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Applying Pressure to Trigger Points

One of the first goals I have with new clients is to educate them about how to know the level of pain to tolerate during the session. Trigger points due to their anoxic (lowered oxygen) state are usually tender to pressure. Sometimes people are nervous about working with me because they have had “trigger point” work done before and it was excruciating, and left them bruised and sore. Competitive types often have in their minds a concept that the more it hurts the greater the therapeutic benefit. In over twenty-one years of practice I have not found that philosophy to be true. I try to emphasize to my clients and anatomy and sports massage students that there is a dramatic difference between deep work and aggressive work.

I believe that any time we try to force the body to do something different in terms of attempting to facilitate the softening of hard muscle tissue, the body always wins. I don’t want to battle the tissues; I want to invite them to become more pliable. When clients try to tolerate too much pressure in hopes of greater benefit, at the least it will reduce the effectiveness of the work, and at the worst it will only add to their soreness and stiffness.

There are three aspects of body awareness that can help protect you from receiving too much pressure from your therapist. BREATH RATE: if you have to hold your breath, breathe more quickly or dramatically change your breathing in any way, the pressure is excessive. CLENCHING: if you have to curl your toes, make a fist, or tighten your jaw to tolerate the work you are past the point of therapeutic pressure. PSYCHOLOGICAL TENSION: if you are saying to yourself, “I hope he doesn’t hold that spot any longer,” you are tensing psychologically, and that thought process will increase systemic muscle tension and may further reduce the effectiveness of the work.

This article is not just for clients. Unfortunately, the “beat ‘em up to shape ‘em up” attitude is alive and well in the bodywork industry. Make sure your therapist understands these guidelines as well. For some reason, many therapists out there unfortunately have the philosophy that easing trigger points requires the patient to be sweating and pounding the table in pain. Using the “no pain, no gain” philosophy in working with trigger points will leave you with “much pain and little gain.” Till next time,

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-John C. Gifford, CBPM, NCTMB
Owner, Motionwise®



John Gifford has performed over 40,000 sessions as an approved provider of sports massage and a unique style of bodywork called Bonnie Prudden Myotherapy® and Exercise Therapy®. His mission as a clinician, lecturer, consultant, and author is to empower people to lead more active, successful, and fulfilling lives through the reduction and prevention of their muscular pain and tension.