**Ethics and Professionalism for Massage Therapists**

**Objectives:**
At the completion of this course, the motivated learner should be able to:
- Define ethics as it relates to massage therapy
- List nine desirable traits for massage therapists
- Compare and contrast the societal similarities between massage therapy and the law
- Name six ethical guidelines for massage therapists that help with ethical decision making
- List three examples of unethical behavior for massage therapists
- Describe what humanized care is and give at least two examples
- Identify several alternative strategies for dealing with a colleague who is engaging in unethical or incompetent care

**Definitions:**
- **Ethics** = rules or principles which govern right and correct conduct based on moral and cultural standards as defined by society.
- **Principle** = a basic rule of conduct; truth.
- **Ethical Decision Making** = the application of ethical and professional skills to determine appropriate behavior and resolve ethical dilemmas.
- **Informed Consent** = voluntary agreement with an action proposed by another after risks and benefits have been communicated to allow clients to make knowledgeable decisions whether or not they want to receive a massage.
- **Standards of Practice** = the principles established as a measure or model that identified the content of ethical practice and quality care.
- **Scope of Practice** = the range of activities that can legally be performed within a particular health occupation.
- **Therapeutic Relationship** = professional boundaries and interpersonal structure between professionals and their clients.
- **Professionalism** = pertaining to one’s profession, the art of being a specialist in a particular field or occupation.
- **Professional Skills** = methods of recording and communicating professional interaction.
- **Values** = beliefs that are important to an individual; abstract ideals that shape an individual’s thinking and behavior.
- **Law** = rule or standard of human conduct established and enforced by authority, society, or custom.
- **Code of Ethics** = guideline for professional conduct.

**Introduction**
Ethics are rules or principles that guide professional massage therapists to choose the right and correct path for treating clients. Professional organizations often choose to establish rules or standards that govern the conduct of the members of their profession. As professional massage therapists, professionalism, ethics and values are of great importance to our profession and give us a firm grounding for ethical decision making.
Before reading this program, consider the next two exercises to clarify your values as they relate to your personal and professional life and consider the steps to take to clarify any ethical dilemmas that may have occurred in your massage practice.

**Values Inventory**

The following exercise will help clarify your values. Below you will find brief descriptions of seven situations. Consider each item and rank 1 the item that you would be least willing to undertake. Continue the ranking on this basis, that is, the item ranked 7 is to be the situation that you would find most acceptable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
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<td>1. You are required to fire a loyal worker, aged 56, who has little possibility of getting another job.</td>
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<td>2. You are asked to make an untrue report about another therapist, with the purpose of covering up his problem behavior.</td>
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<td>3. You discover that one of your colleagues has a drinking problem and you decide to report this condition to the owner of the establishment.</td>
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<td>4. You have been using massage establishment resources for your private use and an investigation is in progress. You can blame a former colleague who has now left the establishment.</td>
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<td>5. You have been seeing clients as an independent contractor at a massage establishment and you decide to see the client in their own home without the knowledge of the massage establishment.</td>
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<td>6. You are renting space in a massage establishment with the agreed upon 60/40 split. You decide to see clients at night at the massage establishment and don’t report the income.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Someone tells you about unsanitary conditions at another massage establishment and asks you to report this to the Board when you have not been inside the establishment.</td>
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If you had moments of doubt with the preceding seven situations, you are not alone. Values are often difficult to clarify. Below you will see how to look at situations and the steps necessary to solve ethical dilemmas.

**Case Studies and Ethical Dilemmas**

Our ethics affect us both personally and professionally. Ethical dilemmas are bound to arise and how we face these dilemmas often is confusing. Consider the following questions as you read this material on ethics and use it to help with your own decision making.

1. **Define the problem by gathering information.**
   A. What is the problem?
   B. Where did the problem arise or originate?
   C. What is the context of the problem in which the problem arose?
D. What is my goal in solving the problem?
E. What are all the dimensions of the problem?
F. Who are the stakeholders involved or potentially involved?
G. Who needs to be considered in solving the dilemma?
H. Do I have all the facts? If not, what relevant facts are missing?

II. Ethics and Values
A. What are all the values involved (at stake)?
B. What values are in conflict?
C. Which values need to be maximized? Minimized?
D. What are the ethical issues?

