



TRANSFERENCE FOR MASSAGE THERAPISTS

Studio Massage Institute

Transference is one of the most important concepts to understand for a massage therapist but the least understood and talked about. Transference is a very complex phenomenon that comes from the psychology profession. The reason that it is so important to understand is the fact that the process of transference is actually what can lead a person to becoming more aware of their thoughts and issues. Transference is what heals.

Transference In Massage

Clients defer to the practitioner's judgment because they desire to be helped by an authority figure that possesses greater knowledge, healing ability and, therefore, power.

Since a power differential exists in any health care relationship, the client may be inclined to respond to the practitioner as he or she would other authority figures, and in doing so, may recreate elements of similar past relationships. This situation is known as transference, a normal, unconscious phenomenon that appears during a therapeutic process. Professional helping relationships usually have a strong transference element in which the parent-child relationship is unconsciously re-established. In transference, unresolved needs, feelings and issues from childhood are transferred onto the helper.

Elliott Greene author of the book "The Psychology of the Body" writes this:

Transference is the displacement or transfer of feeling, thoughts, and behaviors originally related to a significant person, such as a parent, onto someone else, such as the massage therapist. It is a common reaction of clients to their therapists. A bit of transference happens in most relationships in which there is feeling present. Usually, transference-related feelings were formed in the past, so it could be said that these feelings transfer from the past to the present. In transference then, the client relates to the therapist and present moment as if the therapist were the significant person. In this sense, transference is a projection of the internal drama of the client, and the therapist is assigned a particularly important role and script."

Nina McIntosh in her book "The Educated Heart" says this about Transference.

"Transference may sound complex and unusual, but it's actually part of our everyday life even outside of our offices. It's normal for any of us to bring the past into our present relationship. In fact it happens all the time. They are magnified in a manual therapy session because of the intimacy of the setting, the clients altered state and the way that the practitioner/client roles mimic those of the parent/child. "Transference isn't a rational process.

Terrie Yardly-Nohr in her book "Ethics for Massage Therapists" says this:

"The very nature of the therapeutic relationship allows transference to happen easily. Bodywork can trigger a variety of emotions from clients such as anger, frustration, sadness, fear, or joy. These feelings are generally the result of some emotion the client felt in the past towards another person."

So what is transference then?

Simply put, transference happens when there is difference in authority that resembles the parent-child relationship. The client who comes to a massage therapist receives the nurturing that they never received as a child and puts the massage therapist on a pedestal. The nurturing touch brings out the old feelings and emotions that were repressed or suppressed in early childhood. The client unconsciously begins to see the massage therapist as the nurturing parent and it can bring up feelings of attachment that were not resolved growing up. It is when the client unconsciously thinks that the massage therapist is their mother or father or other significant caretaker. Note the word – unconscious.

Attachment is what happens between a mother and child that allows the child to grow and build self esteem. The infant learns about themselves through touch. There are various stages of attachment that occur in child development where the infant feels like they are one with the mother. (And of course they

once were in utero.) As a child grows they learn that they are separate from the mother. This is where things often go astray. If a secure attachment is not formed in their early part of life, they will have life long challenges that result from that.

Massage and nurturing touch re-enacts the process of development. This is why spa treatments can be so popular with the use of healing waters and body wraps. Getting regular massage and developing a relationship with a massage therapist in which the client feels nurtured and cared for as if they were receiving it from their mothers can help heal the grief of not ever getting those early childhood needs met.

Transference is really important yet difficult to understand. The best way to understand it is to experience it. You may or may not have had some of these feelings arise when you were getting a massage from someone:

- Feeling like you don't want the massage to ever end
- Not wanting to leave the office
- Seeing the massage therapist outside of the office and wanting to follow them where ever they go.

Or from the other aspect seeing it in your clients:

- bringing you flowers or special gifts
- hearing about people's personal problems
- being asked to make exceptions in scheduling and payment options.
- inviting you out socially as a friend
- asking you out on a date or making other advances on you.

Or if you ever worked with a psychologist or mental health professional in therapy, you can come to learn more about transference from seeing your own. Becoming aware of your projections in a therapy setting can be a painful experience. It is a matter of getting a look at your unconscious thoughts through relationship. It can be a very eye-opening process and really lasts a lifetime.

While some of these things may just seem like normal things, it is difficult to know the difference. You probably won't know the difference.

What you can do is create a code of ethics and a set of policies and procedures for your practice that will help you make proper decisions in any situation. It is having boundaries that teach people when they are in transference that you are separate from them is what will allow the person to heal and build self esteem.

The other thing about transference is that it not only occurs in these helping types of relationships but almost all relationships. Friendships, significant others, family members and the person who checks you out at the grocery store who seems to 'look just like your mother'.