

# Communication Challenges for MTs

*Giving and  
Getting Effective  
Feedback*



By Ben E. Benjamin and Amy Yeager

In every private practice, lasting success is based on creating strong interpersonal connections. This is particularly true for massage therapists. Our clients make initial appointments for many different reasons (stress, pain, injury, physician referral, etc.), but there's one key factor that keeps them coming: a therapeutic relationship that works for them. Developing and maintaining such relationships requires a solid foundation of communication skills—skills that people are not generally taught, but that are vital to all personal and professional interactions. In this article we'll address one critical, but often neglected form of communication: feedback.

type of biological feedback is hunger, which provides information about our need for food at any given moment. Feedback can be a matter of life and death—as you can imagine, animals that never received internal cues that food was needed (or that enough had been eaten) would not survive very long.

In social contexts, feedback gives us insight into how what we're doing affects other people—what they observe, think, or feel when we act in certain ways. With clients, this can include anything from our hands-on techniques and professional advice to the way we dress, answer the phone, or schedule appointments.



### Feedback: A Valuable Tool for Therapists

Feedback has developed a bad reputation. If a client, teacher, or coworker (or anyone else) tells you that they'd "like to give you some feedback," chances are you cringe inside while you prepare yourself to hear something negative. This response is often justified—the term is widely misused and misunderstood, so that what many people call feedback is actually criticism, blame, or personal attack. In contrast, genuine feedback can play a very useful and constructive role in our personal and professional lives. By learning to give and receive feedback more effectively in a therapeutic setting, we can enhance both our relationships with clients and our effectiveness as practitioners.

First let's take a closer look at the nature and function of feedback. The basic dictionary definition is "the return of information about the result of a process or activity." By comparing this information about the results we're getting to the results we actually want, we can determine whether to 1. continue the process, 2. change the process, or 3. stop the process.

Feedback mechanisms are critical to the proper functioning of a wide range of mechanical, biological, and social systems. The classic example is a thermostat/heater mechanism, which requires feedback on a room's temperature to determine when the heat should be turned on and turned off. An important

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We're often in a position to give feedback to clients as well. We might discuss how their ways of eating, exercising, and using their bodies in their jobs are affecting them, or how various behaviors related to their treatment (e.g., arriving late, asking personal questions, missing payments, etc.) are affecting us.

The ability to solicit honest feedback provides therapists with several distinct advantages. Often, clients who are dissatisfied with some aspect of their treatment don't directly express their concerns; they just stop coming. By opening the door to feedback, we can learn on an ongoing basis what is and is not working for each person. This continuing dialogue helps us retain the clients we have and work more successfully with others in the future. Another benefit is increased receptivity on the part of our clients—the better we are at receiving their feedback, the more open they will be to hearing our observations and suggestions.

## Feedback Strategies: Giving and Receiving Information in a Therapeutic Context

Receiving feedback can be a stressful experience for all of us. There's always the chance that we'll be told something that hurts or surprises us or that we don't want to hear. Giving feedback can be just as difficult, as we balance our desire to get our concerns addressed with our wish to maintain positive and healthy relationships. Most of us never received training in ways to exchange feedback and have observed few models for doing this effectively. Fortunately, however, these skills can be learned at any stage in life. The sections that follow present strategies for making the most of feedback in a therapist/client relationship.

### Giving feedback

The first step in giving feedback happens well before you open your mouth: clarifying your intention. What is the goal of the feedback you're planning to give? When



working with a client, there are a variety of goals that can lead to useful feedback. These include:

- Correcting misinformation. (“No, ice is not an effective treatment for stomach pain.”)
- Checking for understanding. (“You’re saying that you’re coming to massage primarily for stress relief. Is that correct?”)
- Helping the client perform an activity more safely or effectively. (“If you bend your knees more deeply as you do this exercise, you’ll protect your lower back.”)
- Informing the client about the effects of certain behaviors on them. (“When you were eating more healthfully, your injury was healing more rapidly.”)

- Informing the client about the effects of certain behaviors on you. (“When you didn’t arrive for your appointment, I was worried about you.”)

In contrast, some goals—such as trying to make the client change, feel guilty, or understand that he or she is wrong—are unlikely to lead to a useful outcome. Before you give feedback about something that you think is not working well, stop to consider what your purpose is; this may dramatically change what you want to say, and how you want to say it.

In particular, it’s important to decide whether you want to give information about your feelings, about your relationship to the other person, or about a situation or circumstance. For instance, if someone is late, you may want to address your feelings (“I feel really frustrated when you come late.”) or instead address practical issues (“You arrived twenty minutes late. I want to make sure you remember my policy—clients who come late are still charged for the full session.”) If you are upset and not aware of your communication style,

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you might express that same information using an angry, blameful tone, with the content getting lost as you give the “feedback” (“I can’t believe you showed up twenty minutes late! I’m going to have to charge you for a full session, you know.”) By identifying what your goal is (e.g., saying that you’re upset or explaining what your policy is) and expressing your information clearly, you can create greater

clarity and less anxiety for your clients.

After you’ve identified your goal, notice what type of information you’re planning to offer in your feedback. Are the things you want to say your personal opinions, or are they data (factual information)? There’s a big difference between the two. In general, data is much more likely to provide helpful information that the listener can use to make decisions or choices. The data may be about your feelings or about something external. Consider a situation in which your client has not been doing the exercises you recommended. Here are a few different types of data you could give:

- Data about the situation. (“The last three times you’ve come in, you’ve told me that you didn’t do your exercises.”)



Whatever feedback you're giving, there are ways to make it more likely that the person will be able to hear that information and put it to good use.