III. Alternatives and Consequences
A. What are the alternatives?
B. Which ones are unethical? Which ones are ethical?
C. What are the consequences of each alternative?
D. Which ones can I eliminate and still solve the problem?
E. Which alternative(s) maximizes the essential values and minimizes as few as possible?

IV. Solving the Problem
A. Eliminate alternatives that are too costly, not feasible, maximize the wrong values, are illegal, or unethical.
B. Rank the alternatives to each dimension according to which are most likely to maximize the most important values.
C. Select the alternative to each dimension that is most likely to work in the context of the problem while maximizing the important values.
D. Choose alternative(s) that maximize essential values and minimize as few as possible.

V. Evaluation
A. Can I defend and/or justify my position?
B. Is this decision consistent with everything outlined in parts II and III?
C. What ethical theory (theories) did I use in my decision-making?
D. How will I evaluate this decision?
E. Will this decision be ethical with regard to both short-term and long-term consequences?
F. Any suggestions so that this dilemma does not occur in the future?

VI. Miscellaneous
Discuss whatever else you feel should be included in this decision.

Professionalism
Individuals in the profession of massage therapy observe the rules or standards of the profession by exercising critical, rational judgment and by applying the ethical precepts to life situations.

A profession is different from a job. Professionals do more than just go to work. Professionals have responsibilities and values consistent with the massage therapy profession in their delivery of massage therapy. Professionals possess a specialized body of knowledge, licensure or certification, and a professional organization. Professionals have basic rights and responsibilities and their values and circumstances command respect at all times. Massage professionals have personal and professional integrity and
exercises good moral judgment about ethical problems. Professionals also take steps to try to redress wrongs they believe exist.

Ethics give professionals guidance in which to perform their professional role and responsibilities in carrying out massage therapy consistent with the ethical obligations of the profession, in concert with the quality of care due our clients, and compatible with the standards of practice.

Professionals respect and comply with both the law and professional codes. If the professional strives consistently for the highest level of service to the client, the therapist will be following ethical standards and the client’s rights will be protected. If, however, the massage therapist does not have the welfare of the client foremost in mind, ethical violations may occur. Sometimes ethical violations may be subtle breaches of conduct; such as, failure to refer a client to another more qualified professional because that referral means elimination of a payment. Massage therapists must continually self evaluate their behavior by remembering to do what is best for the client and to think ethical considerations at all times.

If the therapist does not consider the client’s needs first, many blatant breaches of ethical conduct may occur. Some of these breaches include:

- developing a sexual relationship with a client
- discussing a client’s personal issues outside the massage room with an outsider
- neglecting to properly drape a client.

Our behavior as massage therapists impacts our profession and society as a whole. Culture, time, religion, politics, values, events, location and scientific knowledge and other variables impact the way we interpret behavior. Values refer to beliefs that are important to an individual. Defined broadly, values are abstract ideals that shape an individual’s behavior and thinking.

Ethics define expected behavior by others and ourselves and what society expects of a profession. In addition, law is a rule or standard of human conduct or behavior established and enforced by authority, custom, or society. Laws tell us what we can and cannot do. However, laws are not static; they move with the times. Massage law is not a separate entity. Instead, it draws on general laws and rules and regulations of federal and state as a basis for defining and governing massage practice. What was once law may now be extinct, such as prohibition.

Law and massage therapy share many societal similarities. Each considers a state of wellness as the sought-for optimal condition for the individual and social group. Each intervenes when there is altered conduct. When this occurs, each takes steps to restore individual or social equilibrium. Each turns to the social and behavioral sciences to understand conduct and to guide remedial action.

Massage therapists must recognize the law as an essential component of practice. The law is there to assist in the decision-making process - just like ethics - and law is there to protect in times of need. There are sometimes gray areas of practice in which the therapist is uncertain of grounds for practice. The risk of liability is ever present. It behooves the massage therapist to become aware of laws and regulations of the profession, so that professional responsibility can be defined and appropriate resources can be used in times of need. The many ethical and professional problems that may
emerge are solved with greater confidence if the therapist has a sound basis of theory and facts on legal and ethical issues. Conflicts are inevitable where ethics and the law are concerned. Therefore, there must be a system of rules or principles that guide massage therapists to make the right decisions. A professional code of ethics can assist us to make decisions consistent with professional responsibility. The code of ethics may not have legal power, but it can be used as a guideline for professional conduct. It provides us with a realistic guide to expected practice. Professionals must be willing to adjust their personal behavior to meet the professional good. We make decisions for what is right and good for the individual, the client, and the profession as a whole. The following diagram will assist with understanding ethics and the clarification of values, morals and ethics.

