

Aston-Patterning®: Integrating Aston Concepts Into a Massage Therapy Practice

by Judith Aston and Judith Pollock, P.T.

Many training courses teach specific massage and bodywork techniques. Aston-Patterning is an approach that also helps the practitioner determine the amount, location, intensity and sequence of work required to meet the client's goals for change — while keeping the whole-body system in balance.

The underlying concept of Aston-Patterning® is that each individual has a unique structure and movement style, based on that person's habits, activities, attitudes, emotions and experiences. All of these factors help us shape ourselves into a pattern that in some way expresses who we are right now.

If the current pattern of who we are is one that involves physical pain or discomfort with certain movements or activities, we might want to find a more optimal pattern for our self-expression. The Aston approach is based on the idea that bodies can change, and that each individual can become more comfortable, effortless and efficient in work, play and rest.

The purpose of Aston-Patterning is to facilitate change toward a more optimal pattern of self-expression. Specific forms of the work are designed to accomplish this goal in a variety of situations. These forms are taught in courses ranging from two-day introductions to four- or five-day workshops to a 20-week certification training program. These courses are offered to people in many fields of work, including massage therapy, physical and occupational therapy, athletic training, dance and movement specialties.

Forms of Aston-Patterning

Aston Massage — a system of bodywork that utilizes a detailed assessment, a customized sequence and skilled manual techniques to facilitate change in tension-holding patterns that may contribute to pain, discomfort or fatigue; a three-dimensional touch is used to release tension from surface to bone.

Neuro-Kinetics — a system of movement education used to achieve more comfortable, effortless and efficient performance of daily activities, ranging from

simple bending, lifting and self-care to world-class athletics, as well as movement patterns that one can do on his or her own to decrease or increase tone.

Myo-Kinetics — a system of assessment and specific manual techniques for releasing tension-holding patterns structurally ingrained in the soft tissues (fascia, muscles, tendons).

Arthro-Kinetics — a system of assessment and advanced manual techniques for releasing restrictions around and through the joint tissues and along the bone.

Aston Fitness — a system of individualized exercise training for loosening, toning, stretching and cardiovascular conditioning.

Facial Toning — a system incorporating massage techniques to loosen unnecessary holding and exercise to maintain healthy tone for the face, head and neck; it combines Aston Massage, Myo-Kinetics and Arthro-Kinetics.

Ergonomics/Environmental Modification — a system of techniques, designs and products to maintain comfort and efficiency and to assist us in the way we interact with our environment.

The Aston system

At the heart of all of these forms is the Aston system, which finds the way the body can be more optimally aligned, move more effortlessly and efficiently, and interact more comfortably with the environment. Although all of these forms can be incorporated into the massage therapy practice, this article focuses on one form of the work, the Aston Massage. The process of assessment and practice



Illustrations by Laura Servid

Above: the pre-test, with the client sitting at a computer terminal. It is important for the client to become aware of his or her alignment and tension patterns as they exist both before and after the massage, as awareness is the key to maintaining positive change. For this reason, a pre-test is given to facilitate awareness of the current pattern.



Above: A post-test, done after the massage and using the same activity as did the pre-test, can highlight the change made in the session.

described in this article is typical of the Aston approach that would be applied to any of the other forms of the work.

The Aston massage: assessment and goal setting

Before beginning hands-on work, the practitioner assesses the individual in his or her current pattern of alignment and tension, and together with the client, sets a goal for change toward a more optimal pattern. For example, if the client is a woman who works as a computer systems specialist, and who has constant neck and low back pain, the Aston approach considers both her alignment and muscle tension holding pattern to assess the possible source of her pain, as well as her feelings and expression about her job.

The Aston approach is based on the idea that bodies can change, and that each individual can become more comfortable, effortless and efficient in work, play and rest.

Alignment and tension are interrelated. When the alignment does not allow the body's structures to be adequately supported against gravity, the body may compensate for lack of support by holding more tension than is necessary. For example, when the head is forward in relation to the shoulders, the neck muscles often get very tight to keep the chin from falling toward the chest. In this case, the massage would emphasize relaxation or release of excess tension.

