

Considering Body Language

BOB HADDAD

It happens quite often. A new or returning client enters your practice space, you chat a bit, and when the client lies down on your mat, she immediately and subconsciously displays body language. Your awareness and interpretation of these displays of physical, emotional, and psychological conditions can help you to carry out a successful treatment. It can also foster good relations with clients, ensuring a comfortable and protected environment within which to work. A client's body language can guide you through your work, and can help you determine what to do (and how and when to do it) during the course of a therapeutic Thai massage treatment.

This essay focuses on interpreting the body language that your clients display during a Thai massage, and working with it in an intuitive and sensitive way. My goal is to raise your awareness of elements of body language in your practice, so that you can more sensitively address your clients' needs.

The science of interpreting a person's inner feelings by observing their body language has mostly been developed by observing people engaged in business meetings, in social situations, while under stress, or in roles of responsibility, dominance, or subordination. Moreover, most studies and books on body language have made their determinations and reached their conclusions as a result of live interactions between two or more people in normal social situations. By contrast, Thai massage clients are generally at rest on a floor mat, with their eyes closed and their nervous systems in a relaxed state. How, therefore, do we apply the determinations and conclusions of body language based largely on external social stimuli to this situation? In this essay,

I propose that the usual standards of body language do not fully apply in the realm of the healing arts. I believe we must reinterpret and reapply our understanding of body language specifically in the context of our work as healers, bodyworkers, and Thai therapists.

Conventional studies and research in body language are often based on what is sometimes known as “cluster theory.” In normal social contexts, body language experts look for their subjects to display not just one, but several indicators of their underlying conditions. In a police investigation, for example, when suspects are interrogated, detectives are trained to look for clusters of physical signs that could indicate that a person is lying or misrepresenting the truth. Touching a hand to the mouth or lips; not looking directly into the eyes of the questioner; increased movements in the lower body, legs, and feet; and turning the head to one side are all indications that a person may be lying.

Although cluster theory makes sense and has been proven reliable when it comes to people who actively engage with others during everyday social activities, I don’t believe it has much bearing when a client comes to a therapist for Thai bodywork. For one thing, visual stimulation is largely absent from the bodywork dynamic, so this gives the receiver much less to “hide” from. Another factor is that the receiver is being touched, compressed, stretched, and moved continuously. As such, the client has much less idle time, and less reason to react in clusters of several expressions, gestures, or movements at the same time. Finally, there is little or no verbal interaction, so clients cannot show their expressions or sentiments through their voices. I am convinced that a sensitive, aware therapist can decipher meaningful information about a client simply by observing a single action, movement, expression, sound, or physical display.

Indicators of physical conditions

Although conventional body language research is based mostly on social, emotional, and psychological factors, bodywork clients also display indicators that point to specific physical conditions. Accomplished therapists should be aware of both types of body language, and should assess and explore them based on individual determinations that are reached during the course of the client-therapist relationship.

It can be important to look for indicators of physical conditions when working with new clients. Therapists get to know their clients’ bodies over a period of time, not just in the first session. In pre-session consultations, we discuss health history, and we learn about prior accidents and surgeries. As we get to know a client’s body and energy during the first few sessions, we learn more about underlying physical conditions and restrictions that may result in physical manifestations.

As soon as a client lies down in supine position, for example, if one hand rests comfortably on the mat with the palm facing upward, but the other hand is rotated slightly inward, then this may indicate a physical problem on the inwardly rotated arm. The same could be true if you notice asymmetrical positioning of the feet, legs, shoulders, arms, or other body parts. Though much of the information in this article addresses subconscious psychological indicators, therapists must also take into consideration those bodily manifestations that are caused by underlying physical conditions.

Body language on the mat

Body language is an important determinant of the overall state of a client, and it's important for therapists to watch for signs that may signal possible underlying conditions. Maintaining this awareness as we work allows us to develop into more sensitive therapists, and it helps us to determine what we should and shouldn't do during a Thai massage treatment. If we exist as therapists to serve our clients within their needs, then in addition to knowing their physical bodies, we must be aware of their fears, apprehensions, and concerns, so that we can allay them as best as possible and work with each client within his or her limitations. After all, a successful Thai treatment should not be an imposition of our agenda onto another person. We should always work *with* our clients, not *on* them. Awareness of clients' body language can guide us through even the most difficult sessions, and can allow us to work in accordance with each person's physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs.

Though I've studied conventional types of body language, I haven't found any in-depth information on body language within the context of traditional Thai massage or other forms of bodywork. This is a pity, because if professional therapists were trained to recognize displays of potential stress, fear, discomfort, and pain, they could more adequately and more sensitively attend to their clients' needs. As a result of working with many clients over the years, I've come to some conclusions that have been helpful in my professional practice, and I'd like to share some of them here.

