

# ALL HANDS ON DECK

By  
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The Benefits of Multi-Hands  
Study Groups

BEING A BODYWORK  
PRACTITIONER HAS  
MANY PERKS,

including one that is fairly unique to bodywork—trading sessions with other practitioners. Trading massage, reiki, or visceral manipulation with a peer practitioner is a twofer: providing care for a kindred spirit and an opportunity to receive care and work on your own healing path. I first experienced bodywork trading in my initial craniosacral therapy class.

There, we worked in pairs, unless there were an odd number of people, and then there would be one group of three people—two practitioners and one client. At first, none of us wanted to be in the group of three; it felt diluted, as if each practitioner had less of the client's energy to work with because we had to share. Then, as we began to understand the value of more than one practitioner—multiple hands-on work (multi-hands)—our attitudes shifted and we *wanted* to be in the group of three.



Multi-hands work is able to cover more depth and breadth. Instead of being more diluted, it is more concentrated. I began to seek out opportunities to practice multi-hands; if a classmate had a headache or a bad moment, two or three of us would swoop in like a precision emergency room team, simultaneously placing hands on her head, solar plexus, sacrum, and feet. Sometimes, during class breaks, just for fun, we'd pile on the teacher and have five or six sets of hands on her. Since then, I have been in many multi-hands situations, including intensive classes that consisted of people working on each other in groups of five or six (one client and four to five therapists), and several different types of multi-hands study groups.

With conscientious preparation, multi-hands study groups are invaluable. Here's why.

**R**ECEIVING  
How does it feel to receive bodywork from two or more people? As I try to think of words to describe it, I can't get past the word *honor*. To have people who respect you, and the process of working together, to listen to your body and guide you along your healing path makes a person feel venerated. It is intense and incredibly supportive. Since each practitioner brings his or her own means of connection and therapeutic expertise, you may explore many aspects of yourself simultaneously or go deeply into a previously unsolvable issue. This integration allows for a fuller and more complex process. Like adding several herbs to a pot of soup, the herbs blend and enhance each other as the soup cooks.

Things can happen in a single multi-hands session that would have taken many sessions of one-on-one work. I have seen people let go of anger and hatred or the insurmountable grief over the death of a spouse or child. Several times, I have seen people break through the oppressive silence of childhood abuse. However, like other bodywork sessions, the body will set the direction and pace, so you cannot plan on an agenda or specific outcome.

## PRACTICING

The role of practitioner in a multi-hands session is dynamic and educational. To feel how the client's energy changes as another practitioner places hands on her, or to be able to discuss with another practitioner what you are noticing and hear how they interpret that data, is a chance to expand your horizons.

Trading groups can include one specific type of bodywork, such as craniosacral therapy (CST), or practitioners who are skilled in a diversity of practices such as aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, and reiki. I am a naturopathic physician and craniosacral therapist, and I am currently in a group with two other practitioners: one Rolfer/visceral manipulation therapist/craniosacral therapist and one acupuncturist/plant spirit medicine healer.

When my current multi-hands study group first started, the acupuncturist wondered about using needles. We found that listening to the client's cranial rhythm would help the acupuncturist decide which point to needle, or she might put in a needle and I would feel the energy flow improve instantaneously. Over the years, I have traded bodywork with many different kinds of practitioners, and I find it is more fun if everyone brings every skill they have to the table, and then discover together how the different approaches interact.

Anne Hoff, the Rolfer in this multi-hands group, says, "I had experienced a tiny taste of four-handed work before joining this group, but had never explored it in depth. Our group combines different modalities, but also has some overlap. The first thing I noticed in undertaking this work is the personal stretch involved: it was easier to be the primary (lead practitioner), as that was more like doing my own sessions, and harder to be the secondary (assistant practitioner), as it was a role I hadn't experienced. In the year and a half or so that we've practiced, we've built trust that allows for a comfortable dialogue between us that supports spontaneous unfolding in new directions."

