

# How Ergonomics?

*By James Peckham*

Sustainable body mechanics (ergonomics) is extremely important in bodywork, both to prevent injury to ourselves and to our clients, and to help us tune in more effectively to our clients. Injuries in massage are nearly always cumulative, instead of sudden. We may think our bodies are fine, and that we are not hurting ourselves now, until we end up with sore thumbs, wrists, carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, or bursitis, five years from now. I have many colleagues who were fulltime massage therapists for several years, and now are estheticians, or selling real estate, because they hurt themselves gradually, over the years.

In these guidelines, I am passing along what I have learned from being a full-time massage therapist since 1992, and a Thai massage therapist since 1996. I have also learned so much from my Thai massage teacher in Thailand, Mr. Pichet Boonthumme, who walks his talk, and who works very deeply, and yet so effortlessly and gracefully. When I first studied with him in 1999, for six weeks, “How ergonomics?” was his most frequent saying, to which he would add, “How best to use your body?” At that point, I had been practicing Thai massage for three years, and had tried to use good body mechanics. Other teachers had talked about it, but I learned much more of the practical details of truly good body mechanics from Pichet.

So far, I have not injured myself by doing massage, although I keep refining the way I work, to reduce risk and harm to my body, while still working as deeply as my clients need. I call these guidelines “sustainable body mechanics.” My hope is that you will develop only good habits, which will become second nature, so that you may do as much massage as you want, as effortlessly and relaxed as possible, for the long-term good of yourself and your clients, or your friends and family.

## **1. Work from your center** (hara, tantien, or “second chakra”)

Initiate all movement from your center, which is your lower abdomen, two finger widths below your navel. You may need to engage your core muscles, and contract them enough to be more aware of your center.

Keep your arms straight, but not rigid, and your shoulders relaxed, so that your hands become extensions of your “hara.” Every small movement in your “hara” translates into a larger movement in your hands. If we bend our elbows, or work from our shoulders down, we break the connection with our “hara.” This is much less efficient, and causes our shoulders and arms to work harder than necessary, which may result in cumulative injury over time.

Tune in to your client’s body from your “hara” as well, so that the connection between your “hara” and your client’s body is a two-way street. Our bodies have intelligence, and can sense what their body needs, in terms of pressure, pacing of our work, and where to give more attention. The idea is to bypass the brain, which may often get in the way of what our body senses. When our arms are straight, and shoulders are relaxed, our hands are properly connected to our “hara.” If we bend our elbows, or work from our shoulders down, we break that connection, and are more likely to rely on our brain than on our body’s knowing, in terms of giving them the pressure they need.

Allow yourself to be drawn in to your client’s body, to the depth they need, and with the sensitivity they need, to work with them instead of “doing” Thai massage to them.

Working from your center is also the most important safeguard against working too deep too fast, which is one of the most common mistakes of many massage therapists.



## **2. Use your body weight**

Thai massage allows us to work at the same level of our clients, and to use our body weight and gravity efficiently, as we apply downward pressure through our arms. This helps us not to rely on arm strength, and keeps our shoulders relaxed.

## **3. Protect your wrists**

Keep your wrist angle comfortable and sustainable for five years or more. We want to have our body weight over our arms, and apply downward pressure. That does not mean 90 degrees exactly, but as close to that as is possible and sustainable. Anything beyond that angle may pinch nerves in our wrists, or overstretch ligaments.

Keep your arm rotation comfortable and sustainable. This may mean that our fingers point straight out away from us, or externally rotated 45 degrees, or 60 degrees out to the side. Again, guard against overstretching ligaments, which could cause the bones in our joints to come out of alignment. Sometimes, we may need to shift the orientation of our bodies, to keep our arms in a more comfortable position.

When you are palm pressing, direct the energy through your arms and into the heel of your hand, and then spread the pressure throughout the palm of your hand, to broaden and soften the pressure. If you direct the pressure through the heel of your hand, and do not broaden it through your palm, it may feel too sharp. If you focus the pressure through the center of the palm of your hand, it is very easy to have too sharp an angle in your wrist, which could pinch nerves or overstretch ligaments, and cause injury.

## **4. Protect your thumbs**

Use the pad of your thumb, close to the first joint, instead of your thumb tip. If you do not have “Thai thumbs,” which bend back at the first joint, use less pressure on the tip of your thumb, because the pressure may feel too sharp or “pointy” for your clients.

Keep your thumb close to your other fingers, so that it is not isolated and vulnerable to injury. Keep the first joint of your thumb in line with your forearm, so that it is supported, both structurally and energetically, by your arm.

## **5. Keep your spine straight**

Keep your spine in alignment, neither rigid nor exaggerating the natural curves of your spine. If you engage your core muscles, you will protect your low back, especially when we foot-press their thigh in Supine Position or Side Position.



Also, keep your head up, and your neck aligned with your spine. Eliminate, or modify, any moves that require you to bend over and round your spine, whether from a standing or sitting position. If you do need to bend over, bend from the hips, instead of the waist. Also, in that move, you are bending your knees and lifting their body by straightening your legs, to protect your low back. For moves that require you to pick up your client's feet for a stretch, kneel to pick up their feet, before you stand up.

## 6. Keep your chest open

Focus on the space between your shoulder blades on your back, and keep your chest open whenever possible. This will help prevent kyphosis and rounding your spine, and help avoid rotator cuff problems.

## 7. Keep your hips and shoulders facing the same way

Keep your hips and shoulders facing the same direction, to avoid torquing your spine. When palm pressing the leg lines, for example, have your knees wide apart, to “frame your work,” so that your spine is aligned at each point along the line.

## 8. Maintain comfortable elbow rotation

When doing a butterfly palm press, keep the “eyes” (inner parts) of your elbows facing each other, and make sure not to allow your arms to rotate externally.



## 9. Breathe

It may seem obvious, but we occasionally need to remind ourselves of the importance of breathing deeply, throughout the treatment, for our sake and that of our clients. In order for a client to receive full benefit from the compressions and stretches, they need to breathe deeply. We may need to remind them at times, and more importantly, our example of deep, relaxed breathing may enable them to breathe more deeply.

## 10. Support your own body weight

It is safest to support our weight on our client's body. If we support our weight on our clients, there is a danger that we could slip and hurt them. At least be aware of the risks involved, and modify the move, to be safe.