

# talk about touch

WITH MARY ANN FOSTER AND MARY KATHLEEN ROSE

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Mary Ann Foster, left, and Mary Kathleen Rose. *Rick Giase Photography*

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# TALK ABOUT TALKING

MARY KATHLEEN ROSE: Last summer, while giving a massage, one of my clients who grew up in the West spoke about her recent move to an Eastern state. She lamented, “I realize now how much I missed talking about irrigation ditches.” Being from a small town in the West myself, I could empathize and we began a spirited conversation stemming from our mutual fascination with land use in the open spaces.

MARY ANN FOSTER: An interesting, yet strange topic for massage. How did that go?

MKR: I was careful to let her lead the conversation, keeping my comments fairly brief. At the end of the session, she thanked me, saying it was “a great massage and a very therapeutic conversation!”

MAF: Chatting with clients during a massage is tricky. According to an Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals client survey, the number one complaint about massage therapists is they talk too much. Communicating effectively with our clients is a balancing act. We don’t want to distract them with inappropriate comments; we also don’t want to ignore them, seeming too quiet or unresponsive.

MKR: What are the basics of client communication? In the initial intake, we establish the intention of the session, find out their needs, let them know this is their time to receive, and encourage them to provide feedback during the session.

MAF: Many clients seem reluctant to speak up during a session, so it’s important to check now and then to see how the session is going, i.e., asking them if the techniques are working, if the amount of pressure

is OK, but most of all, if they are getting what they came for.

MKR: People receive massage for a number of reasons. They come not only to get relief from physical aches and pains, but they come to be nourished emotionally and connect socially.

MAF: Massage provides a great place for clients to rest and let down. Some of them want to talk about what’s going on in their lives and share their stories; others are quiet and use the time to process things internally.

MKR: No matter what clients talk about, it is important that any conversation serves their therapeutic goals.

MAF: I gauge the therapeutic value of what clients talk about by observing their body responses. For example, I noticed one client became increasingly tense as she ranted about her mother. To bring her back to her goals for the session, I asked what she felt in her body when she brought up her mom. When she realized that talking about her mom made her anxious, she caught herself, became quieter, and began to relax.

MKR: Sounds like a skillful way to redirect her attention back to her body, while at the same time avoiding feeding into her stress about her mother. You also facilitated her ability to make the connection among her thought processes and what was happening in her body as she talked.

MAF: This is what I love about massage. It provides an opportunity to help people make the connection between physical sensations, emotional issues, and mental processes.

MKR: In contrast, I could feed a client’s stress by telling a story based on my experiences. For example, “You think your mother is difficult, let me tell you about mine...”


MAF: Yikes! That really violates one of my rules for appropriate communication during a session, which is that all verbal interactions should contribute to enhancing the health and well-being of the client.

MKR: People often share personal information that they wouldn’t in a typical social conversation. We need to be mindful to keep what comes up during a session private. Let’s face it, because of the intimate nature of massage, talking is a challenging issue.

MAF: It certainly is. During a recent intake, I asked a new client what she wanted in her session. She carefully replied, “Please don’t fill my head with idle chit chat. If there is any conversation, I want your attention to be about me.” After all, she is paying me to focus on her.

MKR: What an eloquent reminder to keep communication client-centered. **m&b**

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