a client with tight shoulders, you could say, “I’ve been wondering who’s been carrying the world around for the rest of us. Looks like it was you.”

OF COURSE, NO FLIRTING

Because of the power difference and the client’s vulnerability, any flirting can be intrusive or seen as harassing. No matter what your intention or how innocent a remark or tone of voice may seem, flirting with the client sexualizes the situation and is unethical.

TAKE EXTRA CARE WHAT YOU SAY WHEN WORKING AROUND A CLIENT’S HEAD OR FACE

When working around a client’s head or face, your words can go even more deeply into their unconscious. Because you’re so close to clients’ ears that it’s easy to sound loud and jarring, it’s best not to talk at all. If you do speak, use positive words and images. If you say, for instance, “I want to make your neck looser so you won’t have a headache,” what may stick in the client’s mind is the word “headache.” You could say, “It would be great to have more ease here.” Or play with images: “See if you can let your neck be as loose as warm taffy.”

BE SYMPATHETIC IN YOUR TONE

It’s easy for clients to think we’re criticizing them. For instance, “You’re so tight” can sound like a judgment. We could say instead, “Looks like you’ve been under some stress,” or maybe better, “Have you been under some stress lately?”

KEEP THE FOCUS ON THE CLIENT

When a client says, “My husband makes me mad because he won’t wash the dishes,” you don’t need to add, “Oh, mine, too. Isn’t it a drag? The other day, he made me so mad when he . . .” Clients are paying for your time and attention, not your life story. Sometimes such a remark would be harmless, and sometimes it could be a problem. Suppose your client is an overworked mother who feels that she doesn’t get enough personal attention in her life. She may—rightfully—feel intruded on if you take the spotlight away from her.

SUGGEST AND PERSUADE RATHER THAN ORDERING

What could be less relaxing than for someone to command you to “RELAX!”? Instead of doing that, or demanding, “Let this shoulder go,” you could say, “I wonder how it would be if this shoulder could let go.”

Dealing with Common Dilemmas

Certain questions and situations come up over and over in our work. Here are some specific ways to handle them, keeping in mind that our goal is to focus on the client's welfare.

Talkative Clients

If a client is talkative, your main concern is whether the talking is good for the client or not. This is an important point that many massage therapists don't take into account. Clients don't have to be totally quiet in order to receive the most benefit from a massage or bodywork. In fact, some clients unwind by talking, especially during the early parts of a massage.

If you see that talking is making a client more tense or getting in the way of his relaxing, then you need to say something. This is an excellent time to educate and suggest rather than order. Rather than saying, "You'll get more out of your massage if you are quiet," you can say, "Notice what happens to your back (shoulders, neck) as you're talking. It's okay for you to talk, but I wonder if it interferes with receiving the full benefit of the work."

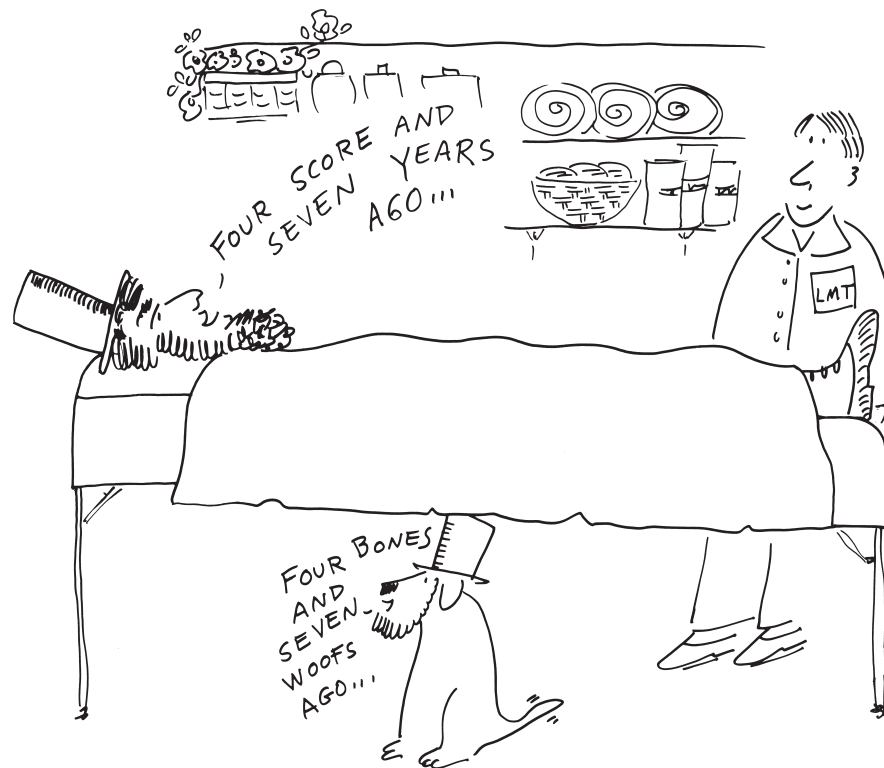
Some clients feel obligated to chat, as if the session were a social interaction. Those clients just need reassurance, "If you really want to talk, that's fine, but this is your hour to relax. You don't need to talk if you'd rather be quiet."