**Clarification of Values**

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Values

Art  Science
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The nature of a professional discipline such as massage therapy, can be demonstrated by the above. In the left corner is the **practice** of massage, or the **art**. This is performed by a licensed massage therapist. It is the sum total of innate ability, education, practical experience, initiative and skill. The upper corner, **values**, defines the agreed upon moral code to which massage therapy subscribes. Values cover the questions of what a massage therapist should do in various contexts in which they practice. Values are often personal and linked to culture. In the right corner is **science**, which is the description and explanation of the what, how and why of massage. Science enables the assumptions on which art and values are based to be tested and either falsified or verified. Our values encompass our morals and ethics, both personal and professional. Values are beliefs, not thoughts. They are enduring, not transient. Values provide guidance with respect to two aspects of our lives; our mode of conduct (personal behavior) and our desired end – state of existence (personal goals). Ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict, usually what is good versus right. We need to clarify our values before we can make ethical decisions. Lasting values must be freely chosen from among alternatives. There must be thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative. The value must be prized and cherished. A value must be performed and become a pattern of life. True values will be acted on repeatedly and will enhance a person’s total growth.

**Values Clarification**

The following will help to clarify our values:

1. Lasting values must be freely chosen.
2. Values must be chosen from among alternatives.
3. There must be thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative.
4. The value must be prized and cherished if it is to be accepted.
5. Individuals must be willing to publicly proclaim their values and they must become a pattern of life.
6. Individuals must be willing to do something with the choice, or act on our values.
7. True values will be acted on repeatedly.
8. A value enhances an individual’s total growth.
9. Values are beliefs, not facts.
10. Values are enduring, not transient.
11. Values provide guidance with respect to two aspects of our lives…our mode of conduct (personal behavior) and our desired end-state of existence (personal goals).
12. “Terminal values” represent ends toward which one is striving (e.g., a sense of accomplishment).
13. “Instrumental values” represent the means that one will employ to achieve the ends.
14. A unified value system is one in which the ends and means are consistent and mutually reinforcing.
15. Ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict, usually what is good versus what is right.
16. Individuals need to clarify their values before ethical decisions can be made.

**Changing American Values**

Some of America’s most important [traditional values](#) have remained firm and constant throughout decades of social change (Yankelvich, “How Changes in the Economy are Reshaping American Values):

- Freedom
- Equality of opportunity
- Fairness
- Achievement
- Patriotism
- Democracy
- Belief that America has a special moral status and mission
- Concern for others in the community
- Religion
- Belief that good fortune can happen to anyone at any time

Values that have [declined](#) in importance include:

- Duty
- Social conformity
- Respectability
- Social morality
- Sacrifice
• Conforming to norms of sexual morality
• Work ethic; decreasing tolerance for work that does not provide personal satisfaction

Values that have gained importance include:
• Pluralism; greater acceptance of people’s differences
• Choices and individualism that express one’s inner nature
• Environment
• Technology as a solution to an array of problems
• Family, very broadly redefined
• Husbands and wives sharing responsibility; not living sharply defined roles
• Individual responsibility for one’s own health
• Women’s rights

The following guidelines are based on the ethical belief about the nature of individuals, massage therapists, health, and society as a whole.

**Ethical Guidelines**

1. The massage therapist provides services with respect for human dignity and the individuality of each client.
2. Massage therapists safeguard the client’s right to privacy by judiciously protecting information of a confidential nature.
3. The massage therapist acts to safeguard the client and the public when health and safety are affected by the unethical, incompetent, or illegal practice of any person.
4. The massage therapist maintains competence in the massage field through continuing education.
5. The therapist exercises informed judgment and uses individual competence and qualifications as criteria in seeking consultation, accepting responsibilities, and delegating massage activities to others.
6. The massage therapist acts with high esteem and regard for clients, other professionals, and self.
7. The massage therapist respects the client’s autonomy or self-determination for making informed decisions (informed consent).
8. The massage therapist respects the right to the objective truth, to justice, and to equality.
9. The massage therapist will do no harm and will prevent harm from happening.
10. The massage therapist does not breach sexual boundaries with a client and will strive for a therapeutic relationship with each and every client.