Sometimes the body responds to less than optimal alignment by holding less tension than is necessary. For example, in sitting, the abdominals become lax when the pelvis is tilted posteriorly or backward. If less than optimal tone or tension is present, and the body is unstable because it does not have enough tone, the massage would emphasize toning rather than relaxation. Sometimes the client additionally needs a fitness session to increase stability and support.

Gathering information: hearing and observing

The Aston approach to massage begins with listening to the client's complaints and concerns. The area of the client's interest, in this example her neck and low back, are noted on a drawing called a body map. The practitioner then visually observes the client's postural alignment to begin to look for the body's asymmetrical needs and adaptations and then for clues to the possible source of the client's pain or discomfort. This observation would be made with the fully-clothed client standing and also, in this case, sitting at the computer.

The visual observation helps the practitioner determine whether a slightly modified alignment might allow the client to hold less muscular tension and feel less muscular pain. Perhaps, for example, her neck muscles might not need to hold as much tension if her head were able to rest more directly over her shoulders. Her low back might be slightly displaced in relation to her upper body, in a way that created excess tension in her

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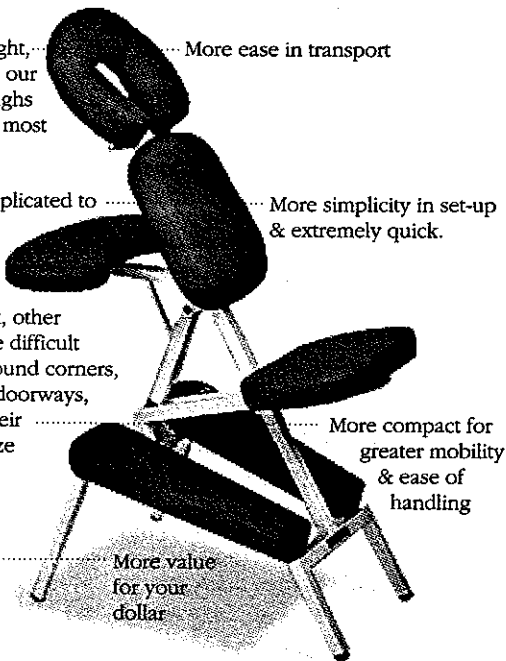
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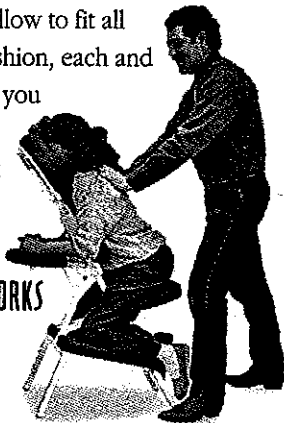
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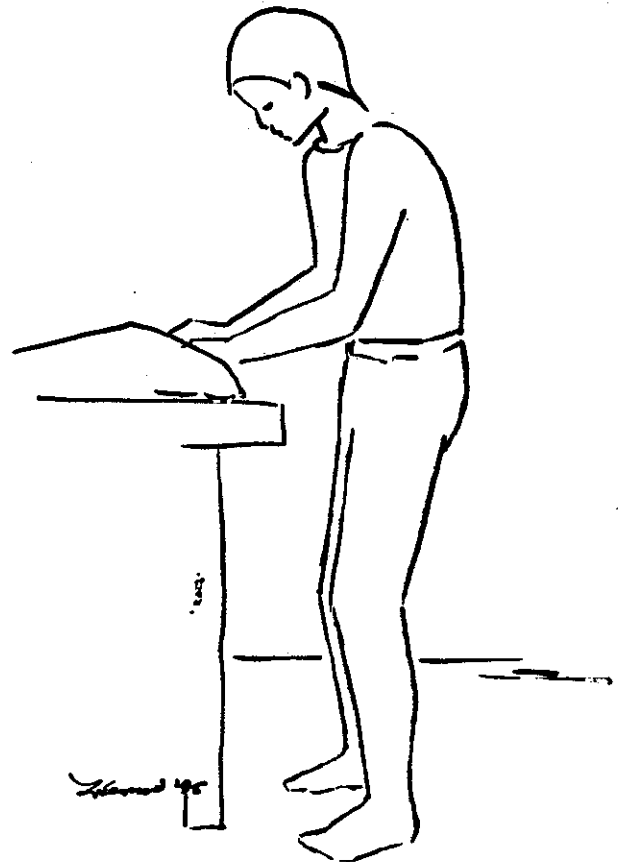
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Above: Improper body use by the therapist, which also lessens the comfort of the client receiving massage. Here the therapist is not using the entire body, thereby diminishing integrity of alignment and tension.

