



Proactive Massage

3 STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO HELP CLIENTS NAVIGATE THE MAZE OF CHRONIC-PAIN CARE

By Loolwa Khazzoom

Many clients are uninformed about where to turn for help in treating their chronic pain. Repeatedly frustrated by the lack of answers from mainstream medical establishments, some may turn to you, the massage therapist, for help. Others may have given up on asking health professionals for guidance and need you to initiate the discussion. As a health practitioner, you are in a position to provide your clients with information that may help them overcome chronic pain—for good.

Like more than half of Americans, I suffer from chronic pain—a condition that has affected me for more than a decade. During this time, I have swirled through a confusing maze of doctors and bodyworkers, drugs and nutritional supplements, exercise programs and spiritual practices in search of the pain-free Holy Grail.

In my personal experience with body therapies, none of my therapists was proactive in helping me find the path out of suffering. It took me years to figure things out on my own, and by that time my

condition had worsened, something that could have been avoided had I been offered information earlier on. Some of my practitioners hadn't said anything because I hadn't initiated the larger conversation; they were pretty much "in mode" with whatever practice they were doing, and not offering unsolicited guidance on the bigger picture. Others weren't informed enough themselves, because their training hadn't educated them on complementary practices that can and should go hand-in-hand with their work.

Clinical research has proven massage therapy to be a leading source of relief from chronic, or recurrent, pain, an ailment that affects more than half of Americans and that interferes with their activities, mood and overall enjoyment of life. The relief, unfortunately, is sometimes temporary. I propose that massage therapists broaden their understanding of their role just enough to help clients see the big picture, one that involves referrals to multiple practitioners, if necessary.

While there has been a growing body of research on pain medication and management, few health professionals have been trained to offer comprehensive guidance through the confusing maze of resources available to people who suffer from chronic pain. Nor have they been trained to listen adequately and respond appropriately to the particular needs of chronic-pain sufferers, leading to a potential exacerbation of these clients' problems.

There are three steps you can take to assist clients through the maze: understand the emotional dimen-

sion of chronic pain; create a safe space for healing; and help them utilize other healing resources.

1 Understand the emotional dimension of chronic pain.

Chronic pain is a condition that "can really be a ravaging and damaging experience," says Mark Young, M.D., chair of the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the Maryland Rehabilitation Center. "Not only is there a physical toll, but there is an emotional one."

For people in chronic pain, adds Anasuya Batliner, an acupuncturist and bodywork therapist in Berkeley, California, "the uncertainty of how their life will be is really, really difficult, so depression is a huge part of it. The same part of the brain that processes pain also processes emotion.

"That's why pain also affects the part of the brain that has to do with our survival," she adds. "When you're injured, it just evokes questions of, 'Am I going to be able to earn a living? Perform my family duties?"

