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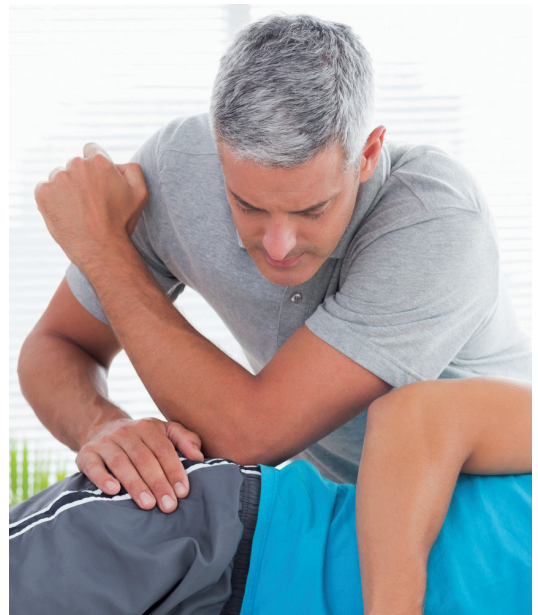
Practicing What We Preach— Using Range of Motion Exercises in Our Body Mechanics as Self-care

By Anne Käarid,
RMT, NHP

Whether we are a patient or a therapist, exercise is an essential component of supporting a healthy and well-balanced body. Maintaining good health in the body and mind is something that many people strive for. We know this. It is the backbone of our business; indeed, it is part of our mission to improve our patients' wellness. However, when it comes to our own wellness, many of us could probably use some support to practise what we preach.

Like our patients, we struggle with the busyness of daily life, hectic work schedules at the clinic, and finding time to implement our own self-care plans, particularly for exercise. What if there was a way to incorporate some of our daily exercise needs into the massage treatments we give regularly? Could a multitasking endeavour like this actually allow us to fit exercise into our busy schedules?

In this article, I would like to encourage you to take a closer look at range of motion (ROM) exercises, why they are so vital for effective body mechanics, and how you might integrate these exercises into your own daily treatments. Of course, much of what I will cover is familiar to massage therapists. In fact, I imagine that you give many of the same recommendations to your patients for their home care. I would like you to turn the focus around and onto yourself to investigate the benefits of ROM exercises and how they relate to your daily body mechanics. This perspective will let you think about a self-care plan to



ensure your own wellness and the longevity of your career.

First, let us begin this exploratory journey with a refresher course on joint functions and ROM exercises. This is what we know: the main function of a joint is to facilitate movement; ROM exercises are aimed at supporting this movement. The joint itself provides skeletal stability and flexibility; it also directs the movement of the muscles in its location. At the most basic level, ROM exercises help support the physical activity of a joint and its supporting structures.

Good ROM prevents the development of shortened adaptive muscles, contractures, and shortening of the capsule, ligaments, and tendons. The effects are realized in limbs and a torso that function efficiently,



Anne Käarid, RMT, NHP, has worked as a therapist since 2008 and brings her experience of eastern and western manual therapies to her clients in the quaint town of Almonte, Ontario. Anne is also an educator, mentor, and tutor, and is currently working on a micro-educational platform to support the skills and expertise of RMTs, as well as their self-care. www.annethermt.com.

“Good body mechanics cannot be maintained by ROM exercises alone. The foundation of good body mechanics is good posture and alignment.”

joints that move easily and comfortably, and improved posture and balance. ROM exercises are a key component of body mechanics and a part of your self-care plan that should not be overlooked. These exercises are important for everyone to maintain strength and mobility—particularly for those with joint conditions. No matter what your limitations (i.e., overuse, hyper- or hypomobility), it is important to learn to exercise within the safe margins of your ROM, not to pass the pain threshold, and to respect your restrictions. This is particularly important when starting to adapt ROM exercises to your particular technique and your unique environment. Keep in mind that these exercises are not the same as stretching. While stretching can help improve flexibility, ROM exercises specifically target the mobility, health, and function of joints.

All of us possess this knowledge and lean on it when we assess and recommend home care to our patients. But when was the last time you considered everything that you know about ROM exercises to make them a part of your daily body mechanics routine?

As RMTs, we put our joints through a lot of stress and activity. Our joints are often overworked, tired, and prone to injury.



Whether you are new to the industry or are a seasoned pro, you will sometimes experience limitations in your movements and ROM. This can often be attributed to lack of exercise, poor posture, or ineffective body mechanics.

Good body mechanics cannot be maintained by ROM exercises alone. The foundation of good body mechanics is good posture and alignment. Alignment refers to how the head, shoulders, spine, hips, knees, and ankles relate and line up with each other. This supports musculoskeletal health, including the balance of the eight main bilateral load joints in the ankles, knees, hips, and shoulders. Good alignment reinforces the natural curves of the spine and maintains proper posture no matter how the body moves. This is where body mechanics come in. This term describes the way we hold our bodies when sitting, standing, lifting, carrying, and bending during treatment. All throughout our schooling, we heard the importance of proper body mechanics and maintaining postural integrity stated repeatedly. And we were taught how to use our entire physiques in a way that avoids unnecessary structural stress.

