

GUIDELINES FOR GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK IN MASSAGE THERAPY CLASSROOMS

Many students feel fear when they think about giving feedback to classmates. They try to avoid the situation by offering vague general comments like, “It was great,” “Thanks for the massage,” or “I was really relaxed.” Such generalizations rarely prove useful or help the students who are acting as therapists improve their massage skills. Giving and receiving good feedback is essential to learning massage and to professional development. Self-awareness, boundary setting, basic communication skills, and massage technique improve when students move beyond comments that are vague, evasive, personal, or judgmental and into providing feedback that is specific enough to promote positive changes in professional behavior and massage technique.

Constructive Feedback Defined

Business coaches and education writers describe constructive feedback as a response to input or an inquiry that is information specific, issue focused, and based on observation. When you give constructive feedback, you focus on a behavior that needs to be changed or adjusted in order to improve performance. Comments that address a person’s characteristics or personality are avoided because they tend toward praise or criticism, which is different than feedback. Praise is the expression of approval or admiration, while criticism is faultfinding or censure. Neither praise nor criticism helps people make positive changes that improve their performance. Instead, egos are stroked or feelings are bruised, causing an unsafe and unbalanced learning environment.

Guidelines for Giving Constructive Feedback

Giving constructive feedback is a skill. It is something you can improve if you are willing to practice, evaluate the quality of the feedback you give, and ask for input from classmates on your ability to communicate suggestions for improvement effectively. These guidelines and examples can help you get started.

- 1. Check in.** Ask yourself, “Am I ready to give feedback based on my observations with specific suggestions for changes? Do I have any motivations for giving feedback other than to help my classmate improve?” If you feel ready to give good feedback, proceed. If you don’t, take some time to reflect on your feelings and write out your feedback. Then check what you have written against the rest of the criteria on this list.
- 2. Comment right away.** Give feedback as soon as you notice a behavior that needs modification. If a stroke feels too light, alert your therapist during the stroke by saying something like, “Would you deepen the pressure one or two notches? Yes, that feels deeper, but you can still drop one notch deeper? Now you’ve got it!”
- 3. Say it again.** Sometimes the behavior improves temporarily, but the unwanted behavior may reappear. Give feedback repeatedly to ensure your therapist makes the necessary change. For example, “The pressure feels too light again. Good; now the stroke is deep enough.”
- 4. Specify.** Be direct when describing what you observed or felt; you don’t need to praise or criticize. For example, “When you undraped my leg, it felt as if you were holding the sheet up at an angle that might expose me. Can you hold it lower so I don’t feel a draft?” If you go into “praising mode,” you might be tempted to devalue your own feelings by saying



something like, “I know you are really good at draping and so I probably don’t know what I’m talking about, but it felt a little bit like you were exposing me during the leg drape.” If you go into “criticizing mode,” you might give feedback in such a way that it will be rejected by your therapist or cause hurt feelings by saying something like, “You’re draping skills are bad. You always expose me when I’m your client and I can never feel safe with you.”

- 5. Focus on impact and change.** Explain the impact of the behavior on your experience and suggest specific changes that would improve it. For example, “It feels like you are cutting the stroke short on my thigh. What if you took the stroke all the way up and around my greater trochanter instead? That would feel relaxing and fluid to me. Yes! That’s it! That feels so much better!”
- 6. Respond to change.** When the therapist changes his or her stroke or adjusts the behavior based on your feedback, respond to the change with reinforcing statements like, “Yes, that feels better” or “You’re on the right track, but slow down just a little bit more. Yes, that’s perfect!”
- 7. Find balance.** Give balanced overall feedback on massage exchanges by providing information both on what worked and on what didn’t work. Don’t give feedback on only one or the other.
- 8. Be specific.** Remember that general or vague feedback is not helpful. If you say, “That was great” it is as useless as saying, “That was terrible.” Give specific feedback that can help your therapist improve his or her techniques. For example, “What I really liked was the way you transitioned your strokes from my back, through my gluteal muscles and then down my legs. It felt like it helped me to connect all of my body and was soothing. The technique that seems to need improvement is the variety of strokes you use. I felt effleurage and friction with your forearm, but you never used petrissage, tapotement, vibration, or range of motion. I would have enjoyed the friction more if you had used different application methods. It would have been great to feel circular friction down my erector muscles, and linear friction on my hamstrings.”
- 9. Be considerate.** Give feedback privately and don’t share with other students the feedback you provided to a classmate. No one likes to be the object of gossip and it is difficult to make positive changes when you feel like your classmates are talking about your skills behind your back. Every student has an obligation to support a classroom environment that is safe and focused on learning. Do your part by being respectful when you give feedback.
- 10. Get feedback on your feedback.** After you give a classmate feedback on his massage, allow him some time to absorb it and write it down. Then, ask your classmate for feedback on the usefulness of the suggestions you gave him. Through this type of back and forth communication, you build trust in each other and improve your skills.