back muscles. A chart is made to notate body complaints and symptoms as well as the relationship of segments to one another.

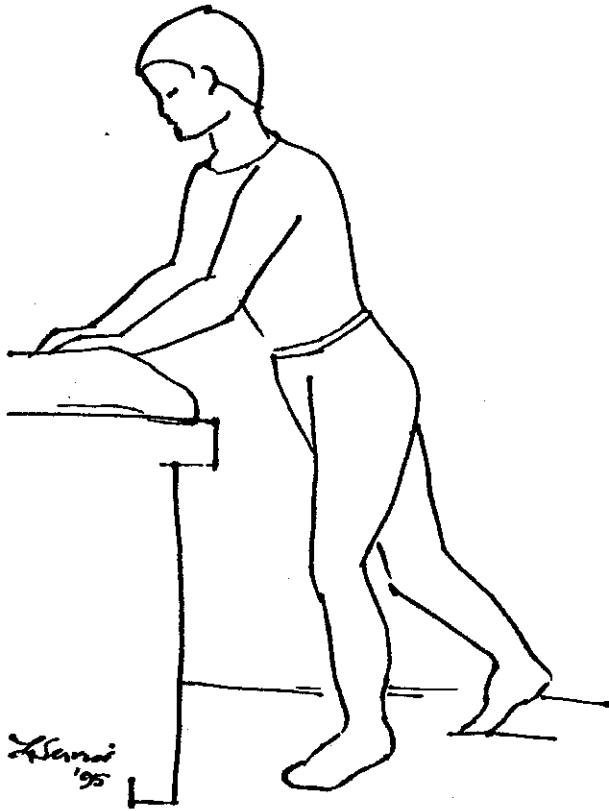
Palpation body map: recording areas of hyper- and hypo tension

Once the hearing and observing assessments are made, noted and discussed with the client, an evaluation of the muscular tension is performed. This usually consists of the clothed client resting comfortably on the massage table while the practitioner manually feels the tension patterns throughout the body. The practitioner records areas of tension as well as noting areas where there is less tension, or tone than might be appropriate. This map of the body's pattern is then correlated with the observation of alignment and client's awareness to form a hypothesis.

The hypothesis

The practitioner forms a hypothesis about the source of the client's problem and how to reach the client's goals by considering three main factors: pain/discomfort (what is heard); alignment (what is seen); and tension (what is felt). The practitioner also pays attention to her or his own thoughts and intuition.

Once the relationships between pain, alignment, tension, goals and expectations are understood for this particular client, a plan is made for releasing soft tissue restrictions and/or toning hypo-toned areas for better support, less pain and more presence.

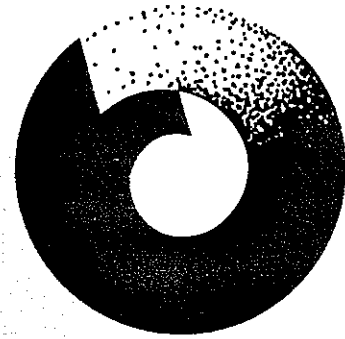


Above: Proper body use by the therapist. The Aston approach teaches a specific system of body usage for the practitioner to maintain his or her own integrity of alignment and tension while doing massage. Comfortable, less effortful and more efficient body usage can help avoid repetitive stress injury to the hands and wrists, protect the neck and back from muscle strain, preserve energy to avoid fatigue, and prevent stress to any one area by learning to use the whole body instead of just the hands.

