



Transforming touch therapy

Leslie Bruder, founder of The Institute for Phenomenal Touch, talks exclusively about the 15 key principles that can be used to enhance therapist performance

Leslie Bruder knows about massage. Having begun her career as an enterprising five-year-old earning quarters for rubbing her grandfather's feet, she now runs The Institute for Phenomenal Touch in the US, sharing her gift for touch with aspiring and advanced massage therapists. With her students having taken first, second and third places in the Freestyle category at the 2018 World Massage Championships in Copenhagen, her results speak for themselves.

Speaking exclusively to *European Spa*, she shares the principles that turn an ordinary massage experience into an extraordinary one.

How did you begin your career?

I've always been tactile and felt like I had a knowledge in my hands. Aged five, my grandfather would pay me to massage his head and feet. Then when I was 12, my neighbour needed knee surgery and I said, 'Let me just look at it'. I put my hands on his knee and went into a kind of trance. It was like I could see inside. For a half an hour or so I played with my hands 'inside' of his knee. It really felt like I was inside moving things around. The next day he went to get a pre-surgery ultrasound after which they said, 'We don't understand. There's no longer anything wrong'. That was the first time I knew that I had some kind of gift.

In 1983, I applied to the Boulder School of Massage Therapy. After they received a sample of my work, I was told to take everything I innately knew and put it on a shelf temporarily while I was studying. I did that and learned so much about physiology, pathology and different forms of massage – Swedish, Shiatsu and Integrative. At the end, I took all my stuff down off the shelf and brought it all together to teach my own creation of bodywork, which I called Three Dimensional Massage.

How did The Institute for Phenomenal Touch come about?

I set up the school in 2004. It began as a one-month programme and it



evolved into this two-year journey. Our motto is, 'Why be ordinary when you can be extraordinary?', which inspired the principles our curriculum is based on. I figured out what I was doing by studying myself and then teaching. The principles developed in that teaching process. The moves came out of the principles, and then we started naming the moves. It was a collective experience creating this work, which I renamed Phenomenal Touch Massage.

Tell us about the principles

Although we work with well over 100 principles, there are 15 core ones (see box) but the most important one is to 'meet your client where they are', and to do that you need to 'be fully present' – nothing else exists but that person and you. 'Listen deeply' to what they want and what their body is telling you. You're there to help the client find themselves and listening deeply, meeting them and being present are very important principles.

Previous page and above: Leslie Bruder discovered she had a gift for body work at the age of 12 and has been developing her skills ever since

After that, you must find the correct speed for your client. Most massage therapists work twice as fast as the body can absorb. I work very slowly, like molasses. If I work slow enough then the body I'm working on can catch up to and keep up with me.

Why do you think therapists work too fast?

It's partly cultural in that many countries teach massage therapists to work fast, but I believe it is emotional as well.

I went to the Dominican Republic to train 21 therapists at a very high-end spa. Before I began teaching, I watched them work for ten minutes to assess how I could be of help. Immediately I could see they were all working super fast. After I helped them to slow down, several of them burst into tears as they

15 key principles of Phenomenal Touch massage

1. Meet the client where they are
2. Be fully present
3. Listen deeply
4. Watch the speed limit
5. Work three-dimensionally
6. Move the body in space
7. Use momentum
8. Create undulation
9. Incorporate fulcrums
10. Utilise gravity
11. Make seamless transitions
12. Hook on to the tissue
13. Enter muscle in a short position
14. Be the wave
15. Work with reverence



This page: Among the key principles for improved massage techniques and results are to slow down and use the body's fulcrums for ease of movement

▷ could finally feel themselves working more slowly.

My sense is that most of us don't want to feel. We spend so much time pushing away our pain and if we slow down enough we'll feel it. That goes both for the person receiving and the person giving. It can be scary to slow down but the rewards are huge.

What are the other principles?

'Working three-dimensionally', and by that I mean working both sides of the body at once. This not only feels better (as we are three-dimensional beings) and works twice as much of the body in the same amount of time, but it also tricks the muscle into letting go. The tension has no where to run and hide and so it dissipates instead.

'Moving the body in space' is another principle – lifting it off the table and moving it slowly so the client feels as if they're in water. It releases tension like nothing flat can do. It's just so much more natural. This requires 'momentum', if you don't have that you're using strength, but with it you can move the body without hurting yourself.

Our next principle, 'undulation', takes moving a step further – lifting and dropping the body in a rubbery, wave-like fashion creates a dynamic

but controlled sense of falling.

In order to do this we take advantage of gravity by allowing the client's body to fall naturally as we slowly resist their weight. We also 'use gravity', rather than strength, to drop our own body weight into the client. This not only feels much better but it also saves the therapist's hands and arms.

Along with this is the use of natural 'fulcrums'. If I try to lift a client's head, it's heavy, but putting my arm underneath it gives me leverage. Fulcrums allow you to lift the body



with ease – it feels better for the client and it creates a sensation of levitation.

Another very important principle is 'hooking on to the tissue'. Most massage therapists move over your muscles rather than moving the muscle itself. Hooking on to the muscle with your finger pads and creating suction removes all the slack between your hand and the client's tissue. With that type of contact, you can effectively engage and sculpt the muscle. The difference between the two ways of touching is huge.

'Shortening the muscle' is also crucial. If you work it in the elongated pose it's going to kick you out. If you shorten and create space, you can get so much deeper without causing pain.

Phenomenal Touch incorporates 'seamless transitions', fluidly overlapping one move to the next. Rather than working hard to lift and move the client's body, the therapist simply moves their own body as if they were a wave, bringing the client's body along for a symphonic dance of touch. All these things go together to create an extraordinary experience.

Finally, a massage should be performed 'with reverence' – an unconditional love that treats the body as a temple. I massage every person as though they're the most important being on the planet.

How can all this be done in the time constraints of a spa?

Phenomenal Touch does not require any more time to do than any other form of bodywork. It is what I practice because it was birthed innately from me, but any therapist can take whatever technique or form of massage they practice and incorporate these principles into what they already do in the exact same time frame. It will only serve to elevate their present form to its highest level of art. ●●●●●

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