The client was talking so much that it irritated me, so I politely asked her to be quiet.

Is there a polite way to ask a client to shut up? Practitioners really have no right to ask a client to be quiet unless a client is being abusive. Otherwise, clients should be free to sing arias, recite the Gettysburg Address, or talk as much as they want.

Your job is to let them know when those activities seem to be getting in the way of *their* relaxation, not yours.

Sometimes practitioners are distracted by a client's talking because they feel they must respond, as if it were a normal conversation. Actually, all you need to do is say enough to show that you're listening. "Uh huh . . . I see." If a client keeps trying to engage you in conversation or if you're newly trained and are having a difficult time focusing, then it's okay to say, "It's fine for you to talk, but if I pay too much attention to talking with you, I can't concentrate on doing a good job."



Four score and seven . . .

Clients Who Are Emotional or Want Advice

As clients feel comfortable with you, they sometimes talk about their personal lives or ask for advice. Sometimes as they relax, feelings they've held back in their ordinary lives come up, and they may express their anger or sadness. You want to be compassionate with your clients, but sometimes it is difficult to know when you have inappropriately taken on the role of counselor. Let's sort out when you are being true to your role as a manual therapist and when you might be acting too much like a counselor or psychotherapist.

WHEN CLIENTS WANT ADVICE

When a client is in distress, upset, or having trouble, you may feel that you need to do something about it, to fix it. However, your job isn't to fix your clients' personal lives; your job is to create a safe and relaxing atmosphere for them to receive your work.

You can provide a valuable service if you simply listen to your clients. People who are complaining often don't really want advice; they just want to vent. If that helps them to relax, all you have to do is make sympathetic

sounds to show that you're listening and being supportive. "Really?" "That's too bad." Any more than that can be overstepping boundaries.

WHEN CLIENTS ARE EMOTIONAL

Some practitioners are uncomfortable when a client cries; perhaps because they think they must do something about it or stop the client from feeling unhappy. However, bodywork and massage can bring up held-in feelings, and crying can be a helpful release. When clients cry, you don't need to do anything other than perhaps indicate you're aware of their crying: "Looks like some feelings are coming up for you." And you might want to offer them a tissue or see if they want you to stop working for a minute. There's no need to do anything else; just your presence can be enough of a comfort.

Some practitioners may go too far interpreting the boundaries between psychotherapy and bodywork. They may think that anything outside of massaging muscles isn't their domain, or they become uncomfortable when a client cries or expresses distress about their personal life. Here's an example of interpreting our role too narrowly:

My client had just come back from court, where she had officially ended her 20-year marriage. She was very upset, expressing anger at her ex-husband and also crying. I told her that she might need to see a counselor and that I wasn't qualified to help her.

Although there are times when you might need to suggest that a client seek professional counseling, it doesn't take any special training to be a sympathetic ear for clients. If, 6 months after the divorce, this client is still crying and expressing anger at her ex-husband, then you might want to suggest that she seek the services of a counselor. Try to do so in such a way that the client feels supported rather than rejected. "I don't mind your talking about your problems here if it helps you relax, but I wonder if you would also like to see a professional counselor who can support you through this difficult time." (Also, consider such a consultation for yourself if you feel overwhelmed when a client cries.)

