

Using Soft Tissue Release

What is Soft Tissue Release (STR)?

This is a technique for stretching soft tissues, primarily muscles, fascia and tendons.

Why use it?

Many clients complain of having “tight” muscles. Sometimes they are prescribed stretches and experience temporary relief from the feelings of tightness. One of the reasons basic stretching gives only temporary relief is because muscles are not uniformly tight: there may be localized areas of tension or adhesions restricting a few fibres only. When we perform active stretches, it may not necessarily be the “tight” part of the muscle that lengthens, but the part that is already more pliable. Soft Tissue Release helps localize a stretch to those fibres in the muscle that most need lengthening.

How is it performed?

There are three types of STR: active, passive and weight bearing. This article explains passive STR. For active STR the principle of application is the same, whichever muscle you are treating. Therefore, once you have mastered the basic technique it may be used all over the body.

- 1) Firstly, identify the muscle to be stretched and the direction of fibres.
- 2) Secondly, ensure that the muscle is in a neutral position. Neutral means that the muscle is neither contracted nor stretched. Often this requires the therapist to passively shorten the muscle to eliminate either stretch or contraction. So, for example, if you were treating hamstrings in prone, you would flex the client’s knee to around 90 degrees, thus passively shortening the hamstrings. This is your start position.
- 3) Explain the procedure to the client.
- 4) In the neutral position, “lock in” to the muscle to fix the fibres, starting proximally, on or near the origin of the muscle. In this way you are creating a false insertion point for the muscle, gently compressing the soft tissue. (For methods of fixing see below).
- 5) Whilst maintaining your lock, gentle and slowly stretch the muscle. So, in our hamstrings example, you might be fixing the muscle near the ischium, and gently extending the knee by returning the client’s leg to the couch. All the while you are lowering the leg you maintain your lock.
- 6) Once the muscle has been stretched, release your “fix” and return the muscle to neutral.
- 7) Choose another point to fix the muscle, working more distally. Repeat until you reach the distal tendon(s).

Methods of Fixing/locking

There are many different ways of fixing or “locking” the muscle including:

- forearm
- fist
- elbow
- pisiform
- thumb
- fingers

It is important for you to fix the muscle using methods which safeguard your own joints. The example here shows a therapist using fists, forearm and elbow as methods of locking.

Usual massage contraindications apply. In addition, caution should be used when using STR to treat clients who are known to bruise easily. The sensation should be comfortable for the client and should never be painful. Stop if the client experiences pain.

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