

Mechanical Massage

Have you ever heard the saying, “don’t throw the baby out with the bath water”? It was a saying with which my grandmother was familiar and was used to warn that when we totally reject a theory or an idea, we risk ‘throwing out’ one good gem. I feel this way about mechanical massage. When I trained in massage many years ago, wooden-handled back rollers were to be found on sale in health shops and market stalls. Use of such massage ‘tools’ was widely pooh-pooed on the grounds that when using them, the therapist was unable to feel the client’s skin, and that the client would therefore receive a less beneficial treatment. Often, they were not much more than gimmicks, sold alongside oils and creams. Vibrational massagers were the kinds used for performing self-facials and I left mine in a bathroom cupboard for ten years! However, with increasing awareness of the need to protect our upper limbs from overuse, and with far more sophisticated devices now on the market, it is perhaps time to re-examine the potential for the use of these tools, not as a replacement for hands-on massage but as a complement to it.

It is likely that as a therapist there have been times when you have needed to apply deep pressure to specific areas of the body in order to release tension. You have probably discovered that using your thumbs is of limited use as this puts excessive pressure on thumb and wrist joints and may cause damage. Using your elbow is an alternative, but sometimes the client is not in a suitable position for this. Devices such as the Jacknobber® and Index Knobber® are useful alternatives. These hard plastic tools are easy to hold and enable you to direct your pressure to specific points on the muscle. You will quickly learn to sense how much pressure to apply. Imagine this: you are presented with three gym balls, identical in appearance, but each inflated differently. One is fully inflated, one has a bit less air in it and the last has less again. I bet you would be able to tell which of the gym balls had the most air in it and which had the least, simply by pressing on each of them? Using devices such as the Jacknobber® is exactly the same: you quickly learn to determine the tension in your client’s muscles by how much resistance you feel, whether or not you are feeling bare skin.

Another common tool is the simple golf ball. Therapists treating plantar fasciitis, (a condition resulting in tight fascia in the foot plus tight calf muscles), often give golf balls to their client to roll under their feet. It is not known whether this helps to stimulate bloodflow, stimulate reflex points or in some way alters the plantar fascia, but it is widely reported to help in the treatment of this common condition. Of course, you don’t need to use a golf ball: those hard rubber ‘high bounce’ balls sold in toy shops are equally good, as are the ‘spiked’ therapy balls available in varying sizes commercially.



For an alternative try using the balls that dog have as toys’. These are available from pet shops and look just like brightly coloured tennis balls but are far harder to compress. They are great for use on piriformis, hamstrings and gluteals. Use them to apply static pressure to tight muscles and tender spots for up to a minute at a time.

Have you ever seen those wooden massagers in the shape of animals? At first sight they may appear a bit gimmicky but because they have smallish ‘feet’ they are in fact useful for applying pressure to muscles such as supraspinatus and for working longitudinally between the lateral and posterior compartments of the calf, for example.

There’s no doubt that hands-on massage is wonderful. But there are certainly times when we need more than hands. As therapists its time to start being inventive. I encourage you to discover your own tools. When choosing a tool simply ask yourself (1) is it safe?, (2) is it effective?



After reading an article in Sports Injury Bulletin about the use of a broomstick to treat the deep psoas muscle (yes, really!) I was inspired to discover new devices and new ways to help me treat my clients. Clearing out my son's room I found a box of wooden skittles and discovered that a skittle is wonderful for applying pressure to a muscle that had been niggling me for some time, tensor fascia latae. Use of the skittle on myself is safe and it's certainly effective at reducing what had been a very tight hip muscle, tricky to self-treat.

In addition to tools used to apply pressure, a quick walk around the high street chemist will reveal the wide variety of electric massagers now also available. Whilst these are not for commercial use they are helpful for use on ourselves. Between treating clients I have used a lightweight commercial massager on the flexor and extensor origins of my elbows. Combined with stretching I am convinced this helps prevent both golfers and tennis elbow, common complaints among busy massage therapists.

The tools mentioned in this article are just some of the items I have found helpful in my practice.

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