Initial visual assessment

An initial visual assessment based on physical manifestations is important in order to gauge the overall state of the client. Since traditional Thai massage usually begins with the client in supine position, therapists have a chance to view the entire anterior body at one time. Soon after a client lies down, their eyes generally remain closed for a long period of time. This gives the therapist an opportunity to continually and discreetly scan the front of the body for clues and suggestions about the client's overall condition. If you are not cur-

rently doing this in your practice, I suggest you start doing so. A few seconds of time spent in this way can sometimes provide valuable information that can guide you and sustain you through the entire session. Here are some things to look for as soon as your client lies down on your mat.

Upward or downward palms

Upward facing palms generally means the client is receptive to the work and open minded and positive about the process and potential outcome of the session. Downward palms can suggest the opposite.

Distance of the arms from the torso

If the client's inner arms are away from his sides, it generally indicates a sense of ease and openness. If they are placed close to the body, it could denote holding, tension, or a protection mechanism of some sort. If the client's forearms are on their sides, with palms facing inward and touching the sides of the body, it could suggest concern, fear, and apprehension.

Distance of the legs from each other

While in a state of relaxation, most people lie on their back with their legs at a comfortable distance from each other. Naturally, the distance depends on the relative size and dimensions of each individual, but if you notice that both legs seem unnaturally close, or are touching each other, it may indicate something on a deeper level.

Breathing patterns

Maintaining awareness of your client's breathing is extremely important, as it can help to determine the course of treatment and types of techniques that may be used during a given session. Someone at ease will generally breathe in a calm, deep manner, with a gentle rising and falling of the abdomen, and a short period of rest in between each exhalation and inhalation. Shallow breathing may indicate a blockage in the stomach and the chest, and if this is the case you may be guided to work more extensively in those areas. Quick, short breaths may indicate nervousness or fear, or they may be physical symptoms of shortness of breath.

Now let's look more closely at individual body parts, and ways in which they may suggest certain physical, emotional, and psychological states.

The face

In Thai massage and most other forms of bodywork, the face reveals considerably less emotion than usual because the eyes remain closed during treatment.

Even with the eyes closed, however, pursing of the lips or tightening of the facial muscles can indicate pain or discomfort, and flaring or slight twitching of the nostrils or lips often suggests that an emotional response is very near. Be cautious, get ready to lessen your pressure, and be supportive and compassionate if you notice any of these displays.

The forehead

Clients can involuntarily wrinkle the brow in response to sensations or emotions such as surprise, fear, pain, or some form of concern. A forehead will often rise straight up toward the scalp if the emotion that surfaces is surprise. Fear, pain, and grief, however, are usually manifested by a wrinkle that engages the muscle between the brows, and pulls it inward toward the nose. The muscles near the temples also move inward toward the nose. People under high stress will often massage the area between the eyes, at the bridge of the nose. They may also rub the third eye in circular fashion with two or three fingers, or press it and then spread their fingers laterally – the thumb to one side and the index and third finger to the other side. This same gesture often indicates a tension headache.

The head

Very few emotions or sensations are displayed with the head when a person is in a static relaxed position. In social body language, many head expressions are also tied to eye movement, and since in massage, the eyes are generally closed, fewer head movements are displayed. Nevertheless, a raised chin, especially if it's accompanied by a forehead wrinkle, could indicate pain or discomfort. Also, when a therapist applies broad pressure to the shoulders, or works the neck or shoulder lines, clients may move their heads from side to side as they attempt to release their own tension in counterbalance to the therapist's pressure.

The hands

Placement of the hands on top of and near various body parts can indicate fear, protection, and other concerns. When hands cover areas of the body, the gesture can indicate a barrier, and a “do not enter” sign to the therapist. In all cases of crossed hands and crossed feet and legs, a therapist should take extreme care to not break through those areas in ways that could startle the client or make him feel uncomfortable. Doing so could jeopardize the cultivation of trust that is necessary in order to facilitate healing.



No need to open the hands right away

Be careful as you approach the stomach

Folded and clasped hands

Hands that are folded and placed on top of the stomach can be a signal of protection. When you encounter folded or clasped hands, a good rule to follow is to not unfold them quickly or unexpectedly. If you can work relatively well for a while without uncovering the hands, do so. Folded or clasped hands near the genital area should be taken seriously within the context of bodywork, since this gesture may indicate sexual trauma of some kind. In this case, extreme care must be used when approaching the inner legs with your hands or with any other part of your body.