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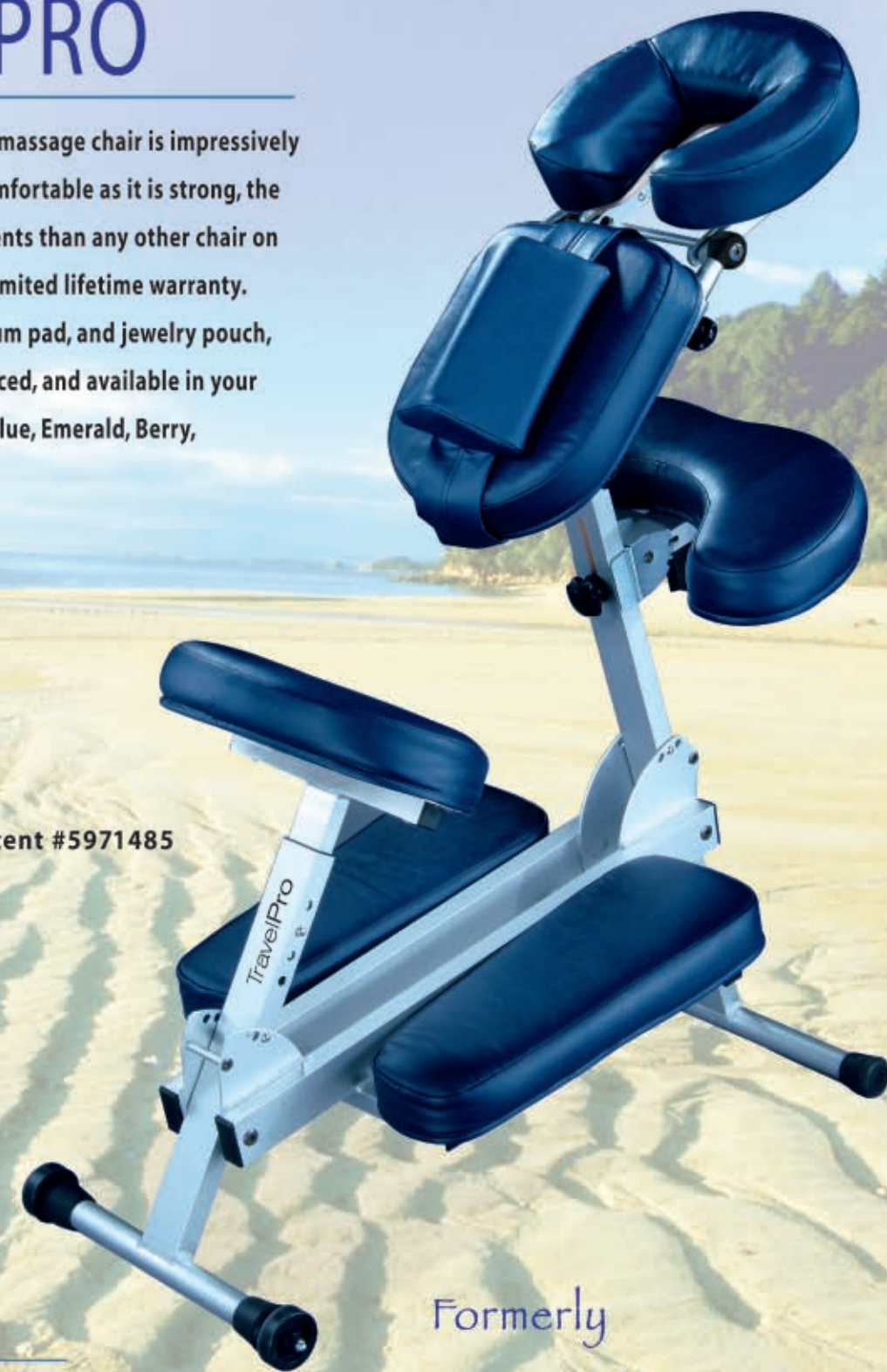
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Maintain my relationships?' That uncertainty, in turn, exacerbates the pain."

Adding to these layers of suffering is the trauma of dealing with an unsympathetic, even blaming Western medical system. "I see a lot of situations where the doctor can't get to the source of the problem with chronic pain, because it's difficult if not impossible to find—so

people who suffer through the 'if we can't find it, it doesn't exist' attitude."

2 Create a safe space for healing.

The cumulative effect of physical and emotional distress requires massage therapists to demonstrate extra care and flexibility when treating clients with chronic pain.

"You must have compassion," emphasizes Mary Beth Bullock, a massage therapist in Oakland, California. "People suffering from chronic pain have been dealing with this for a long time, dealing with different personalities in the medical profession. You need to be aware there can be blockages based on de-

fense. It's a vulnerable place to be on the table, especially if clients have chronic pain, because chances are they've been dealing with a lot of people who haven't been listening."

"If someone feels a bodyworker is not tuning into their delicate situation, it has a psychological effect of putting [the client] into flight-or-fight mode."

—David Simon, M.D.

the doctor says it's all in your head." says chiropractor and massage therapist Stan Ewald, who is also assistant professor at Southern California University of Health Sciences, in Whittier, California. "There are a lot of

FINDING A PHYSICIAN: AN ACTION PLAN FOR CLIENTS

A starting point in helping clients find chronic-pain resources may be helping them figure out whether their doctor is a good match for their condition—and if not, how to find one who is. Considering that many bodyworkers have fled the Western medical world out of frustration, helping guide your clients in this realm may prove challenging. Here are four points to begin with:

A) Set your goal.

