The "E" Dilemma

What your massage instructor never told you about erections

Let's face it, erections make us nervous. The possibility of one happening on a massage table keeps many men from ever getting a massage, and the possibility of having to deal with one makes many massage therapists anxious. Talking about them makes us want to giggle and joke. Their arrival during a massage can be as natural and innocent as a dog wagging his tail or as threatening as a sexual violation. Having a client who has deliberately aroused himself can be an unforgettable low point in a massage therapist's career; but a therapist's inability to deal appropriately with the innocent physiological arousal of a male client's body can forever taint his view of massage.

When it comes to erections in a therapy room, there is a lot at stake for both practitioner and client. Erections can make both the client and the practitioner feel vulnerable. If we respond with unnecessary disapproval and fear, it's a disservice to an already embarrassed client. Yet, we have to guard against the threat of a disrespectful, abusive client. It's a tricky situation.

There are misconceptions that add to the confusion. The most common one is the idea a man won't
have an erection unless he's sexualizing the situation, unless he's mentally or physically stimulating himself. Men say that's just not true. They report experiences of being a client, floating along, enjoying the simple pleasures of massage without any sexual thoughts or feelings of attraction to the therapist, and then...oops, their enjoyment has become visible. Also, younger men can have erections, as one therapist put it, "if the wind changes direction," and certainly can have physiological reactions from the intimacy of touch during massage.

Bodyworkers sometimes notice a client is having an erection and assume he's not saying anything, he's not uncomfortable. However, many men report being terribly embarrassed but decide to keep quiet, hoping the therapist won't notice.

Sometimes a therapist might think they're to blame for the client's behavior. If a client thinks we're offering sex, we can feel a sense of shame, as if we've somehow encouraged him. Sometimes, that confusion can make us uncertain about how to respond. Even if there's no hint of inappropriate behavior, when a client is aroused, it can set off questions in the practitioner's mind: Does he think this is a sexual massage? Have I been seductive in some way or led him to believe that? Especially if we don't know the client well, the situation can be uncomfortable, awkward and even scary. That's why one of the most important things we can do before, during and after a massage is client education.

**Protect yourself**

Our first goal in assessing the situation is to protect yourself—protect your reputation and your dignity as a professional. And even though it's a remote possibility, you want to protect yourself from bodily harm. Is the client having a natural, physiological response to the pleasure of being touched or is he deliberately arousing himself?

Fortunately, most of the time an erection isn't deliberate and the client doesn't have a sexual intention. However, if a client is acting inappropriately, then you need to stop the massage, take your hands off his body, address the situation and define your boundaries.

For that inappropriate client, you might say: "I want to make clear to you this is a non-sexual massage and I won't work with anyone who is acting inappropriately." Many practitioners, especially if the client is physically stimulating himself, would simply end the massage then and leave the room, regardless of what the client says. Others might, depending on their comfort level, give the client a chance to improve his behavior. Sometimes, a client doesn't intend to be offensive but has honestly misunderstood what you are offering.

Of course, you want to clarify the non-sexual nature of your massage long before the client is on the table—in your ads, when the first appointment is made, by the professional appearance of your office and your own appearance and behavior. Even with all that, there may still be a client who has the wrong idea. You have to make your boundaries very clear with such a client and guard your own physical safety first. Don't put yourself in danger by staying in the room with a client who is being abusive or disrespectful. Trust your intuition about the client's intentions. And don't work in an isolated office or at home alone with men you don't know.

What should you do when you notice your client has an erection and you're pretty certain it's just a physiological response? Should you ignore it or say something? And if you say something, what should you say and when should you say it? Is it a good idea to talk beforehand with new male clients about the possibility they could have an erection? All of this depends on the client's behavior, your professional relationship with the client, and your intuition about the situation. Depending on all that, you can choose to ignore it, address it or clarify your boundaries again.

- **Ignore it**

Under the theory what goes up must come down, practitioners often choose to ignore an erection. We can keep doing what we're doing, move to a less intimate part of the body or ask the client to turn over. Or if you know, for instance, that having work on his abdomen or thighs gets a client stirred up, you can work with that area earlier in the massage when he's less relaxed. You also have the option to avoid an area the client finds stimulating. However, you don't want to make a practice of limiting the range of your massage simply because of your personal discomfort.

While some suggest placing a towel over the groin, that might only draw attention to the area without communicating a clear message.

- **Speak up and clarify boundaries**

Clear the air. It's not unusual for practitioners, especially women, to be uncomfortable about dealing with a client having an erection. While men and women practitioners seem to feel equally violated by a client who expects sex and is being offensive, men seem to have more locker-room ease with a client who has an unintentional erection. Regardless of your gender, if you think that silence is adding to your discomfort or the client's, then it's a good idea to clear the air.

If the client isn't acting inappropriately, most bodyworkers wouldn't interrupt the flow of a massage to
talk unless the client says something. If he indicates he’s embarrassed, you can say something like, “Oh, that happens. Would you be more comfortable if you turned over?” or “Maybe you could focus on your breathing.” Say this in a matter-of-fact way and without disapproval.

Whether or not to say something is a judgment call made on a case-by-case basis. For instance, it would be helpful to talk with a client you’ve only seen a few times if he usually gets erections during the massage. Talk with him before he’s taken off his clothes or gotten on the table. You could say, “I noticed you had an erection during the last massage and I wanted to clear the air and say I know erections are usually just a physiological response to touch and it’s not unusual for clients to have them.” If it seems appropriate, you could add, “Since you’re a new client, I just want to reiterate this isn’t a sexual massage.” A legitimate client shouldn’t be offended and might be relieved.

- Educate the client beforehand

Of course, if a client expresses concern before the massage about having an erection, then you want to educate him that erections can happen as a physiological response to touch and they aren’t necessarily a cause for concern. A friend explains to such clients, “If you don’t pay any attention to it, I won’t either.”

Most massage therapists say they don’t bring up the possibility of an erection unless the client mentions it. They think even saying “You might have an erection” could make a client wonder if you’re sexualizing the situation. Of course, that’s not always the case. For instance, if a white-haired, grandmotherly massage therapist talked to an 18-year-old man about what’s normal, he would probably appreciate the reassurance.

- Get support and suggestions

If you still find yourself anxious about a client having an erection, even though you know it’s an innocent response, you could talk with colleagues and mentors for support and advice (without violating confidentiality.) Unless you limit your practice to women, erections will occasionally happen.

Although it’s not unusual for massage therapists, especially women, to be uncertain how to deal with erections, if this is a major problem for you, you might consult a psychological counselor to keep it from hampering your work.

The work we do is intimate, and nowhere is that more evident than with “the erection dilemma.” The potential embarrassments on both sides challenge us to hone our communication and boundary-setting skills. Whether we’re dealing with a major, session-ending indiscrution or a minor “oops,” we’re called on to use our professional judgment and our common sense. It’s all just part of the job.

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