WHEN CLIENTS MAY NEED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING

In general, you might recommend clients seek professional counseling when they seem unable to come out of normal periods of depression or grief by themselves or when they seem overwhelmed by grief or depression—not just feeling sad or unhappy but unable to engage in their lives or work. Also, if clients seem confused about their lives or unable to cope by themselves or if they often ask you for advice, you should recommend that they seek other help. Again, you want to be compassionate and not sound as if you're rejecting them. You might say, "You seem to have a lot of questions

about decisions in your life. I can offer you a sympathetic ear, but I don't have the training to help you sort out your marriage (job, relationships). Have you thought about seeing a counselor?"

If you are unsure about how to work with a client because of their emotional needs, consider getting a consultation from a mental health professional as a valuable resource for yourself. Certainly, if clients express feelings of wanting to commit suicide, are engaged in self-destructive behavior, or are being harmed by someone else, you must urge them to seek counseling, and you should immediately get a consultation yourself from a mental health professional to find out the best way to help this client. Depending on the licensing regulations in your state, you may be required to report a client who is in danger of harming himself or someone else.

Clients Asking Personal Questions

Responding appropriately to a client's personal questions about you can be much more complicated than it looks. Although you may respond spontaneously to questions about yourself from friends or acquaintances, knowing how to respond to clients' questions can take more thought. Often, in order to answer a question well, you'll need to understand the reason the client is asking it.

If you answer a personal question without thought, either you could give out more information than the client needs or than you want to reveal or your response could shut out the client in an abrupt way. For instance, a male client asking a female practitioner, "Are you married?" could be asking if she could understand the difficulty he is having with his spouse or could be asking if she is available for a date. If you don't know why a client is asking a question and feel uncomfortable with answering, you might say, "I'm curious why you're asking." To be client centered, you always want to turn the spotlight back on the client—but in a friendly way. You don't want to be abrupt with a client who's just being sociable or trying to connect with you.

If you think the client is looking for support for a difficult marital situation, you could say, "I understand how hard it is to keep clear communication with a partner." If you learn the client is looking for a date, you could simply state your policy that you do not socialize with clients.

Clients may ask personal questions for other reasons also. Some clients feel uncomfortable or impolite if the focus of the session is entirely on them. You can let such clients know that they can relax and concentrate only on the work and on their own concerns. And some clients are merely curious and friendly and have no hidden motive in asking personal questions.

If there is something dramatic or obvious about you that you know clients will ask about—your foot is in a cast, for instance—have your story ready. You don't want to give each client a 15-minute monologue about how

your foot got broken. Again, what you want to discern and respond to is why the client is asking the question. A client inquiring about a practitioner's broken foot could be wondering if the wounded practitioner can now more readily identify with their pain, or they may ask, "Even though you are injured, can you still help me today?"

Keeping your privacy and keeping the focus on the client can be difficult for those who live in a small town or are part of a community where people know each other's business. However, if a client brings up something they have learned about you from someone else—"How's your bad back/divorce/leaky roof?"—all you need to do is assure them that all is well, that you are fine and ready to give them your attention and best work.

Clients Asking Questions Outside Your Scope of Practice

When clients ask you a question outside your expertise, it's important to be willing to say, "I don't know." It's a respectable answer. You can say, "Sorry, but I don't have any training in that area." Don't pretend to know or try to bluff your way through answering such a question. Not having to know everything can be freeing for you, and your clients will appreciate the honesty of an "I don't know." It educates them about what you do know and what your areas of expertise are. Showing your clients that you honor your limits helps them trust you. Clients won't usually be dismayed or shocked that you don't know everything; they just move on to their next concern.



I don't know.

Feeling that you have to know the answer to every question either directly or remotely related to the body can make your work stressful and stifle your curiosity. You could find yourself falling back on rote answers. “The way to work with this kind of knee is to do X.” Having to know can make you miss out on what’s going on right here, right now, in front of you with this client.