Is your goal to be out of pain? To run marathons? You need to know your goal, then establish it with your doctor, says chiropractor and massage therapist Stan Ewald. "When the doctor becomes satisfied at something less than what the goal is, then you've gone as far as you can with this doctor. You need to find a new one."

B) Find a new doctor.

Pain specialists advise that the best doctor works in collaboration

with her patient: For a given problem, the right doctor will share the various potential causes, outline the different diagnostic and treatment options available, say what she suspects to be the root cause and why, then suggest and discuss a plan with the patient. The right doctor will take time with the patient, listening carefully and behaving respectfully.

A cost- and time-effective way to search for this doctor is to write a brief synopsis of your medical history, chief complaints and ultimate goal—including whatever is most important to you in a patient-doctor relationship—and send it to potential candidates (which you can find through personal referrals or searching the Internet for physicians specializing in pain treatment). Interview those who respond: Ask about their medical philosophy, their approach toward working with patients, and their

overall beliefs about healing. Pay attention to the inter-personal dynamic, and choose the practitioner who feels appeals to your gut instinct.

C) Educate yourself.

Visit the American Holistic Health Association (www.ahha.org) and www.pain.com as starting points for resources, referrals and self-help articles on chronic pain.

D) Keep on keeping on.

"Never give up on finding the right practitioner," says Ewald, "and never give up on accomplishing your goal 100 percent, whether [it's] eliminating pain or restoring function to an injured area."

Always remember that there are other treatment options out there—and along with them, hope.

—Loolwa Khazzoom

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The holistic approach to healing looks at what the practitioner can do to awaken the client's natural healing system, says David Simon, M.D., co-founder with Deepak Chopra of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing in Carlsbad, California. "When we're in a state that feels threatened, all of the life energy of a person goes to protecting their boundary, so that they don't feel their boundary is violated.

"Therefore, the energy is to protect, not to heal," Simon adds. "If someone feels a bodyworker is not tuning into their delicate situation, then rather than opening the space of safety that allows that healing to occur, it actually closes down that space. It has a psychological effect of putting someone into flight-or-flight mode."

To tune in to the client, it is key

to energetically ground yourself before beginning a session so as to be fully present, advises Batliner, then, "when someone says that certain touch is not OK, or that something hurts, try not to take it personally or make it out that you're incompetent or wrong or whatever. Back up and just use it as an opportunity to expand your awareness of where you are and where the other person is and where you meet."

It is the job of bodyworkers to make that meeting place safe, she emphasizes. To that end, make sure you are flexible, tailoring every massage to each individual's needs, instead of getting stuck in routine.

"Approach them with a lot of respect for their fear of being injured or reinjured or just touched," Batliner says. "No matter what protocol

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you have, and no matter what you were taught in school, your supreme teacher is the person on the table. You are adapting whatever protocol you learned to follow the person's lead."

"If they have been traumatized in their right shoulder, you do not touch their right shoulder," adds Bullock. "Respect the boundary the client has set, and don't impose your own idea of what a session should involve."

Remember massage-school basics of initiating

conversation about injured areas, pressure levels and other comfort-related matters, like putting a pillow under the knees rather than waiting for clients to speak up. Also keep in mind that socialization and other factors may prevent individuals from being honest, even if you verbally check in.

"What I do is really tune in to not just what they are verbally saying, but also what they are vibrationally saying," Batliner says. "As a bodyworker, you can't just rely on the words, because they don't always go along with the body language and energy. You have to pay attention to all of it."

Move very slowly, she advises, and check in frequently. "Watch the person's face. Tune in to sense if the person is staying OK with what you are doing, or if they are bracing against you, tuning you out, or leaving their body." Ultimately, she says, you need to be humble in your service and "trust that this person has the power to heal within themselves."

To this end, says Bullock, be careful not to inadvertently shame your clients for being where they are in their process. "There should be no judgment from practitioners, period," she says, "no matter what you think you know."

3 Help your client utilize other healing resources.

Beyond offering a safe and healing space for clients struggling with chronic pain, you can assist them in creating an action plan. Educate yourself on what types of health-care practitioners work in your area, then initiate a conversation with your client, asking if she would like session time to evaluate what has and has not worked, and what other options are available.

