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MASSAGE

ISSUE 257 • OCTOBER 2017

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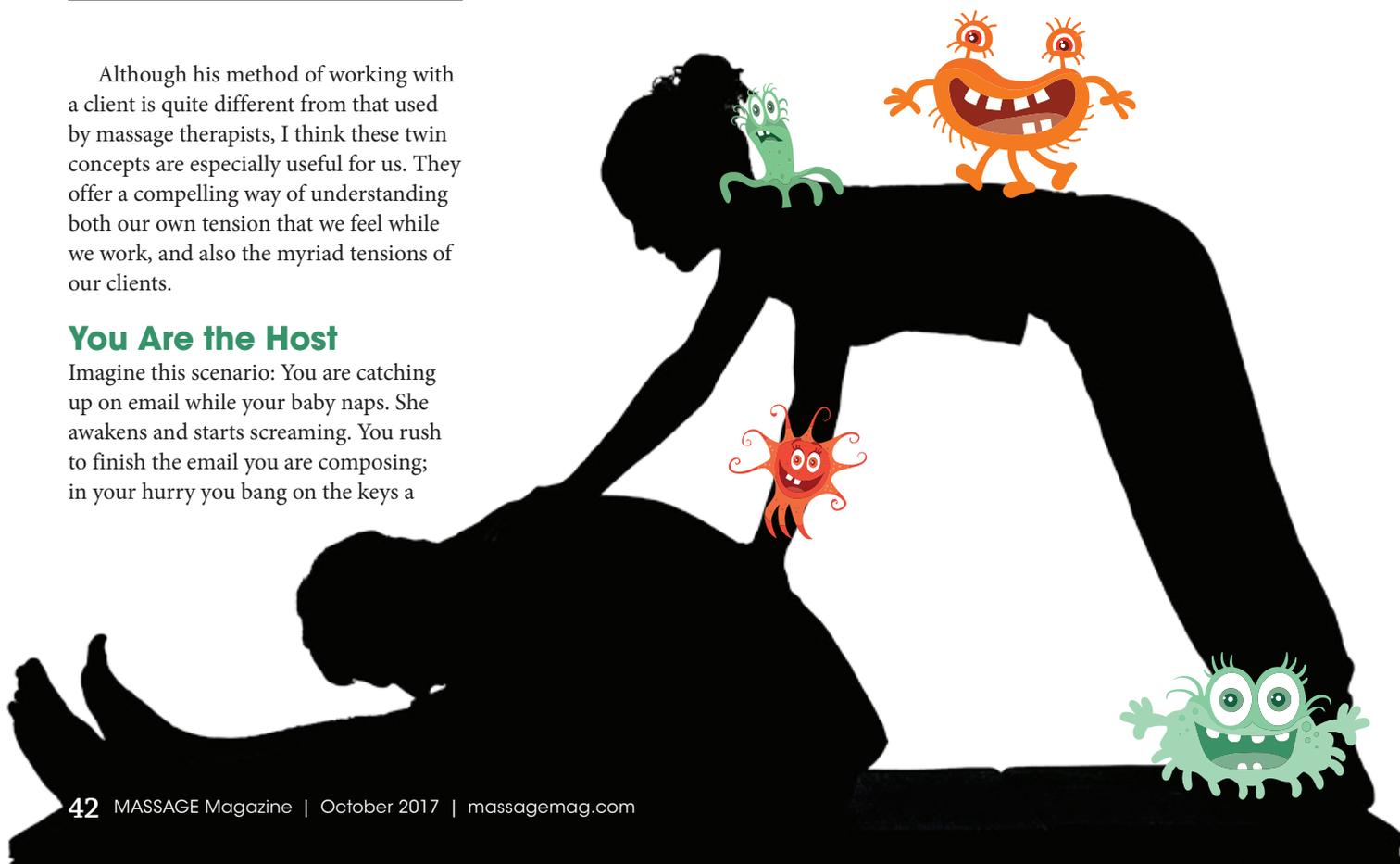
By David M. Lobenstine, L.M.T.