Based on this unique assessment system, the practitioner gains an appreciation of the specific problems, patterns and goals for each individual session. This process includes understanding the inter-relationship of body segments and determining the location and amount of work to be done for change in the area that is controlling the less-than-optimal pattern. Continuous re-assessment within the session guides the practitioner in working with the rest of the body to facilitate balance, resilience and cooperation of the body segments as well as ideas to sustain the change.

The pre-test

The skillfully performed session facilitates change in the client's alignment and tension patterns. It is important for the client to become aware of his or her alignment and tension patterns as they exist both before and after the massage, as awareness is the key to maintaining positive change. For this reason, a pre-test is given to facilitate awareness of the current pattern (Illustration #1). In our example of the computer specialist, a



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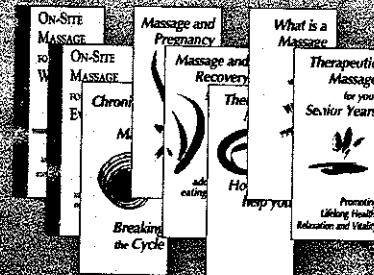
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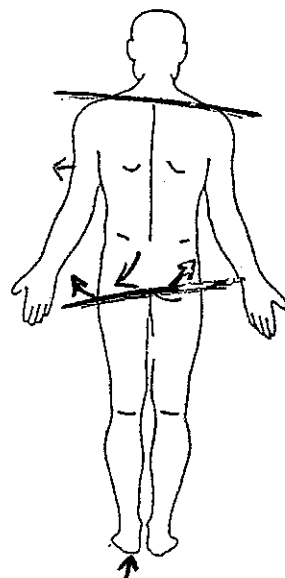
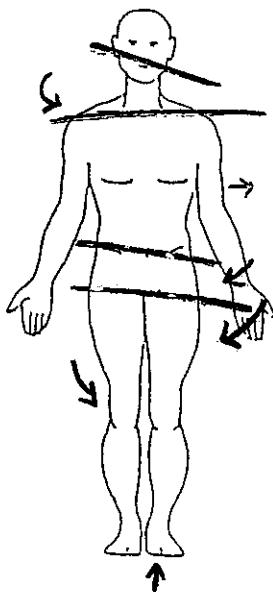
simple pre-test could be asking her to notice how much effort she feels as she turns her head toward and away from the computer screen as she works at her keyboard.

The plan for change

The plan for change is holistic in the sense that, rather than simply addressing

alignment and tension-holding pattern, and then why some modification to that pattern could lead to a more optimal pattern and less pain.

If this client has a strong visual sense, she needs to see how her pattern affects her pain and how that pattern could change to allow her to feel more comfortable. In this case, the practitioner might demonstrate the pattern or use a mirror to point out how the pattern presents itself.



Above: A body map notating the pattern of relationships — in this case, showing the client's neck and low back. This map is made by hearing and observing, to notate body complaints and symptoms as well as the relationship of segments to one another.

the specific area of pain, it involves the integrity of the whole body, both in its current pattern and in its optimal pattern. Once the client is aware of the current pattern, he or she is better able to understand and agree to the plan for change. The pre-test can highlight the presence of the current pattern. A post-test, using the same activity after the massage, can highlight the change made in the session (Illustration #2).

Matching the client's learning style

The practitioner wants the client to both understand and agree to the plan for change. People have different ways of processing information. Part of the practitioner's skill is presenting the information in a way that best matches the client's learning style. For example, if the computer systems specialist best learns by having things verbally explained to her, the practitioner should present the plan by verbally describing the client's current

If the client is particularly kinesthetic, meaning she can process information that she receives about how something feels, the practitioner might bring the client's awareness to where she feels the weight of her body as her feet make contact with the ground while she walks.

Most people learn through a combination of these senses, and the practitioner can bring a manageable amount of information from each area into the client's awareness. Aston training involves sharpening the practitioner's ability to observe, select and communicate the appropriate information to facilitate this process.

