

Ethics as Right Use of Power

Cultivating your practice with Compassion, Wisdom & Clarity

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Massage therapists occupy a very unique position in American society. A significant strength of our profession lies in being able to comfortably inhabit different worlds that approach the body in a variety of ways. We provide complimentary healing within traditional medicine, utilizing Eastern and Western thought. We provide healing touch in a touch-deprived and touch-phobic society. The profession has grown and defined itself in the last 25 years. As public awareness grows, our status grows, leading to greater power and responsibility.

Ethics is an issue that has become more visible and more emphasized in the massage community, both locally and nationally. As we grow and step into the professional world, various boards and organizations are requiring ethics to be taught. This requirement is a natural, essential and sometimes a painful step in the growth process.

Massage therapists and bodyworkers are often drawn to this profession because of deep desires to help people, be of service, work from the heart and make things better for others. Typically, the approach to ethics has been one of following a set of predetermined rules and guidelines, finding ways to protect oneself from the perils of legal prosecution, having one's livelihood taken away. There is more to ethics than adhering to what is right and wrong. We are encouraged to enlarge our scope of understanding by viewing ethics through a larger and perhaps different lens; a lens that magnifies how power and influence impact the therapeutic relationship. If we wish to truly honor the code of ethics to "do no harm," we must accept the responsibility of using our power and influence wisely in the therapeutic relationship. Such an examination can give us precious insights into ourselves and our sacred relationships with our clients.

We yearn for pleasure and satisfaction of finding and owning our personal power and using it well. We use it to love, connect, heal, protect and make our gifts and purpose manifest in the world. We use our power to experience ourselves as wise and skillful. Right use of power is the use of personal power to express compassion and kindness. The study of ethics and power can be dynamic, engaging, nourishing, interesting and life-enhancing. It invites us to gently explore the mists and shadows of human relationships. Clients often choose relationship over one's specific training as a vehicle for healing. It is important to remember that basic goodness is inherent. Using the energy of our power appropriately is learned.

By looking at ethics as "right use of power," we expand the focus from behaviors that cause harm to include behaviors and attitudes that use power to promote healing and empowerment. Ethics poses questions about how we are to act in relationships and how we should live with one another.

For many people the word "power" elicits an uncomfortable feeling. Power is often associated with harm, greed, being used or use of force. As massage therapists, we are sometimes unprepared to accept our own power. It can easily be denied. This is partly due to an unexamined relationship with power and partly due to growing up in a society where power is often seen in a negative light. Owning and re-engaging with our power as a resource for good can be transformational, thus impact the therapeutic

relationship in a very positive way. We are all capable of such magnificence and beauty when we use our power in the service of something greater!

Power is simply the ability to have an effect, or to have influence over. The right use of this influence is profound and complex. The right use of power reaches far beyond the desire to do no harm. The right use of power must be learned and practiced. This learning requires attention, skill and wisdom. The practice is for a lifetime!

I am forever grateful to have met Cedar Barstow who developed and introduced me to this concept of ethics as right use of power. The organizational model I use for this approach is the 4 seasons ~ a circle ~ a never- ending learning process. Learning is a process of gaining understanding and skill. The educational material is grouped with each of the aspects of the 4 seasons.

The 4 aspects are:

- 1) **Spring:** Planting, Beginnings and Possibilities. *What guides your decisions? What type of harvest do you want?*
- 2) **Summer:** Tending. *What do we tend to within the therapeutic relationship?*
- 3) **Autumn:** Harvesting, Reaping ~ Season of paradox. *How do we continue to nourish the therapeutic relationship?*
- 4) **Winter:** Slow Down, Pay Attention, Clarity. *What needs our attention? What brings clarity? Recognizing our limits.*

The above model offers guidance, skill and wisdom in working with the often fragile and confusing dynamics of the therapeutic relationship, along with exploring our own relationship with power. Following are a few questions you can ask yourself ~ What is your personal history with power and authority? What do you know about your power? What are the different ways your power is expressed? How can we learn to accept the beauty of our own power? How does all this impact your relationship with your clients?

For many massage therapists and bodyworkers, the study of ethics has been reduced to a “requirement.” Let’s begin to view the study of ethics as a journey into self-exploration, social consciousness and personal growth. Only by understanding our own use of power and influence, and deeply considering the ways in which our interactions with others influence our work and our lives, can we hope to enter into truly healing relationships. Ethics is truly soul work at its core!

Blessings to you,

Kathy

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