

The Talkative Client

I frequently receive emails from therapists who think their clients talk too much, tell them things that are too personal, or ask them questions that are too personal. We've all had clients who like to talk...in fact, *some of us like to talk*. I've had massages from plenty of chatty massage therapists. I try not to be one, myself, but I do base the amount of talking I do on the client's behavior in that regard.

I figured out early in my career that for some clients, social interaction is just as important to them as the massage. Maybe they live alone and lack someone to talk to. If they are initiating the conversation, I will let them talk. It's their time; they're paying for it. If it is truly a distraction to the work you are doing, you might handle it by politely saying something like, "Let's stop talking for a few minutes so we can focus on your shoulder...I may need some feedback on what I'm doing. I want you to get the best possible benefit from the massage." Then you might engage them in a little passive or active stretching and ask how it feels, or where it hurts, to keep them feeling involved.

Clients sometimes treat us like counselors...telling us about their personal issues, sharing stories about their divorce or breakup, their problem children, problem parents, problem co-workers, or whatever. We sometimes hear way more than we want to. Avoid giving advice—even if you're asked—it's the best thing just to make sympathetic but non-committal comments like, "Oh gee, I don't have any idea what I'd do in that situation." It's not our place to counsel people or comment on their personal problems. It's not always negative; some clients may go on and on about their wonderful relationship, their wonderful children, or their wonderful life. Just be happy for them and say, "That's nice!" Nothing more is necessary.

Some clients indeed ask us personal questions. Something like "Do you have any children?" is innocent enough. But if a client asks you anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, just say "Why do you ask?" That could be anything from "Are you a Christian?" to "Did you vote for Donald Trump?" That is none of the client's business, but you can't say that. You can say something like "Please don't take it personally, but I prefer to keep my personal life separate from my work life, so it's my policy not to discuss personal things with clients. Now let's focus on seeing if we can help your sciatica." Turn the session back to the bodywork. Sometimes you may have to do that repeatedly, but eventually, they'll get it.