These ethical guidelines provide a realistic guide for massage therapists to follow so that a realistic massage practice may be conducted based on a realistic scope of practice. The scope of practice defines the knowledge base and practice parameters of a profession. Together with ethics, standards of practice, the law, and scope of practice, the massage therapist can draw upon all these aspects of behavior and develop a successful and highly ethical practice. These guidelines are clear and concrete, but ethical dilemmas are not always as direct.

**Ethical Pitfalls**

- Money
- Sex
- Power
Ethical pitfalls can be caused by personal desires and fears. Ethical missteps occur when we want something for ourselves even at the expense of the person for whom we are caring. Missteps such as a favor, touch, sex, our wish to be seen as a healer or merely our desire to do it our way are examples of personal desires. Fears such as we aren’t good enough, fear of touching this person, fear of misusing power are all examples of fear.

Massage therapists must understand our own vulnerabilities and recognize how they affect our interactions with others (self-knowledge). Clients may experience trembling, shaking or orgasmic relief during the session or continuing after the session. Old fears or recognition of childhood abuse will cause the client to enter the period of heightened emotion. Clients will surrender control and become extremely vulnerable. This is when the client needs a safe environment to express these fears and emotions without being judged. Practitioners need openness to accept these emotions and to provide a feeling of safety.

A caution to be observed at this time is that the practitioner must practice only in their areas of expertise and competence. Don’t practice amateur psychology. Refer when necessary to a professional equipped to handle these emotions. Practitioners must be aware of transference and counter-transference. Unusual states of emotion change social rules and confront the belief system. Both changes expand the caregiver relationship and require extra awareness to protect the vulnerable client from transference and counter-transference of the caregiver.

To help others, we must be mentally clear, emotionally tranquil, and physically healthy.

Why do massage therapists need to practice ethics?

- We practice ethics to promote and maintain the welfare of the client. The concreteness of professionalism at times clashes with the ambiguity of ethics. Ethics is defined as the behavior we expect from ourselves and others. It is simply “what is right” in our social, professional, and personal life. Ethics are a system of values and principles adopted by a group, such as massage therapists.
- Conflicts and uncertainties always arise where ethics are concerned.
- Principles that guide professional, ethical behavior include:
  * Respect – esteem and regard for clients, others and ourselves.
  * Client’s Autonomy – freedom to decide and the right of informed consent.
  * Veracity – right to objective truth.
  * Non-maleficence – do no harm and prevent harm from occurring.
  * Beneficence – contribute to the well-being of the client.
  * Confidentiality – respect the privacy of information.
  * Justice – equality.
- Some absolutes of professionalism and ethics include:
  * Professionals do not breech sexual boundaries with clients.
  * Clients are to be referred when skills required are out of scope.
  * Care focused on help, not harm.
  * Clients are to be informed.
- Question yourself.
*Can I handle the power of the position of authority with respect of empowerment for the client?*
*Do I have the knowledge and skills to effectively respond to a particular situation?*
*Am I avoiding a dual or multiple role with the client?*
*Am I maintaining the boundaries of a therapeutic relationship?*
*Am I within the established scope of practice?*
*Am I respecting the scope of practice of others?*
*How do I handle a client who refuses to seek medical intervention when indicated?*
*Do I have the highest good of the client in mind?*
*Am I supporting the highest good as a professional?*
*Are my professional and communication skills effective?*
*Would I want someone else to know what I am doing?*

**Nine Desirable Traits that Every Massage Therapist Should Have**

While ethics deal with the philosophy and study of human conduct, there are other desirable person traits that help to ensure an ethical massage practice. These are:

- Honesty
- Courage
- Intelligence
- Faith
- Hope
- Kindness
- Empathy
- Humility
- Competence