- General data. ("Studies have shown that patella tendon injuries heal much more quickly when this exercise is done regularly.")
- Data about your experience. ("Among all my clients, the people who have done their exercises regularly have healed much more quickly.")
- Data about your feelings. ("I'm really worried about your knee healing properly and I'm wondering if I communicated how important the exercises are.")

Notice that the following statements are not data, but opinions:

- "You really ought to do your exercises." (Your opinion of what the client should do.)
- "This tells me that doing your exercises is not that important to you." (Your opinion of what the client is feeling or thinking.)
- "You're being so irresponsible!" (Your opinion about the client's character, in the form of an attack.)

The preceding examples all involve feedback about something that is not going the way you'd like it to. However, the distinction between opinion and data also applies to feedback about things that you think are going well. Giving an opinion such as "You're such a great client to work with" may make a client feel good, but it doesn't provide any substantive information. You could be referring to the client's punctuality, how many questions they ask (or how few), the nice things they say about you, or any number of other things. Without more details, the person can't know what you're basing your opinion on, and therefore they can't know whether they agree or disagree with that assessment. It may turn out that given your definition of a "great client," they don't want to be one after all.

When you give data, clients have the chance to use it however they wish. They can make their own decisions

about what that information means to them, and they can find ways to use it that are consistent with their own beliefs, priorities, and goals. Options for responding to opinions are much more limited. Clients will either agree or disagree with you, or perhaps just suspend judgment until they learn more. For instance, if you say, "Massage therapy is the best treatment for you," clients might agree or disagree based on how much they trust your opinions, but they won't understand why you believe this is true. In contrast, when you provide concrete facts—such as the average healing time, rate of success, and likelihood of complications—you give clients tools to make their own choices about treatment.

Once you've determined what your goals are and what data you'd like to offer, the next step is speaking directly with the client. Whatever feedback you're giving, there are ways to make it more likely that the person will be able to hear that information and put it to good use. Below is a basic protocol for giving feedback that helps to foster receptivity, understanding, positive feelings, and problem solving:

- ✓ Ask permission to give feedback. ("I would like to talk to you about ... Is this a good time to do that? If not, I would like to set a time to discuss it.")
- ✓ State your goal. Explain why you are giving the feedback.
- ✓ Solicit questions. ("Please ask me questions if anything is not clear.")
- ✓ Give the client control. By asking permission and soliciting questions, you've already created a context in which the client has some control over the information they're about to hear. Depending on the situation, you may also ask about other preferences they have for receiving the feedback. (For instance, they may want to hear about the big picture before hearing the details, or they may want

to hear what you think is going well before hearing what you think needs improvement.)

- ✓ Explain the context or situation.
- ✓ Give data: facts or feelings. Be careful to use data, rather than opinions, whenever possible. Give small amounts of information at a time so the client can process it.
- ✓ Check for understanding. Ask clients to give a summary of your feedback. Express agreement with their summary or correct any misunderstandings.
- ✓ Ask for a response. (“How do you see what happened?” “What are your concerns about what I said?” “What was going on for you?”)
- ✓ If appropriate, discuss possible solutions or behavioral alternatives for either or both of you.

### Receiving Feedback

Guidelines for effectively receiving feedback are similar to those for giving feedback. For instance, in both situations it’s important to have a clear understanding of your goals. When you’re receiving feedback from clients, useful goals include correcting your own misinformation, helping to ensure mutual understanding, learning how various things you do are affecting the client, and learning what aspects of treatment they find most and least comfortable. One goal that is rarely helpful (but quite common) is attempting to find flaws in the feedback you’re getting, so that you can defend your own position, behavior, or opinions.

The distinction between opinion-based and data-based feedback also remains important. For instance, if you ask clients for feedback on your work with them, they might first offer an opinion: “You give a great treatment.” This may feel good to hear, but it’s unclear exactly what the client means. With the awareness that information about facts and feelings is more useful than opinions, you can actively steer the conversation in that direction. Asked to give specific data, the client may say, “I like your treatment because you give exactly the amount of pressure that I feel I need, when you work deeply you don’t hurt me, and I’m never sore after I leave.” You can use this detailed information to help guide your work in the future.

While you don’t have full control over the way feedback is given to you, you can still take steps to help shape the conversation so that you get feedback that is useful. You also have control over your attitude toward the feedback—you can be interested and open to it or defensive and closed. If you’re actively soliciting feedback, explain the type of feedback you want and the way you want it given, as well as what you do not want to hear. For example, you might ask clients to tell you about what they felt and observed, rather than giving their opinions. If the feedback is unsolicited, notice whether you feel comfortable receiving it in the current situation. If you don’t, ask to postpone it until the circumstances are more favorable (e.g., you’re not

in a rush, and you feel you’ll be better able to process what you hear).

As you receive feedback, make an effort to gather the information that will be most useful to you. Listen for facts about the client’s feelings and observations; if the person is not providing all the facts you’d like to hear, ask for them. Try to understand what the client is saying before you offer your own thoughts or evaluations. People who feel you’ve heard and understood them are much more likely to actively listen to you. To be sure you’re hearing the message accurately, frequently paraphrase what’s being said to you and check to see whether what you heard is what the client intended. Ask the client to give you a little information at a time and give you a moment to be sure you understand it.

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### A Rewarding Practice

As massage therapists, our skill in communicating and developing professional relationships is essential to building a sustainable and rewarding private practice. In this article, we’ve focused on the issue of feedback, which plays a critical role in our relationships with clients. The ability to effectively give and receive feedback is also useful in a wide variety of other professional and personal contexts. While the goals of the feedback will vary slightly, the basic principles outlined here are applicable to any situation. We hope the insights and strategies you’ve learned will inspire you to investigate ways to use feedback more effectively in both your personal and your professional life. **M&B**

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