Regardless of where hands are placed, once a client feels more comfortable, and a level of trust is established, they may unclasp their hands on their own. And if they don't, you always have the option to ask them to do so, or to ask them if you can do so. On the other hand, you may choose to simply take note of their positioning and not touch them there or work in that area at all. In many cases, heeding a "do not enter" sign is the best way to gain your clients' confidence and trust. It's often best to work within the needs and restrictions of the particular person on the mat at that moment in time. Once a safe healing environment is established, fears may diminish and signs of protection may disappear.

Closed hands and clenched fists

Some clients exhibit closed hands – and more rarely, clenched fists – when they are lying on the mat in supine position. One or two closed or clenched hands can indicate different feelings, and the reasons are difficult to determine within the context of a session. For the most part, however, a closed hand or a clenched fist can indicate some sort of resistance, defensiveness, or deter-

mination. If you notice a closed hand or fist as you begin working in supine position, take note of it and develop a strategy to slowly move toward that arm somehow, so you can naturally take hold of it, as you would during the process of a regular Thai massage movement.

If, for example, you notice that one hand is more closed than another, you might wait until you begin to work on the upper lateral leg on the same side of the body. As you approach that upper leg, you would have to grab hold of the client's hand in order to open their arm so that you can begin your leg line work. Once you grab their hand to open their arm, this could be a perfect time to explore the hand a bit, to gently massage it, stretch the fingers, rotate the wrist, and press into the palm. Try to release the tension in a flowing, organic way before you bring the arm back to the mat and begin your leg work. Very often, even the slightest touch to an area that is holding tension will bring about an opening.

A slow and natural approach to closed or protected areas of the body is almost always the best strategy. Rather than targeting a particular area by singling it out and working on it aggressively, always try to approach the afflicted area organically and within the context of the whole body. Take time to work the general area around an afflicted spot, instead of jumping right onto the target.

Palms

Palms are very good indicators of a client's openness and disposition. For the most part, palms that are open and turned upward indicate openness and receptiveness to the work. They may also indicate that the client feels comfortable in your presence, and that they don't feel threatened or intimidated in any way. Palms that face inward and upward signal that the arm muscles are not engaged, as they must be when they are positioned downward or outward. From an energy perspective, open and upwardly turned palms allow healing energy to enter the human system more easily, since the very act of turning palms upward results in an internal energy shift. Anyone who works in energy healing knows this.

Try it for yourself. Stand or sit and extend your arms and hands outward with your palms facing downward toward the ground. Now bring all your attention to your hands, and take note of the feelings, sensations, and energies you have there. Now, while focusing your attention on your hands, rotate them outward so that your palms face upward. You should immediately feel different sensations of lightness and openness that you didn't have when your palms were facing downward.

On the Thai massage mat, upward palms can signal openness, receptivity, and non-threatening or submissive energy. Downward-facing palms may indicate defiance, being closed to the work, or they may even suggest a sense of

authority or superiority. Submissive, trusting dogs who want to be touched reveal their throats. Humans show their palms. This is not to say, however, that every time you see downward facing palms you should assume the client is closed to your work. Some people's anatomy is such that their arms and wrists are in a relaxed state when their palms are slightly pointed inward, or even if their arms and hands are on their sides, with thumbs facing upward. In addition, women's arms anatomically rotate outward more easily, while men's rotate slightly more inward.

If you have a client with downward-facing palms, take note but begin your work without moving them. You will have plenty of time to investigate the arms and hands when you address them during the course of the session. In many cases, after you work an arm with compressions, palming, and thumbing, the hand will open, palm upward, when you release the arm to the mat.

Self-touching

A client who rubs his fingers together, usually the thumb and index finger, may be engaging in self-comforting. It's the same if he uses one or more fingers to gently rub or caress a part of his body such as a leg, the chest, or the heart area. Take note of these gestures, but don't stop them. Your client may simply be adjusting to your work by comforting himself, and this will allow him to go deeper in the session and to open up more fully to the healing process.

The arms

Body language with arms often involves draping one arm over the body, holding an arm or wrist with the other hand, or gripping one or both elbows with the hands. While these gestures may have different subtle meanings, they almost always indicate some sort of protection or barrier.

Partial arm-cross, self-hugging

In clinical body language, a partial arm-cross, where one arm drapes across the body in order to lightly touch the opposite side of the body or grasp the other arm, is often viewed as a type of self-hugging mechanism. It can indicate that the person is fearful of your work and that she is trying to console herself. This act of self-comforting and self-assurance may further indicate that she is engaging in a process of establishing trust in you as the therapist. Because of this, don't stop or invade that process by quickly unhooking her arms. As always in these types of situations, a slow, organic, compassionate approach is best.