Clients Who Are Demanding

Clients who seem critical, demanding, or controlling can be a challenge; you don’t want to take their behavior personally. Avoid getting into negative countertransference. Keep in mind that clients may be acting out of fear that stems from past trauma. Although you may never know what clients’ histories are, demanding or critical clients are often communicating that it is hard for them to feel safe. Their message may be that they are not sure you are going to pay enough attention to their care. If you respond to their demands with impatience or irritation, you could be proving their assumptions true.

It is better to try to let them know you’re doing your best. “Is there anything I can do to make you feel more at ease?” If a client persists in being demanding, you can say gently, “I feel like you’re not comfortable, and I want this to be a good experience for you. I hope you will let me know what else I can do.” Your honesty and openness may help the client trust that your intentions are good.

It’s rare for clients to express directly that they were unsatisfied with your work and that they don’t want to work with you again. However, if that happens, it’s best to end the relationship in a way that doesn’t blame either of you. You could say, “I’m sorry that you’re not happy with the massage (or bodywork session). For some reason, we just don’t work well together.” Or “Perhaps my style of working isn’t what you’re looking for.”

Setting Limits

The ability to set limits gracefully and effectively is vital to our professional lives, especially for those in private practice.

If clients don’t know what the boundaries are, it’s difficult for them to feel safe with you. Although we may not think of setting limits as a skill that we need to learn, the reality is that our limit-setting skills need to be practiced and polished as much as our hands-on skills.

If you have an employer, usually they are the ones who handle such things as setting and collecting fees (and tips), punctuality, and sexual inappropriateness. You may not have many opportunities to set limits yourself, but you can learn by observing what works and what doesn’t in how your employer sets limits both with you and with clients.

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Here's an example about how being unclear about expectations can cause problems for both you and your client. A colleague reports:

I had a client who raved about my work and said he was going to tell all his friends about my “miracle work.” Well, that kind of praise went to my head, and I let it interfere with my judgment. When he started coming late and missing appointments without calling, I didn't say anything to him or charge him for the missed time. In fact, I even altered personal plans to create a time slot for him—and he didn't show for the appointment!

I know that I would have set limits sooner with another client, but I was caught up in being “the miracle worker,” and that wasn't good for either of us. Every time I didn't set good boundaries, he pushed another limit. I wish I could say that I started setting limits, but the truth is that he just stopped making appointments. I did him a disservice by not being clear about boundaries and expectations.

Setting Limits Gracefully

The most awkward and pesky dilemmas, particularly for those who are self-employed, are how to deal with clients who sexualize the situation and how to maintain boundaries around time and fees. Knowing what to do with clients who make passes or who act sexually inappropriate is discussed in Chapter 8. The following sections discuss some ways to make setting limits about time and money easier for you. Of course, you may want to rephrase these responses in words that feel natural to you.

BE CLEAR ABOUT EXPECTATIONS IN ADVANCE

This point can't be stressed enough. It's much easier and less awkward to set limits when you know you've been clear with the client about your policies from the beginning. It's a good idea to get in the habit of starting to educate clients during the first phone call about your fee policies, time policies, and, if necessary, the nonsexual nature of your work. For instance, assuming this is your policy, make sure you always say, “If you need to cancel, please let me know at least 24 hours ahead of time so I have time to schedule someone else; otherwise, I'll have to charge you for the session.” If you make it a habit, then you don't have to wonder later on whether you've told a client about the policy. About time policies, you can say, “Your appointment will start at 4:00; please be on time so that we can have a full hour to work together.”

First sessions need to include time not only for gathering information from the client but also for educating the client about your professional standards—in written form or verbal form or both. That can include policies about late arrival, notice to cancel, payment options (such as whether you take postdated checks), confidentiality, and your right to refuse to work with

a client who acts inappropriately. Find policies that you're comfortable with, be clear about them with your clients from the beginning, and then follow through as necessary. Having your policies in writing and asking clients to sign or initial forms is a good idea.

BE CAREFUL ABOUT YOUR TONE

When you have to set a limit, be matter of fact and even sympathetic but not apologetic. "I'm sorry that you couldn't make your appointment last week because you decided to go out of town. Unfortunately, since you didn't let me know you weren't coming in, I have to follow my policy and charge you for that session." Avoid taking a parental or judgmental tone with a client. ("You need to be more considerate of my time.")