**Unethical Behavior**

While we are personally striving to practice ethically, there are incidences when it is apparent that colleagues are ignoring their ethics. What can a massage therapist do when others are practicing outside the law or outside the ethics of the profession? It is unprofessional for massage therapists to ignore incompetent or unethical colleagues. Offenses occur frequently, not only in massage therapy, but also in other types of health fields. Offenses include:

- substance abuse
- the apparent inability to exercise sound professional judgment
- severe depression, paranoia or other mental disorders
- sexual abuse of clients
- chronic lying
- theft from clients or businesses
- practicing without a license or under false pretenses

One need only watch a few soap operas to know that health professionals encompass all types of people. Typically the knowledge of an actual offense committed against clients or colleagues comes to the attention of colleagues gradually. Your motive for reporting a colleague for
unethical behavior must be to protect clients or even society from the harm that such behavior may cause. Potential whistle blowers must:

a) document carefully
b) maintain due process judiciously
c) provide as much support all around as possible
d) persevere to the completion of the review.

Completion will probably involve the role of several others, such as regulatory board members, professional organizations, supervisors or administrators. Your job in seeing the issue to completion is to work diligently within prescribed processes to enable a positive outcome that is beneficial to everyone involved.

In any perplexing situation it becomes necessary to reflect upon our knowledge and to decide what action may be appropriate. There is a five-step process that anyone faced with ethical dilemma can engage:

1. Gather as much information as possible about the situation.
2. Determine the precise nature of the ethical problem.
3. Decide on the ethics approach that will best get to the heart of the problem.
4. Decide what needs to be done, and how best it can be done (explore a wide range of options).
5. Do it!

**Humanized Care**

The adherence to ethics does not ensure that all ethical dilemmas can be solved by the professional. We need other qualities in our lives to help us become outstanding massage therapists. The massage therapist who develops and cultivates compassion and a respect for each person as an individual will be better equipped to face the difficult moral decisions that may arise, including the unfortunate moment when a mistake occurs.

The adage, “It’s not what you say but how you say it,” is fitting for massage therapists to convey a humanized “I care about you” approach to all clients.

Humanized care as defined by Howard and Strause is care in which clients are consistently treated as:

- inherently worthy of the health professional’s concern.

Furthermore, the client must be treated as:

- a unique and
- irreplaceable human being.

Clients must be enabled to:

- exercise choice and control over their lives
- share in decisions regarding their massage therapy, and
- must be in a reciprocal and not a patronizing relationship with the therapist.

Finally, therapists must exhibit

- empathy and
- warmth towards clients.

The development of moral character will help the professional be ready for the hard times when no answers seem readily available or when confronted with something that is not easy to face. Moral character traits include wisdom, courage, faith, hope, love, honesty,
kindness, reasonableness, empathy and humility. Probably the most highly esteemed trait are those that support the attitude of respect for human dignity. The issues of right and wrong that confront professionals require self-reflection and introspection. Every professional must take some time to be introspective about his or her own feelings about life and morals and their own qualities. By doing so we will better learn how the moral tools of duties, rights, and character traits can help build and sustain that part of the fabric of human society known as the massage professional-client relationship.

Fritz suggests that massage therapists ask themselves the following questions:

1. Can I handle the power of the position of authority I have as a professional from a position of respect and empowerment for the client?
2. Do I have the knowledge and skills to effectively respond to a particular situation?
3. Am I avoiding a dual or multiple roles with the client?
4. Am I maintaining the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship?
5. Am I within the established scope of practice?
6. Am I respecting the scope of practice of other professionals?
7. How do I handle a client who refuses to seek medical intervention when indicated?
8. Do I have the highest good of the client in mind?
9. Is what I am doing supporting the good of the profession?
10. Are my professional and communication skills effective?
11. Would I want anyone else to know what I am doing?

**Eight Client Rights that Help with Ethical Decision Making**

1. The client has the right to informed consent prior to any treatment.
2. The client has the right to know that his medical record and his condition will be kept in confidence.
3. The client has a right to privacy.
4. The client has a right to refuse treatment.
5. The client has a right to be treated with dignity and respect.
6. The client has a right to expect reasonable and competent care.
7. The client has a right to know policies and practices of the massage practice.
8. The client has a right to examine and receive an explanation of his bill.

If the therapist respects these client rights, ethics are respected and both the client and the practitioner are protected.