A rare double arm grip. Avoid the mid section, be patient, and work slowly



Arm-gripping

When one hand is firmly gripping the other arm, or when both arms are folded together across the chest, a firm barrier is being placed between you and the client. It is a defensive posture, and in addition to being a sign of “no entry” between you and the client’s chest, breasts, or heart area, it could also indicate negativity or doubt about the session itself. Though it is rarely seen on the mat, a double arm-grip, where both hands grip the opposite elbows or upper arms, is a very strong statement, and serious thought should be given about how (or if) to approach the client in the area being protected.

The legs

For the most part, clients know that a therapist needs to work on the feet and legs, and that in order to do so, they must be uncrossed and somewhat open. If a client lies down and immediately crosses her legs or places her feet so close together that you need to open them wider in order to work, you’ve got a situation that needs addressing fairly quickly.

Crossed legs and feet can indicate general protection of the medial legs and the entire inner area of the lower torso. In some cases, it can be a subconscious protective device resulting from sexual abuse. A gentle way to diffuse this type of posture is to let the client know that you will now be holding and moving her legs. Rather than quickly and forcibly opening the legs on the mat, you might try putting both feet in your hands and gently moving both legs together. Double leg movements such as gentle rotations, rocking from side to side, and forward compressions can help to diffuse barriers, warm up the lateral leg lines and hips, and bring about more comfort and ease. In most cases, the legs will release their tension and the feet will relax. When they do, you can open the legs while still holding them aloft and repeat the rocking and rotation movements with one leg at a time. After a few minutes of working like this, when you return the legs to the mat, they will almost certainly be more relaxed and will probably rest comfortably on the mat at a reasonable distance from each other.

The feet

In supine position, clients will sometimes jiggle a foot repeatedly for a few seconds and then stop and start again. When you see this, it is often a sign of nervous energy. Jiggling the feet can also mean that the person subconsciously wants to run away from what is being experienced. Try to imagine how you could work with that person in a way that would help to calm and dissipate that energy. Visualize where the nervous energy that is exiting at the foot may be stored. It may be in the upper lateral leg, for example. If this is the case,

gentle, persistent work there could uncover tense muscles, a pocket of stress, or an energy blockage. Foot jiggling can also indicate that a client is bored, and if this is the case, it will stop as you progress through the session with new techniques.

Watch for dorsiflexion of the feet when you work on the feet and ankles. Some people will flex their feet upward when you hold or lift their feet or lower legs. This could be a defensive posture, if the client is afraid of feeling pain in this area, or it could mean that they are trying to “help” you. Curling of the toes is often an expression of fear or protection. Be aware that these are usually involuntary reactions, so try to not become frustrated with clients who react this way. Send metta to them, and be patient and compassionate. Work these areas gently but firmly with rotations, compressions, and line work on the anterior and posterior feet. You can bend the toes backward, apply acupressure to the webbing between the toes, and crack their toe knuckles, too.

If a client keeps his feet very close together in supine position at the beginning of a session, consider making physical contact with their lateral legs first, perhaps by doing some palming and thumbing on the outside leg lines. After a while, and once the client feels comfortable with your touch, his feet and legs may open more naturally.

Body language awareness

I hope that these ideas about body language within the context of therapeutic touch will be helpful to the Thai massage community. I believe that awareness of body language in clients is an invaluable tool for all professional bodyworkers. The safest way to address clients’ fears and barriers, and the best way to win their confidence and trust, is to work with respect, compassion, and patience.

Remember to take a moment to visually assess your client before you even touch them, and be aware of body language during each session. Observe the body’s physical placement and relative symmetry, scan for possible indicators of underlying psychological conditions, and take note of breathing patterns. Your impressions and intuition can serve as tools to guide you through each session, and can allow you to be as sensitive as possible to each client’s needs.

When you see a display of body language that suggests “no entry,” it’s best to not abruptly break your way through that protection zone. Doing so can result in further alienation. First, try to work around those areas, whenever possible, and see if they gradually open up by themselves with your touch. Remember that it’s always best for a client to surrender to his own process of self-healing, rather than feel invaded or forced open by a therapist. When and if it becomes absolutely necessary to uncross an arm, or to move a hand from the heart area, or to unclasp two hands from over the stomach, you have

several options. You may ask permission to do so; you may softly announce that you will soon be doing so; or you may gradually approach the protection zone by slowly working up to it from a nearby part of the body.

When we work with compassion and patience, we respect the individual before us on the mat, we break away from self-imposed constructs of what we think that person needs, and we encourage the session to unfold with the loving-kindness that is so essential to traditional Thai massage.