Sequencing the massage session

The plan for change determines the sequence of the massage and requires continuous assessment and re-assessment of the status and relationship of muscle tension, so that the appropriate amount of

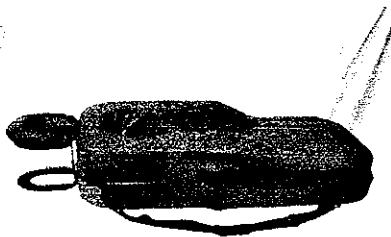
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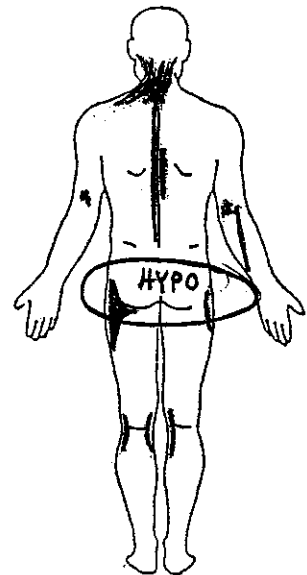
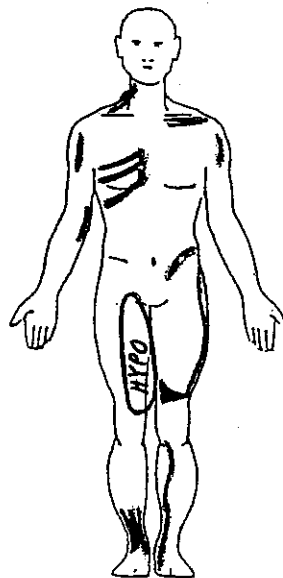
change is kept consistent throughout the body.

The massage might begin in the area that is the most controlling component of the overall tension pattern, which is frequently not the same area where the pain is felt. Based on how the tension changes in the controlling area, the amount of change in other areas needs to be balanced

necessary to allow change that alleviates pain in the neck and shoulders, while preparing the other areas of the body to negotiate and sustain the change. The practitioner's ability to determine the appropriate sequence of work — the problem solving unique to the individual — is what seems to determine the success and longevity of the work.

The post-test

When the massage is finished, the



Above: a body map notating hypo tension. This map is made by palpating, in order to record areas of tension as well as areas of less tension, or tone, than might be appropriate. This map of the body's pattern is then correlated with the observation of alignment and client's awareness to form a hypothesis.

to that new level of tension. This technique of assessing change in the muscles' tension as the massage progresses helps to determine the amount, location and intensity of work required to keep the system in balance.

In our example, the client's discomfort is in her neck and low back. However, with this whole-body assessment, the practitioner may decide that tension in the legs, for example, is displacing the alignment and preventing optimal support for the client's neck and shoulders. In this case, it may be helpful to begin working with tension in the legs rather than in an area closer to the actual site of pain.

Based on the change that occurs with that initial work in the legs, the session may proceed with balancing the tension in the rest of the body to support the change. This sequence may be what is

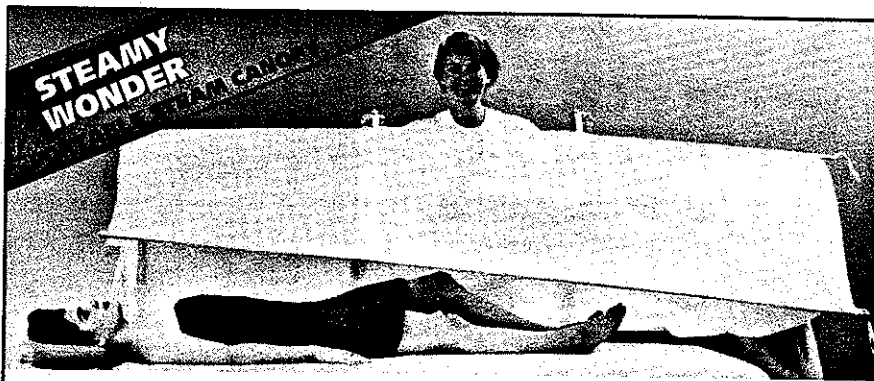
client can repeat the activity used in the pre-test (which in our example is turning her head toward and away from the computer) to determine whether the movement is easier and more comfortable. The pre- and post-tests are carefully chosen to reflect the specific goals of the session. The client could also return to the mirror, if this was used before the session, so that changes in her or his alignment can be pointed out.

