



NEWS / PROFESSION

Creating Safety for Female Patients

BRINGING AWARENESS TO THE MALE PRACTITIONER POWER DYNAMIC

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- There is work to be done to create more safety in our treatment spaces and I'm confident we can continue to make strides.
- Take a trauma-informed bodywork or therapy class to understand how to appropriately ask for consent before touching the body, and understand what behaviors might be unknowingly retraumatizing your patients.
- There are amazing practitioners of all genders practicing in our field. We owe it to the reputation of our profession to have that be as unanimous as possible.

I was motivated to write this article after hearing yet another story of a male practitioner in our field making inappropriate comments about sexual behavior in his treatment room. Over the years, I've gathered stories about various men practicing in our field who have exhibited inappropriate behavior toward female patients. As health care practitioners who hold a unique role of body touch and emotional processing, we owe it to our profession to bring this to light and uplevel our awareness.

In the past decade of practice, I've heard some pretty disturbing stories from our field: a well-known male acupuncturist who has his numerous female patients regularly lie with fully exposed breasts and needles around their breasts and areolas as a "breast health treatment," all with an attitude that he's helping them evolve. Another male acupuncturist who led his female patient in a meditation with needles in and started relating her needing to own all parts of herself; to his needing to own his compulsion to masturbate.

Last week I went to a sound healing and the male facilitator, who owns a retreat center, related a current astrological phenomenon to him waking up "very horny that day" to a group of four

women. We then proceeded to go into a darker room with eyes closed and receive a sound healing from him. Although I personally did not feel threatened by this facilitator, I was aware of how scary and retraumatizing this seemingly “innocent” comment could have been to me 15 years ago, not to mention other women who are healing their own or intergenerational trauma. I know at least one of the other participants is a survivor of childhood abuse.

Even recently in *Acupuncture Today*, a male practitioner wrote an article about a female health condition that he equated to sexual repression in women, as well as overeating and lack of exercise. Making these statements without also acknowledging the care or questioning the appropriateness of approaching such subjects by a male or female practitioner is potentially damaging to our female patients.

There is work to be done to create more safety in our treatment spaces and I’m confident we can continue to make strides. Although this is not an exhaustive list by any means, here are a few suggestions for our male practitioners to start with:

1. *Never* bring up your own sexual behavior or desires in the treatment room. It does not matter if you see yourself or your comments as innocent or even educational. It is not appropriate and is highly likely to make your patient feel very uncomfortable; the opposite of a healing space.
2. *At least* one in four women have experienced sexual trauma. Conduct yourself as if the patient in front of you could have been one of them. That means being aware of body language. Many men take up a lot of space with their words and bodies because they have been socialized to do so. What you may perceive as confident, may in fact be read as dominating, such as sitting in a chair with your legs wide or making intense eye contact.
3. Take a trauma-informed bodywork or therapy class to understand how to appropriately ask for consent before touching the body, and understand what behaviors might be unknowingly retraumatizing your patients. Learn what fight, flight, freeze and fawn look like to help identify trauma responses to unintentional behaviors.
4. *Be an advocate*; when you hear something, say something. Many women are still afraid to call out inappropriate behavior for the various repercussions it brings. If you are a male practitioner and you hear of inappropriate behavior, use your inherent position of power to investigate the situation. Use your voice to bring about positive change, whether that be talking directly to the offending person, a discretionary board, or both.
5. Where appropriate, ask other females in your life about what it is like to be a female being treated in a medical setting of any sort. What makes them feel empowered vs disempowered? Really listen to their experiences, and learn how to apply the wisdom to your own practice and life.
6. And finally, talk to other male practitioners about this topic. Let them know what you have learned and where you stand with it. Let them know you are ready to see change from your male colleagues. Tell the females in your life you are an ally, here to help support them and allow their voices be heard.

There are amazing practitioners of all genders practicing in our field. We owe it to the reputation of our profession to have that be as unanimous as possible. Awareness is the first step, acceptance the second and action the third. Note that this article is written from the voice of a white, cis-gendered, queer female and does not include perspectives from the BIPOC or trans community, which also need to be heard. More education on inclusivity needs to be required to graduate and practice in our field, for the safety and health of our patients.

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