

In Praise of Rituals

by Patti Biro



If you look up the meaning of the word *ritual* in any dictionary, the following (or similar) definition appears, "The observance or performance of actions or procedures in a set, ordered and often ceremonial way."

Whether it is the way you take your morning coffee, the route you take on your daily walk or your bedtime routine, all of us have rituals we practice daily. Embracing the power of rituals has a special benefit for the massage therapist and bodyworker, as well as the client. Consider these important functions a ritual can provide and how you may include them in your massage and bodywork sessions.

Rituals define boundaries

A ritual opening at the beginning of a massage-therapy session can signal the client to begin to enter the "relaxation phase." It might be as simple as ringing a chime or a gong, a moment of deep breathing or a brief lying on of hands. The ritual begins the therapeutic process and psychologically prepares the client and therapist for what lies ahead. In this way, both therapist and client are "in tune" to begin the session and set the stage for the therapy.

At the end of the session, a transition process can help the client gently return to her daily life. A closing ritual can be as simple as a spritz of cool-scented water, chiming the gong or completing the massage with a series of long, brushing strokes on top of the drape or blanket, starting from the feet to the head.

Select a closing ritual that suits the type of massage-therapy session you offer and is consistent with the intent of the massage. For example, if you offer a session designed for invigoration and rejuvenation, then close the session by offering the client a chilled eye pack followed by a spritz of chilled, citrus-scented water. This protocol will finish the massage-therapy session with an energy zing! For a relaxation massage, the closing ritual signals the body that it is time to move to a more awake state and close the therapeutic process. This can help gently ease the client to the next phase without disrupting the pleasure of the session. The key is to tailor the ritual to your client's intent and the type of massage.

Don't forget that closing a session can be a momentary disappointment for the client—but from the client's point of view, nothing breaks the mood and the benefit of the therapy session quicker than turning off the music or being told the next client is waiting.

Rituals promote consistency

When multiple therapists provide a variety of services in a spa, massage studio or fitness facility, adopting rituals helps to ensure all clients experience a similar level of quality and consistency in their treatments. Individual approaches, skills and techniques are not compromised by the addition of rituals to a group practice. Rituals can be designed to promote the feel of the spa or practice, and they help to reduce any anxiety a client may experience when having different therapists conduct a session. In this manner, rituals can help provide comfort by helping the client to know what to expect.

Rituals help both client and therapist stay on time!

Welcoming, opening-the-session, closing and farewell rituals can be part of a carefully choreographed experience for the client. They have the added benefit of helping everyone stay on time. Calculating the time for these rituals, using them consistently and assuring that they are used by all staff can improve traffic flow and avoid "running over" with appointments. Adjusting for the time the rituals require will promote a smooth transition that allows the client to pay, schedule the next appointment or purchase products without feeling rushed or pushed out the door. Your bottom line will benefit from calculating and incorporating these steps into the dance!

Rituals build confidence

New employees, new graduates and even therapists who have been in practice for a number of years will find their confidence level is supported by knowing and using rituals. Mastering the basic rituals can help a newcomer feel like part of the team and more confident of using her individual skills within a given framework. When a new service or technique is introduced, designing a ritual for including it in the session can help make the new technique or treatment flow naturally into the sequence of the massage session. Including a practice session for all employees to review the ritual and share ideas for how to include it in the session can provide a great staff development experience.

A potpourri of rituals

Some wonderful welcoming rituals include instructing clients to leave their shoes at the door, don spa slippers and encouraging them to leave their concerns with their shoes. Or, one can greet each client with a welcome beverage and allows a few minutes in a reflection room while the room is prepared. A favorite closing ritual at one day spa includes having the massage therapist wait outside the door for the client to redress, and then offering the client a cool beverage and choice of inspiration cards, which the client can take home and put on the refrigerator, on the bathroom mirror or carry in a briefcase for a personal message.

Reflect on the rituals you already use in your practice and let your creativity consider how and where you can expand your repertoire of rituals. Select those that both enhance the services you offer and address areas of needed improvement, such as staying on time between clients.

Patti Biro is an educator with more than 25 years of experience in the design, development and planning of continuing professional education for health and wellness professionals. She is a NCBTMB-recognized provider of continuing education. Biro is the founder of Elder-ssage™: The Art and Science of Massage for the Aging Adult, which emphasizes the cross-disciplinary use of massage for the older adult. She can be reached at

pattibiro@yahoo.com or on the Web at www.pattibiro.com.



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