**Code of Ethics**

The following Code of Ethics was developed by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB):

- Have a sincere commitment to provide the highest quality of care to those who seek their professional service.
- Represent their qualifications honestly, including their educational achievements and professional affiliations, and will provide only those services which they are qualified to perform.
- Accurately inform clients, other health-care practitioners, and the public of the scope and limitations of their discipline.
- Acknowledge the limitations of and contraindications for massage and bodywork and refer clients to appropriate health professionals.
• Provide treatment only when there is reasonable expectation that it will be advantageous for the client.
• Consistently maintain and improve professional knowledge and competence, striving for professional excellence through regular assessment of personal and professional strengths and weaknesses and through continued education training.
• Conduct their business and professional activities with honesty and integrity, and respect the inherent worth of all persons.
• Refuse to unjustly discriminate against clients or other health professionals.
• Safeguard the confidentiality of all client information, unless disclosure is required by law, court order, or is absolutely necessary for the protection of the public.
• Respect the client’s right to treatment with informed and voluntary consent. The NCBTMB practitioner will obtain and record the informed consent of the client, or client’s advocate, before providing treatment. This consent may be written or verbal.
• Respect the client’s right to refuse, modify, or terminate treatment, regardless of prior consent given.
• Provide draping and treatment in a way that ensures the safety, comfort and privacy of the client.
• Exercise the right to refuse to treat any person or part of the body for just and reasonable cause.
• Refrain, under all circumstances, from initiating or engaging in any sexual conduct, sexual activities, or sexualizing behavior involving a client, even if the client attempts to sexualize the relationship.
• Avoid any interest, activity, or influence which might be in conflict with the practitioner’s obligation to act in the best interests of the client or the profession.
• Respect the client’s boundaries with regard to privacy, disclosure, exposure, emotional expression, beliefs, and the client’s reasonable expectations of professional behavior. Practitioners will respect the client’s autonomy.
• Refuse any gifts or benefits which are intended to influence a referral, decision, or treatment that are purely for personal gain and not for the good of the client.
• Follow all policies, procedures, guidelines, regulations, codes, and requirements promulgated by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork.

**Scenarios**

Let us now examine some scenarios that may confront massage therapists. Consider the above questions for each scenario. Also consider the questions in the beginning of this study to help you make ethical decisions.

**Scenario I**

In the book, “Massage: A Career at your Fingertips” (Enterprise Publishing, 1995) Martin Ashley, a lawyer and massage therapist, says request for sex during massage most often comes from men being massaged by women. (Roughly 75% of massage therapists are female.)

In many parts of the U.S., a sexual massage is more common and easier to find than legitimate massage. In some areas, the sexual massage in the yellow pages completely overwhelms the few listings for massage therapists. Millions of men have had sexual
experiences, and continue to have them today. As such, it is understandable that they would have some confusion about what it is you do. That is why you must be:

1) non-judgmental and
2) completely clear in your communications before beginning a massage. If you perceive signs that lead you to believe this client wants sex, ask your client questions to find out if you are right. Mention that he seems to be aroused and ask his feelings about that. If the client’s response tells you his attitude about the arousal is one of enjoyment, terminate the massage immediately. Set clear boundaries, stick to them, and never compromise.

**Scenario II**

According to David Palmer, a former massage school director and author of “The Bodywork Entrepreneur”, 1990, not all massage therapists say no when confronted with sexual advances. In fact, some therapists continue sexual massage and use the lucrative money to pay off mortgages and put themselves or their children through college.

If you are aware of anyone either licensed or unlicensed involved with this behavior, it is prudent for you to follow the steps listed under unethical behavior and become a “whistle blower”. You have a duty and an obligation to report behavior that is outside the law of massage therapy.

Therapists who don’t know how to provide the best care, or their actions go against the goals of the profession of the law must be reported. Failure to do so could be a breach of professional ethics- and may even be illegal.

**Scenario III**

A client who does not speak English well comes in for his first massage. Because he cannot read English well he does not understand the question on your assessment tool regarding contraindications. Therefore, informed consent is not provided.

Ethical decision-making is important when gray areas are encountered, such as when a client does not understand you, has a language barrier, any form of intoxication or prescription drug use that causes the client’s judgment to be altered.