Guidelines for Receiving Constructive Feedback

Receiving feedback from a classmate can cause feelings that range from a sinking in the pit of your stomach, to sensations of shame and humiliation, to the impression that your blood must be boiling. When you know how to evaluate, interpret, and learn from feedback, the process becomes easy and welcomed. These guidelines can help.

- 1. Assess the value of the feedback.** As was mentioned previously, giving feedback is a skill and some people need constructive feedback on their feedback. Assess the value of the feedback you receive by determining if it is based on praise or criticism, if it is so general that you don’t know what behaviors you should change to improve your performance, or if it takes the form of a personal attack that has little to do with your skill level. If you determine that the feedback is of poor quality, it is OK to ask the giver to amend the feedback. For example, you might say, “Tom, your comments on the massage session seem more like a personal attack than feedback. You said that you didn’t feel that I should be allowed in the advanced technique class



because my foundation skills are poor. Can you give me a specific example of a foundation technique you think I need to improve and how I should change the way I deliver it to make it better?” If, on the other hand, the feedback is constructive (not based in praise or criticism), is specific, and respectful, then the rest of the items in this list can help you implement the feedback to improve your skills.

- 2. Put feedback in context.** Remember, you’re in massage school to learn how to give a good massage, which suggests that—like everyone else—you are not perfect yet. When you ask for and welcome constructive feedback, you can learn skills more quickly and develop professional behaviors that ensure your success when you graduate.
- 3. Avoid defensiveness.** Change is scary, and so it is easy to want to deny that changes are needed and to accept good constructive feedback without being defensive. If you find yourself justifying your position (i.e., “Your skin is really dry and its hard to massage, even with lubricant”) making excuses (i.e., “I’m not feeling very motivated today and that’s why I didn’t give you a good massage”), sulking, feeling angry, or withdrawing into silence, it’s a safe bet that you are shielding yourself with defensiveness. Let the defensiveness go because it doesn’t support your improvement. Instead, with the help of the student who gave you feedback, make a list of three things to focus on during the next massage.
- 4. Take a time out.** Sometimes even good constructive feedback causes feelings of sadness, humiliation, or a loss of self-esteem. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by feedback, take a time out. Ask the classmate giving you feedback to pause for a moment and give you time to take a few deep breaths. Remember, that this feedback relates only to one specific instance in your life and does not diminish who you are as a good person. Separate the feedback from yourself. This is information about a particular skill—a skill you can learn and will learn to perform better in the future—and not about your inherent traits, personality, ability to succeed, values, or characteristics. When you feel ready, ask your classmate to continue.
- 5. Ask for more.** When you get feedback from someone who knows how to articulate an experience and provide suggestions for improvements, it can be thrilling. Don’t miss out on the opportunity to learn. Instead, ask for more. Get into the nitty-gritty of a technique. Try it multiple ways while the feedback giver says, “Yes”, “Almost”, “No—not quite,” “Try this,” or “Perfect!”
- 6. Implement the feedback.** It’s easy to get good feedback during one session and forget it by the next. Feedback on the depth, speed, positioning, and flow of strokes may be easy to adjust while you receive input from your classmate, but will you remember it for the next massage? When you get feedback, have a plan in place so that you can capture it and review it later. It works well to write down, on an index card, three things that really worked and three things you want to change. Ask the classmate who provided the feedback to help you prioritize your goals for improvement and list specific suggestions for the next massage. On one side of the card, write what you did well. For example, you might write, “My draping felt safe and snug; my effleurage felt flowing and consistent; and the holding strokes I used to open and close the massage felt relaxing to my client. Keep all of that.” On the other side of the card, write what you want to improve. You might write, “My client suggested that I work on the delivery of petrissage, specifically getting more lift in the tissue with the stroke, and keeping the strokes rhythmic. She also commented that I don’t use variety in the ways I apply friction strokes. I’m going to review my textbook, make a list of different types of friction strokes, and practice them over and over again until they feel natural.” Keep one card from each practice session and review your cards immediately before you give a massage. As you master skills, place a big check mark on the card to remind yourself that you are improving!