Bodywork pioneer Moshé Feldenkrais was an engineer, judo practitioner and relentless observer of self, who developed a system of body movement and self-awareness that was eventually named after him (the Feldenkrais Method). One of his many beautiful insights, although not one that has been discussed much, is the notion of parasitic movement and its accompaniment, parasitic tension.

Although his method of working with a client is quite different from that used by massage therapists, I think these twin concepts are especially useful for us. They offer a compelling way of understanding both our own tension that we feel while we work, and also the myriad tensions of our clients.

You Are the Host

Imagine this scenario: You are catching up on email while your baby naps. She awakens and starts screaming. You rush to finish the email you are composing; in your hurry you bang on the keys a





Parasitic movement is inevitable for massage therapists.

little harder than you did a minute ago, you hunch closer to the computer and your shoulders begin to creep toward your ears. That additional muscle contraction—in the fingers, back and shoulders—is *parasitic*.

Let me explain.

A parasite attaches itself to and then feeds off its host. So too, this extra contraction piles on top of what you were already doing, thus sapping your energy. The extra muscle activation doesn't accomplish anything—your email doesn't get finished any faster because you are hitting the keys harder—but it is there just the same.

Indeed, a crucial aspect of this movement is that we are not aware of it. (Just as we are not aware of the parasites living inside of us.) In our relentless focus on completing the task at hand—*finish email, rescue baby*—we ignore *how* we are completing that task.

In this tiny example, many unnecessary muscle contractions have become attached to the only necessary movement needed to type that email: the very slight contractions of the flexors and extensors of the fingers.

As you can imagine, parasitic movement never affects just one muscle. As soon as we start to rush our typing, for example, we're using all those forearm flexors and extensors more than we need to. Then the *trapezius* and *levator*

scapulae start contracting to raise the shoulders. Next, as we lean toward the keyboard, the *paraspinal* muscles are working to maintain the body in that increasingly awkward position.

And on and on.

Thus, parasitic movement is a very useful way to think about something that happens to all of us all the time: the contraction of any muscles that you don't actually need to complete an action.

This excess of effort wouldn't be a big deal if it went away, right away; if, email sent and baby comforted, the shoulders flopped back to their resting position, the forearms went slack once again—but that's not what happens.

A parasite doesn't just hang out for a minute and then voluntarily leave the host. Some of that contraction remains, and thus becomes the constant companion to parasitic movement, what Feldenkrais called parasitic tension: the excess contraction that is held in the musculature even after we've completed the action.

Our Parasites, Ourselves

So, what does all this have to do with us? In short, massage therapists are especially susceptible to parasites. Think about it: We spend our days contracting various muscle groups in very complicated sequences, but we almost never focus our

attention on these efforts. Instead, we are too busy focusing on the *other* body in the room.

We take great pride in our ability to help other people, session after session. While you are doing this helping, how often do you ask yourself, "Am I contracting the extensor muscles of my forearm unnecessarily?"

Chances are, never.

We don't think about whether we are contracting more than we need to. We are too busy thinking about all that excess tension in our client, and how we are going to overpower it. Or we are too busy wondering about how big a tip we'll get if we do. The result is clear: Parasitic movement is inevitable for massage therapists.

The sooner we acknowledge that inevitability, the longer and happier our careers will be. We have all moved parasitically, and have all felt the parasitic tension that results, even though most of us probably haven't given it that name.

Think of that client who keeps asking for more pressure as you work on his rock-hard *rhomboids*. Chances are, as you try to (somehow) go even deeper, your whole body joins in. Your shoulders bunch up and curl forward as you try to drill down. The whole length of your arms tighten: biceps and triceps, forearm flexors and extensors. There's a good chance that even your glutes and hip

flexors are contracting more than you are aware of, in this full-throttle effort to overwhelm the client's tissue. This is parasitic movement.