A comprehensive informed consent process is necessary if you will see the client for a series of treatments. If you are seeing the client only once, a short assessment tool can be used to identify any contraindications and written informed consent can be obtained. Failure to obtain informed consent is a breach of ethics.

Most people do not have the specialized knowledge and skills that healthcare professionals possess; therefore, they have little choice but to put their trust in their providers. But such trust is rooted in several assumptions: that providers possess the necessary skills and knowledge, that they’re motivated to combine their expertise with their profession’s goals (relieving suffering, protecting and promoting health), and that professional integrity is unfailling.

Unfortunately, some therapists may not provide the best care or their actions may not be in keeping with the standards of the profession, so they may be practicing outside the ethical boundaries of the profession. For example, therapists may fail to provide information necessary to protect the client's health, they may assume that they know better than a client’s in his best interest, or they may inadvertently mislead or deliberately deceive clients. Informed consent is intended to protect clients from ethical or legal breaches and make formal their right to all relevant information, tailored specifically to them.
**Scenario IV**
A client is referred to you by a neurologist for a series of neuromuscular treatments on his neck. You recently completed massage school and have had no continuing education on NMT. The client is not improving after six treatments, but you convince the client to continue to come for another series.

Failure to refer your client to a more qualified and experienced massage therapist compromises professional ethics. Clients have a right to professional care and self-reflection helps us know and respect our boundaries and abilities. Self-reflection is an exploration of one’s self. It is an attempt to better understand our own values, beliefs and prejudices in order to “control” their influence on patient care. If we know that we lack the knowledge and expertise of treating certain conditions, we must ethically refer these patients to more qualified colleagues.

Professional boundaries provide security, order and safe connections based on individual client need. They are limits that protect the space between a novice or seasoned therapist and a client. Within this therapist-client relationship, there is an imbalance of power. Professional boundaries set the limits that protect the space between the professional’s perception of power and the client’s vulnerability in a therapeutic relationship. The underlying concepts of boundaries are power, choice, and trust.

This power imbalance is not dependent on the education, intelligence or confidence of the client. It originates from the client sharing personal information that is not normally communicated and is not reciprocated. It is a relationship of necessity, not choice. Therapists have close physical contact with their clients and make decisions based on their position, thus making the relationship one-sided.

Ultimately, relationships with clients have the power to heal and to harm. Establishing boundaries enables the therapist to control this power differential. The element of trust is inherent in the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client and is predicated on the therapist’s knowledge, attributes and skills. The client entrusts his care to a professional who has unique knowledge in massage therapy to provide the client’s individual needs. Although vulnerability exists for the client, massage therapists promote trust within the relationship by clearly communicating with clients and displaying professional behaviors.

Know your limitations as a therapist and be able to refer when necessary to sustain ethical standards.

**Scenario V**
Criminal law as well as civil law is relevant to the practice of massage. Medical records are legal documents that can be used by a plaintiff or defendant in court. Massage therapists must possess professional skills such as documentation of professional interaction to substantiate their delivery of care.

A client has been under your care for seven months as a referral from a chiropractor due to a Workman’s Comp claim. Your records are subpoenaed for court, but the entire time you treated the client, you neglected to document appropriately. You frantically try to correct your mistake by falsifying and recreating charts. Many errors are made.

Both common law and legislation provide for protection of workers from hazards at their place of employment, and for compensation if they suffer a work related injury. Your documentation is a professional responsibility and can provide the court with needed
information. Failure to document is unethical practice and can cause legal problems for yourself, your client, and the insurance company.

SCENARIO VI
When it comes to boundaries, scope of practice, confidentiality, and fair business practices, it is helpful to explore these topics with colleagues. This is referred to as group reflection and can help identify practices that have become so routine that they’re no longer seen as problems. Since there are many ethical accidents waiting to happen, it is important to explore your own boundaries and discuss them with other massage therapists- your peers. For example, mixing personal and professional relationships can violate the safe space between practitioner and client. This occurs easily when you cross the line and try to become friends with your client. The relationships may be separate, but your client’s feelings may not be.

A client asks you out for a date and you accept. Things progress smoothly until he reveals to you something about his character and you decide to end the personal relationship. Unfortunately, your client does not want to end the personal relationship and begins to stalk you. This situation has escalated to a legal situation in addition to a moral and ethical dilemma.

