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Deep Tissue Healing: The Art of Stone Massage

By Bruce Baltz

Stone massage as we know it today has gone through many changes as its popularity has grown from spa sessions to injury treatments. Today, massage therapists have many choices in stone work education, and there are almost as many stone work classes as there are modalities in massage, ranging from home study classes to several day workshops, from Reiki with stones to deep tissue.

With therapists and businesses trying to keep up with the public's demands for stone massage, the industry has run into unacceptable legal setbacks.

In my opinion, the blame cannot be put on any one party. Therapists must be held responsible for their actions as well as the businesses that offer any type of service. This means the providing parties need to seek proper knowledge so all necessary steps are taken to provide the best treatment possible. The two elements most stone workshops have in common are the use of heat and application of stones to the body through a drape or directly to the skin.

For this work to be done within a safe range for the therapist and client, specific steps must be taken into consideration, including the ability of the therapist to handle a hot stone and a client's tolerance to heat.

When taking a stone out of hot water, make sure the temperature of that stone is within your tolerance. If it is too hot, your ability to apply that stone with confidence, whether through a drape or directly on the skin, will be greatly hindered, and your client will feel your lack of confidence.

Once you have a stone that you are confident you can handle, you must consider your client's tolerance for heat. Take all necessary precautions to assure your client will have the best treatment you can provide. If a hot stone is being placed on the body through a drape, it should be done through a towel, not a sheet - the sheet will often be too thin. It is essential that you check with your clients to see how the temperature feels to them.

Some techniques require clients to lie on the stones. A client's chances of suffering a burn during this treatment are greater, but the technique can still be administered with proper training. I tell my clients that they are in control of the session, which includes determining temperature - hot or cold - and pressure. If you do not give your clients this permission, they might think to themselves: "You are the professional and I guess this is the way it should feel." We cannot afford to have this thought cross their minds.

If your intention is to apply a stone directly to the skin, you need to make sure the heat stays within the client's tolerance. If the maximum level is 10 and we do not want to be there, we are looking for the seven to eight ranges for deep-tissue work. You will also have to acknowledge that the seven to eight range could be different on each of your clients, with hot, cold, and pressure; this must be respected. The chances for injury to the client are greatly reduced when a properly trained therapist takes these steps.

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To add stone massage as a modality to assist in the healing process you need to be aware of the learning curve to apply this technique safely. When therapists come to me for training in the use of hot and cold stones, I ask them to take a stone in their hands and work with it as though it is a part of their hand. It does not matter how long one has been a therapist, the stone will be an equalizer in class because student therapists have to massage with that stone as though it is an extension of their hand.

This process will take time before the stone can be one with the therapist's hand. Therapists will need time to adapt the stone into the flow of their work. When this time is not taken, therapists will not develop the technique properly. Thus, the therapist will not feel comfortable, and the client will pick up on this feeling and not want the treatment again. This will reflect on all stone massage therapists, which will perpetuate a negative feeling for stone massage.

I do not recommend that one therapist attend any workshop, and return to their place of business and train the rest of the staff in what they have learned. This could be a formula for disaster for the client, therapist and owner, and could result in an injury to the client, as well as legal action. Thank you to the businesses that support continuing education for their massage therapists, but allow your therapists the time to perfect their modality whatever it may be. The end result will benefit all involved.



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