Sound familiar?

You can now probably see how easy it is to move parasitically when you are working on that demanding client—or, rather, how hard it is to *not* move parasitically. But the same danger exists with a light Swedish session as with a more robust sports massage.

Consider another common manifestation of parasitic movement: The next time you begin a long effleurage stroke, using the heel of your hand or your forearm—say, down the spine or up the leg—pay attention to your fingers.

If you are like most therapists, as you continue the stroke, whether you are working light or deep, your fingertips and palm will start to arch away from the client and start to rise towards the ceiling. The fingers will straighten, becoming taut and tense. This tendency is especially true if you are tired, or doing a long stroke without repositioning your feet, or in an awkward position or thinking about something else.

Does this contraction in the extensor muscles of the fingers aid the stroke? Not in the slightest. Once again, this is parasitic movement at work.

Parasitic Tension

Where there is parasitic movement, there is parasitic tension. Again, we all have felt it, especially after a long shift or a particularly demanding client. You end the session and walk out of the room; your hands feel like claws, your forearms like baseball bats. As you wait for your client to get dressed you are not doing anything with your arms, yet they remain clenched. You can't seem to get them unstuck.

This is parasitic tension.

Again, your forearms don't *need* to remain taut; you are not using those muscles. And yet those muscles can't seem to let go. The excess contraction while working has translated into excess tension even after you are done working.

The result is a vicious cycle. Parasitic movement leads to parasitic tension, which in turn leads to more parasitic movement. Before too long, as we know from biology, the parasite becomes inseparable from the host. It becomes difficult to give a deep tissue massage *without* our shoulders creeping up toward our ears. That excessive effort becomes the norm; our bodies forget how to contact the client with ease, using only the muscle contraction that is needed.

Essential Self-Awareness

There is no cure, no quick fix. Parasites are an innate part of our environment, and they are an innate part of our patterns of movement. Since we can't get rid of them, what if we can benefit from them? What if we acknowledge that there will always be moments in which we contract our muscles more than we need to? Then we can use that knowledge as a reminder to continually check in with ourselves while we are working.

Self-awareness is essential. If you can enhance your

understanding of how and when and why you are using your muscles, then you can decide if you can contract a certain muscle group less—or if you even need to be using it at all.

To develop this skill, we must give ourselves permission to think about ourselves, our own bodies, *while we contact our clients*.

Attending to yourself simultaneous to attending to your client may feel wrong. It may feel selfish. It is neither. Instead, it is a practice that will benefit both you and your client.

That said, it will not come naturally. It is a habit you must create, consciously, as opposed to all the unhelpful habits you have created unconsciously. You must develop a practice of checking in with yourself before, during and after each session, like this:

- Before you make initial contact with the client, pause for 10 seconds. Follow your slow exhalation down to empty and think of letting your body weight sink as much as possible into your feet. Notice the areas of the body that are already tense, even though you're not doing anything.
- Each time you transition from one part of the client's body to the next, scan your own body from head to toe. See if you can identify any parasitic tension. Is your jaw clamped shut? Are your glutes clenched?
- When you are doing cross-fiber friction or other deep strokes, scan the muscles from fingers to forearms to shoulders. Ask yourself, "Can I still create this same depth but without tensing these muscles quite as much?" Chances are, the answer is yes.
- End each session slowly. As you break contact with the client, follow your exhale slowly down to empty and visualize your own body as relaxed as you just made your client's body.

Recognizing parasitic movement is a slow and often frustrating process, but the self-awareness—and self-care—that can result is one of our most potent and career-enhancing tools.

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Help your clients learn to recognize parasitic tension in their own bodies, in "When The Massage Client is the Host: Parasitic Tension on the Table," by David M. Lobenstine, L.M.T., at massagemag.com/clienthost.