## PRIORITIZING

When first meeting, it is important for everyone to discuss and decide on the group's goals. Which is more important: Providing the client with the opportunity to receive the work or the educational benefits for the whole group?

If the client's treatment is the priority, the therapists may not be able to stop and talk about technique. Also, if the client is working through an issue, the process keeps going even if the session runs long.

If the priority is to learn techniques, you may need to stop the session to discuss and demonstrate. This requires conversation that can be distracting for some people. Is the client OK with practitioners talking over her? Is she willing to stay alert enough to be able to discuss what she notices?

Since each goal presents its own challenges, it is essential that the group discusses and reaches consensus on what will be the focus. Usually a group is able to find balance between the two priorities, and the goals actually complement each other more in real life than they appear to on paper.

## LOGISTICS AND BOUNDARIES

For the client, there is an inherent vulnerability that comes from being on the table and having multiple hands on you, and perhaps going through an intense process with several people present. The practitioners are also taking risks sharing their knowledge, insights, and intuitions. If people are not compassionate and considerate, it is easy to feel evaluated or judged. Before a group begins, it is important to discuss and agree on the guidelines:

- Everyone must feel safe.
- Everyone's feelings and confidentiality must be respected.
- Everyone must be willing and able to be open and honest. This includes speaking up *immediately* if things aren't going well.
- Everyone needs to be a little bit adventurous.

Successful multi-hands groups have a lovely paradox—each person happily gives a little extra, but feels like they are getting more.

## Where and When

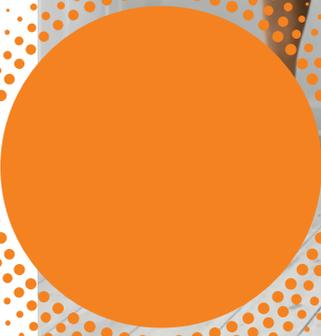
Where the group meets is usually decided by the size of the space—you have to be able to fit all the bodies. Rotating locations divides the burden of travel if more than one person has adequate meeting space. While it can be tricky to arrange, it's ideal if you can be the last one on the table in your own space, so you can stay on the table and relax after everyone else leaves.

While a group of three keeps it nice and cozy, I have also been in groups where many people are invited. Based on who shows up that day, the group divides onto the tables differently every time. This approach provides more breadth and less depth.

Two sessions each day is usually the best. It is important to keep the pre-table time to a minimum, or the second person gets shortchanged or distracted during the first session because he's worrying about getting shortchanged.



Establishing working relationships with other practitioners you respect and trust results in a common language and understanding of each other's approaches, making it easy and beneficial to discuss complex cases.



## THE BENEFITS

- Receive multilevel work at the same time.
- Practice and receive feedback from the client and other practitioners during the session.
- Learn techniques or a new understanding of familiar techniques.
- Gain increased exposure to diverse life and clinical experiences.
- Use these sessions to meet continuing education requirements.

### Protocol and Rotation

For each individual session, one person is chosen to be the primary. For that session, the primary's word is law. Within the confines of the group's priorities, the session can be run however the group determines. The primary can allow the other practitioners, or secondaries, to use their full scope of practice and place their hands appropriately, or she can direct whose hands go where and what their focus should be. The only person the primary needs to accommodate is, of course, the client. While this may sound dictatorial (OK, it is dictatorial), it facilitates a more integral process for the client.



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The sequence of transitioning between sessions, from practitioner to client, is crucial. Since the client in the first session of the day may need time to process, she should be a secondary for the next session. The rotation looks like this:

### SESSION SCHEDULE FOR THREE PEOPLE

The number equals the session number.

Practitioners	Primary	Client	Secondary
Moe	1	2	3
Larry	2	3	1
Curly	3	1	2

If you have more than three people, add in more secondaries.