"There are definite laws whether we can prescribe or diagnose," Bullock cautions. "You can't say, 'You should do this because X, Y and Z is happening.' Talk about it like a referral. You're giving people options, not telling them what they should do."

"Have a working conversation and relationship with someone who knows how to do X-rays or teach people body mechanics," advises acupuncturist Lorenzo Puertas,

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director of the East Bay Pain Care alternative-medicine clinic in Oakland, California.

"Go out and find a caring doctor and a caring chiropractor and a caring acupuncturist," adds Ewald, "people you can have lunch with once in a while, can team up with, people you trust. From that network, you have people to send clients to."

Someone in chronic pain doesn't have the energy to research treatment options, says Bullock. That's where you can help.

Improve clients' quality of life

It takes a systematic treatment plan to treat chronic pain, incorporating methodologies ranging from nutrition to medication, exercise to hypnosis, and acupuncture to psychotherapy. By building relationships with other holistic practitioners, and with local medical professionals at pain-management and integrated-medicine clinics (where services may be covered by a client's insurance), you can help clients in pain build a supportive health-care team.

Had I known this information back in the day, I could have spent my 20s and 30s continuing life as the über athlete I once was—an avoid cyclist, jogger and swimmer, a self-defense instructor, and an adventure traveler—instead spending much of the next decade crumpled in agony in bed. As a massage therapist, providing emotional safety, validation and support to those on your table, educating yourself on available resources, and referring clients out will do much more than make you a terrific massage therapist—it could greatly improve the quality of someone's life.

When you broaden your understanding of your role as a health-care provider enough to help clients see the big picture of pain management, you may spare them from years of frustration and despair.

Loolwa Khazzoom (www.loolwa.com) has published articles in *Health, Self, Alternative Medicine, Yoga Journal, The Washington Post* and *Rolling Stone*. She is now working on her third book, *Patient Knows Best: An Unorthodox Approach to Healing Chronic Pain*.

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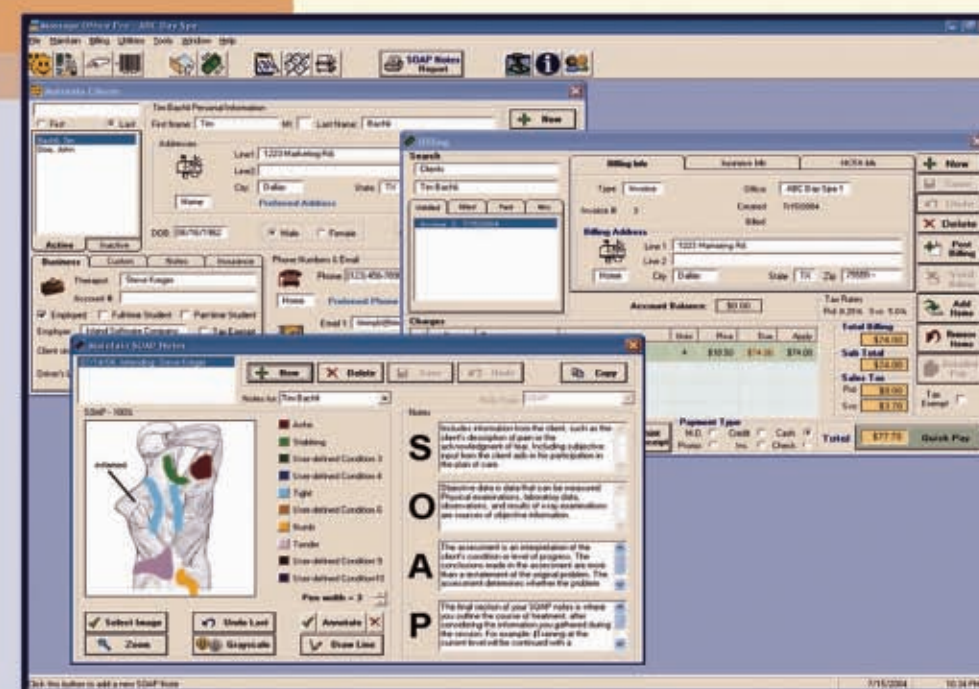
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