Let's review some body mechanics basics.

Correct body alignment and posture

While standing or sitting up straight, draw an imaginary line straight down through the centre of your body so that both sides are mirror images of each other. All parts of your body should be lined up naturally, with arms at the side, palms forward, and feet pointed forward and slightly apart.

- **Check your postural alignment.** Always keep your back as straight as possible and your head level and in line with your body.
- **When bending over a patient,** do your best to hinge at your hips and not lock your knees.
- **Keep your nose and your toes pointing in the same direction (this a rule of thumb for most people).** To change directions, shift your feet and take small steps while keeping your back and neck straight.
- **Avoid twisting your body.** This position not only makes keeping correct body



“ROM exercises may also help reduce stress and improve mental clarity. Consider adding box breathing. When you take the time to connect with your body and your breathing, you feel more centred and ready for your next patient.”

mechanics difficult or impossible, it is likely to cause you to injure yourself. Turn your whole body instead. Try a forward or side lunge to access a broader area of your patient’s body.

Base of support

- **Place your feet about shoulder-width apart or just slightly wider than your hips.** Creating a good base of support improves your balance.
- **Avoid reaching and twisting.** There is no reason to do this. Widen your base of support by hinging at your hips, lunging or squatting, or performing dorsiflexion of your foot to give you a bit more reach. Be creative and try new positions.

Centre of gravity

- **Maintain a low centre of gravity.** When standing, the pelvis is the centre of gravity and is where most of your weight is concentrated. A low centre of gravity provides a stable base of support, improves balance, and lowers risk of injury, fatigue, and pain.
- **Use your body weight for leverage.** Using your base of support and centre of gravity lets you leverage your body in all sorts of ways. Engage your core to decrease

strain on your back and joints, improve your ROM, and leverage your stability.

• Push and pull, rock and glide.

Be intentional when you are setting up your body position and using your ROM in your body mechanics. Stop if you feel strain and approach your technique from a different postural stance.

For those of you who might struggle with the nuances of body mechanics, consider working with a colleague or even a postural therapist. They are a resource that can provide insights and help identify areas of imbalance that you aren’t aware of. Injuries can occur even though you may not feel any type of pain. This is another reason proper body mechanics and good joint health are so imperative. Strength in your body structures is achieved by maintaining a healthy ROM and mobility in your joints. This is where ROM exercises come into play.

You know best what tableside techniques and structures you may be overworking. I’d like to encourage you to think about ROM in your professional life in two ways: First, before and after each treatment, consider building a quick, 30-second, between-patient routine to help improve mobility and flexibility. Include dynamic stretching, (shoulder and wrist rotations, leg swings), and passive stretching (lunges or squats). ROM exercises may also help reduce stress and improve mental clarity. Consider adding box breathing. When you take the time to connect with your body and your breathing, you feel more centred and ready for your next patient. Second, during treatment, remember to move your joints regularly and always prioritize your body mechanics. Consistency is essential when building a comprehensive ROM habit into your body mechanics routine. Begin by intentionally applying ROM methods to the joint(s) that will best support your movement. As you are finding your new rhythm and exploring ways to consider ROM during your routine, it is important to take the time to listen to your body. Breathe deeply and

focus on the sensations of each motion. Note how they assist your leverage and push or pull your body mechanics. Check in regularly with your posture and your alignment. If you are not able to use your body weight in a technique, consider how to access your ROM through different positions so that you can.

Using ROM exercises to support your body mechanics might be a new way of thinking for you. The importance of maintaining a full ROM is often overlooked, not only for overall health, but also for the ability to keep up with the daily tasks and demands on an RMT's body. By purposefully including ROM in your routine, you will support your joints with improved strength, balance, and flexibility and enhance your overall physical performance. I'd like to encourage you to have some fun with it. Explore different positions, try new angles and find a new joy in your daily practice.

Remember to focus on maintaining good posture, keeping your joints properly aligned, and using efficient movements that conserve energy. It is also important to be aware of overuse habits in your muscles and joints. Make sure to distribute your workload and ROM evenly across different parts of your body and switch up your techniques to avoid repetitive strain injuries.

As we come to the end of this article, I would like you to remember that exercises and a self-care plan are not just important for your patients, but also for you as their incredible therapist. I hope you are excited and encouraged to build your own repertoire of techniques by including ROM exercises into your daily body mechanics routine.

Your body, your practice, and your patients will thank you for it! ❧

References and resources are available upon request.

“Maintaining a full ROM is often overlooked, not only for overall health, but also for the ability to keep up with the daily tasks and demands on an RMT's body.”

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