### SESSION SCHEDULE FOR FOUR PEOPLE

Practitioners	Primary	Client	Secondary	Secondary
John	1	2	3	4
Paul	4	1	2	3
George	3	4	1	2
Ringo	2	3	4	1

While the lifespan of these groups is usually short due to the complexity of scheduling for several people, my group has been meeting for more than a year. We seem to have a good division of labor: one of us organizes the scheduling; one of us keeps track of the rotation; and one of us provides the space, including sheets, heat, and tea. A common and wonderful problem in our group is that as we have gained trust and respect, we sometimes talk longer at the beginning, leaving less time for bodywork. We try to be careful to divide up the rest of the time evenly.

### GETTING STARTED

If you don't already know people you want to work with, ask friends or colleagues for recommendations. I met one person in my current group by going to see her privately a few times and then inviting her to join. I recommend you trade one-on-one a few times to make sure everyone can work well together and have time to get to know each other's styles. Sometimes people are uncertain about joining and want to give it a try before committing—consider having one meeting with several mini-sessions as a trial. After the first full set in which everyone has been the client the same number of times (for a group of three, this takes three meetings of two sessions each

time), pause and evaluate how it is going and renew your interest in continuing.

## PREVENTION AND TROUBLESHOOTING

There are two issues that can reliably get a group into trouble.

The first problem: time hoarding. You want to be sure to divide time as evenly as possible. Generally, no one minds getting a little shortchanged as the client occasionally, but a practitioner who constantly requires extra time will create resentment.

The second multi-hands study group hindrance is the silent treatment. Concerns, especially table concerns, need to be taken seriously because of the intensity of the sessions. If someone is in pain or feels disrespected or belittled, it can escalate at lightning speed and quickly lead to irreparable hard feelings and even the dissolution of the group. Whether in the role of the client, the primary, or a secondary, if something doesn't feel right, you need to speak up immediately. Often, others might begin to feel things are not right, but don't quite understand it yet and are glad you spoke up. A group that stops the session to discuss and work through the problem will be that much stronger moving forward.

## COLLABORATION IS CRUCIAL

Establishing working relationships with other practitioners you respect and trust results in a common language and understanding of each other's approaches, making it easy and beneficial to consult with the others about complex cases (as long as the client has signed a waiver). Furthermore, when I refer a client to a practitioner I have worked with, I can facilitate that client's transition to the new practitioner by describing firsthand everything from directions to the office to the practitioner's mannerisms. I have

even brought in other practitioners to work with me, simultaneously, on clients. Below is one example.

### Case History

I was working with a young man with hydrocephalus and Asperger's syndrome. He had always rocked his head gently from side to side, but had recently started jerking his head back and forth violently. In fact, it was becoming so violent, the doctor was afraid he could tear his jugular vein. While he and I had made progress on several other issues, he was still experiencing occasional violent head jerks. I asked and received permission from the client and his mother to bring in an acupuncturist to work with us. Since the acupuncturist and I had worked together before in the multi-hands session, we knew how to work well together. In a few sessions, the client's violent jerking stopped. Now, the three of us meet together once a month. It is both social (extremely beneficial for this particular client) and very productive.

Working with a "true" client, instead of other practitioners, clearly makes the client the priority. The other therapist and I only discuss what we notice or think after asking the client's permission every time. I have brought in and been brought in to sessions with acupuncturists, medical doctors, other craniosacral therapists, and naturopaths for problems ranging from needle shock to digestive issues to posttraumatic stress disorder.

### COURAGEOUS OUTCOMES

A successful multi-hands study group takes commitment, honesty, a desire to learn, patience with the group process, and a dash of courage. The benefits are enormous, including an opportunity for learning about and helping other people, exploring other bodywork approaches, and personal growth. What perks will you discover from working in a multi-hands study group? **m&b**

## WHAT KINDS OF THERAPIES WORK FOR A MULTI-HANDS STUDY GROUP?

There are two criteria for what kinds of bodywork will work best in a multi-hands group:

- Therapies that don't require movement of the client's body.
- Therapeutic doctrines that believe in the body's internal wisdom and, therefore, focus on the client's internal source for direction and guidance.

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