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Strong Ethics for Your Massage Practice



Becoming a successful massage therapist requires good business sense, physical stamina and, of course, skilled hands. At the end of the day, however, the massage therapy profession also requires trust. For that reason, one of the most important tools in a massage therapist's toolbox is a [code of ethics](#).

"Massage therapy is a very personal service," says Beth Stipe, LMT, owner of The Kneaded Touch, a massage therapy business with locations in Amherst and Elyria, Ohio. "In order to establish ourselves as reputable and trustworthy, we should have a solid foundation of ethics to abide by."

Greg Hurd, LMT, massage ethics instructor and director of career development and outreach at Bancroft School of Massage Therapy in Worcester, Massachusetts, agrees. "Understanding your ethics and professionalism helps you create a positive image," he says. "As a massage therapist, you have to always be the person you want people to talk about."

Simply put, one of the best ways to grow your business is through referrals from existing clients, and your clients will likely only refer to you if they know you're honest and practicing massage therapy ethically. Handling the following four ethical challenges correctly will demonstrate that you are.

1. Dual Relationships

Every massage therapist has some clients they like seeing more than others. Before you invite a client to a birthday party or barbecue, however, consider that befriending may complicate professional boundaries.

"I'm sure it would be fun to grab a drink ... with some of my clients, but I've never allowed it because I believe it breaks down the professional relationship," Stipe says.

Indeed, the best way to avoid an ethical dilemma is to ensure clients aren't friends and friends aren't clients.

"Lots of times it makes the sessions uncomfortable and you lose a client," Hurd says. "One needs to go through a process in which he or she asks whether it's worth the risk. For those who see clients as clients and not friends, this never becomes an issue."

2. Confidentiality

Professionalism goes hand-in-hand with discretion. But what if a client says something that worries you? First and foremost, you should fully understand the laws in your state, which might require you to break confidentiality to report a crime, for example, or to intervene if a client is in imminent danger. But what about things you're not required to report?

"What's said in the massage room stays in the massage room," says Pam Shifrin, LMT, owner, Local Revival LLC, Vail, Colorado.

If you're concerned, there may be other ways to help. "I once had a family I worked on, and one of the family members was hiding an addiction problem," says Jenny Rock, LMT, owner, Body Balance Roling and Massage LLC, Portland, Oregon. "I never talked to the others about it; I just encouraged the one with the problem to seek help and said I would be happy to connect them to appropriate professionals if they didn't know where to go."

Hurd says the line is easy to draw. "Never tell anyone anything without a written release of information," he states.

3. Social Media

Social media can be a great tool for marketing your business. If it's not used ethically, however, it also can be a great tool for marring it. Which raises the question: Should you sign in or log out?

Hurd says there's no ethical problem with signing in, but recommends having personal and professional social media pages, and engaging with clients only on the latter. "On Facebook, build a business page so that if anybody wants to reach out to you on social media, they'll find you there," he advises. "Again, this falls under the category of 'dual relationships.'"

4. Product Endorsements

Recommending and selling products isn't unethical and in some work settings will be considered a part of your job. There are times, however, when endorsing products might require flexing your ethical muscles.

Product type, for instance, should be considered. "If it is something along the lines of what massage therapists are allowed to recommend in their state, such as hot/cold therapy or stretches, then yes. I believe we can share it to benefit our clients," Stipe says. "But if it isn't allowed under our scope of practice, then we shouldn't recommend it."

Whether you're struggling with relationships, rates or endorsements, practicing strong ethics ultimately boils down to a single question, according to Hurd. "Is it going to increase trust in you, or decrease trust in you?" he concludes. "That's what you have to ask yourself, because massage therapy is so much about trust."

This article by Matt Alderton was adapted from the fall 2017 issue of Massage Therapy Journal.

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