At this time the practitioner would contrast the pre-test sitting at the computer, for example, with the post-test sitting.

Features of Aston massage training

This form emphasizes a holistic approach to the whole body/mind, versus an isolated area of pain, and utilizes an extensive assessment prior to and during the massage. Other unique components

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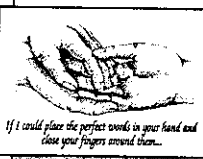
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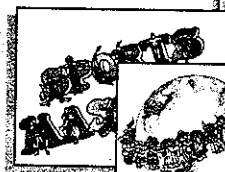
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include the techniques of manually matching the shape of the area being massaged, moving in the direction of the grain of the underlying soft tissue, and using a three-dimensional touch.

These techniques significantly add to the patient's comfort while receiving the massage, and help achieve the goals for change in the body's alignment and tension-holding pattern. They require specific training and practice, both for the skill

The plan for change is holistic in the sense that, rather than simply addressing the specific area of pain, it involves the integrity of the whole body, both in its current pattern and in its optimal pattern.

of assessing what is needed in each individual situation and for the skill of actually achieving the shape and the direction and the three-dimensional touch.

The assessment, plan and techniques for achieving the client's goal are vital to the success of the massage session. Perhaps equally important is maintenance of the practitioner's comfort in the process of assisting the client. This approach teaches a specific system of body usage for the practitioner to maintain his or her own integrity of alignment and tension while giving massage. The quality of the work is greatly affected by the practitioner's body usage, both in the client's experience of the practitioner's touch and in the results of change in tension and alignment.

Besides contributing to greater comfort for the client receiving the work, this attention to the practitioner's body usage has many advantages for the practitioner — such as the ability to more accurately feel the body's layers and assess what is needed. Comfortable, less effortful and more efficient body usage can help

avoid repetitive stress injury to the hands and wrists, protect the neck and back from muscle strain, preserve energy to avoid fatigue, and prevent stress to any one area by learning to use the whole body instead of just the hands. These add up to a happier and longer career in massage therapy (Illustrations #5 and #6).

The Aston approach is more than just a massage technique. It is a means of personal expression. In the process of discovering your client's unique structure and style of self-expression, you learn something about yourself. You learn that you are someone who knows how to draw from many resources: your ability to hear what someone says; to see his or her patterns; to feel the tension in the soft tissues; to think about what needs to be done; to communicate what you sense and what you know; and to use your intuition, your emotion and your experience to pull it all together.

The Aston training is a way for you, as a practitioner, to learn who you are and how you want to express yourself. The Aston session is also a way for you to pass this gift along to your clients. ■

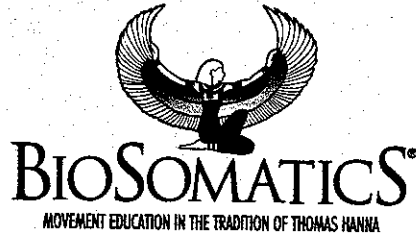
Judith Aston is director of the Aston Training Center and a former professor of dance and movement for actors, dancers and athletes. She has also done extensive work in the field of psychology, helping therapists with their patients to identify and modify patterns of behavioral expression.

Founder and developer of Aston-Patterning, she is a pioneer in the field of integration of mind, body and environment. A consultant in education, industry and athletics, she has presented courses throughout the United States, Europe, New Zealand and Japan.

Aston maintains ongoing schedules of teaching and training while developing new programs and products to correlate with her own continuing process of discovery and problem solving.

Judith Pollock is a physical therapist and Aston-Patterning practitioner in Berkeley, California. She began training with Judith Aston in 1985. Pollock earned her master's in physical therapy from Children's Hospital, Los Angeles/Chapman University in 1991, and completed her Aston-Patterning practitioner training at Incline Village, Nevada in 1995. Pollock integrates Aston-Patterning with physical therapy in her private practice and in an outpatient hospital clinic in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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