SPEAK IN TERMS OF YOUR GENERAL POLICY RATHER THAN PERSONALIZING THE LIMIT

You can depersonalize what you say by referring to your general rules: "It's my policy to charge when a session is cancelled within 24 hours unless the client had an emergency."

PRACTICE WHAT YOU WOULD SAY IN VARIOUS SITUATIONS

Some practitioners have a difficult time setting limits. Remember that setting limits is a skill just like learning massage strokes; it takes practice to become a pro. To become more comfortable and more effective with limit setting, it's a good idea to practice with non-client friends and relatives; try out what you would say in various situations.

Role-playing:
Usually a structured exercise in which students or colleagues take a role—for instance, as client or practitioner—and act out a specific situation as a way of becoming more comfortable with handling the situation in real life.

It may sound silly, like play-acting, but role-playing is a great way to hone your skills. Even though you may feel mentally prepared to deal with a situation, it helps to say the words out loud. Usually the same feelings that you would have in the actual situation—awkwardness, fear, and so forth—will arise, even though it's not a real-life situation. Also, your colleague can give you useful feedback about the effectiveness of your tone, words, and demeanor.

Here's a success story from Brian Thayer, LMT, a massage therapist, who at the time was a recent graduate of a massage therapy school that uses role-playing. (If you're out of school or your school doesn't offer role-playing, you can set up your own role-playing with willing friends or colleagues.)

My first paying client turned out to be a great learning experience. I was really nervous beforehand. After the intake process, I left the room to give him privacy, saying, "Please feel free to get undressed to a level that you are comfortable with and get on the table under this sheet face up." When I said "under this sheet," I put my hand under the top sheet and turned it over slightly.

When I returned, I knocked on the door, opened it, and found my client lying face down, completely nude on top of the sheet. As if I wasn't nervous enough!

I took a deep breath and said, "Oops, let me step out of the room while you get under the top sheet and turn face up, please." As I stepped out of the room and closed the door, my calm, centered state escaped me. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door again and entered. This time he was under the sheet lying face up, but asked, grabbing the sheet, "Is this really necessary?" My reply was, "Actually, I use proper draping for all my sessions."

I was so pleased that the right words came out of my mouth without a second thought! What made the difference was that I had role-played that very situation with a fellow student, saying what I would say when or if a situation like that came up. They say practice makes perfect: for me, practice made permanent.

Most of us come into this work because we want to help people; an important part of how we help is by setting clear boundaries. Clients feel safer and practitioners are more at ease when we all know what to expect and where the limits are.

The Right Words

Although our work is centered in the nonverbal, our words make a difference. We want them to enhance our hands-on work and make our jobs easier. Because each client and each situation is unique, there will always be challenges. No matter how long we are in practice, there will always be times when we find ourselves searching for the right words and occasionally stumbling. Our goal is to know that what we say makes a difference and to keep looking for words that connect with our clients.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 You have had two previous sessions with a client. On the day of his third appointment, the weather was fine, but he or she didn't show up. Practicing with a colleague or friend, put into your own words what you would say or ask when you call this client.

110 THE EDUCATED HEART

- 2 Have you ever been a client, trying to settle in and relax on the table with a massage therapist or bodyworker who talked in such a way that it was hard for you to stay relaxed? What could that practitioner have done differently to enhance your relaxation?
- 3 A client calls at the last minute to cancel an appointment because he or she “just can’t get away from work right now.” This client canceled at the last minute once before. At that time, even though you had explained your policy of needing 24 hours’ notice, you didn’t charge him for the missed session. What would you say to him or her now?
- 4 Is there a situation involving limit setting that you dread dealing with? How can you make the situation easier for yourself?
- 5 Imagine you, the practitioner, are a pregnant woman, just starting to show. (You don’t have to be pregnant or even a woman to imagine this.) Your client begins to ask you questions about your due date, marital status, and how you feel. How do you keep the conversation client centered—how do you steer it back to the client? What underlying concerns might the client have about how your pregnancy would affect your professional work and relationship with him or her? How would you find out what those concerns might be, and how would you address them?