Now you have lost a personal and professional relationship because the boundaries were blurred. This is an excellent group reflection discussion. It may have happened to other therapists, and how they handled it may help you in the future. Always check your boundaries. If any “red flags” are appearing in any relationships, pay attention to them. “Red flags” are those signs or gut feelings that tell you that something is not right.

SCENARIO VII
You are in a restaurant and you see your client dining with her husband. You speak to them and bring up the topic of her last massage and ask her when she is coming back for her next massage.

You have violated confidentiality by acknowledging your client as such in public. Your client did not tell you that she is getting bodywork against the spouse’s wishes. Her husband was adamantly against his wife getting massages because he felt that they did not have enough money.

This is a violation of confidentiality, which is a patient right. Each patient is an individual and has a right to confidential care. Failure to do so is a compromise in ethics. This interaction with the husband and wife could have caused unwanted problems between them. Each client has a right to privacy and confidentiality.

SCENARIO VIII
You greet your client with a hug and remark that she has lost weight.

This is a physical barrier infringement. Physical boundary issues are not only about sexual inappropriateness with clients. Before you hug a client, make sure you received spoken or unspoken permission. Some clients see hugging as very personal and feel violated. As far as the comment about the client’s weight, it could backfire by making your client feel self conscious or “conditionally loved”.

There are many other ways in which physical boundaries are put in jeopardy. Some include draping procedures, privacy compromises while dressing or undressing, working in invasive areas (abdomen, anterior neck, groin), smells and aromas, lingering touch, and the use of the therapist’s body during the session (bracing body parts, leaning on sensitive areas, etc.). These are issues you cannot afford to take lightly, since they are
essential considerations for building trust between the client and therapist. There are ethical considerations for crossing personal boundaries—either yours or your client’s.

**SCENARIO IX**
You are working with a new client in the client’s home. No one else is in the home. You feel uncomfortable. What should you do?
You feel that your physical safety is at risk and perhaps your ethics. Close your table and leave the house. Explain to the client that the massage has ended. If you must leave your table in the home, go to your car and call a friend or the police to pick it up for you. Consider developing a policy that you will not work on a client in his home or office when no one else is around. Decide that you will not work on clients who you do not know well or who have not been referred by a known third party. Protect your boundaries and your ethics.

**SCENARIO X**
My friend comes for a weekly massage and we spend more time talking than massaging and I feel guilty about accepting payment.
Once again this is a violation of physical boundaries. The pre-established dynamics of the personal relationship with a friend or relative tends to eclipse the professional relationship. Be more assertive in the treatment room and establish healthy boundaries that help you focus on the job you are doing. Then you can accept payment without guilt and you are giving your client what he is paying for. Your ethics and your boundaries will remain intact.

15 WARNING SIGNS of BOUNDARY COMPROMISES
Boundaries are often unclear. Sometimes we need reminders of what our boundaries are in massage therapy. It is helpful when a respected colleague can participate in group reflection and help you identify practices that may be problems. The following are warning signs of boundary compromises:
1. Accepting unwanted touch or gifts.
3. Neglecting your personal value system.
4. Allowing your client to zap all your energy.
5. Falling in love with your client.
6. Failure to recognize that your boundaries have been crossed.
7. Touching a client without permission (failure to obtain informed consent).
8. Allowing others to make decisions for you.
9. Letting others define who you are or what your goals are.
11. Believing that you can do more than you are educated to do.
12. Believing that your client can anticipate your needs.
13. Allowing your feelings and emotions to get in the way of your massage.
14. Expecting someone to “rescue” you from your troubles.
15. Fear of saying no because you dread the consequences.
16. Failing to establish a professional environment.
17. Your “gut response” tells you something is wrong.
Any of these warning signs tell you that something is not right in the client/therapist relationship. It is the practitioner’s responsibility to address any issues that could jeopardize professional ethics.
As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Character is higher than intellect.”

**Massage Therapy Sexual Issues**

As a professional massage therapist providing services to the public, it is important that you understand your legal rights, obligations and risks while practicing good ethics. The headlines are rampant with incidents of betrayal and unprofessional conduct by persons of authority, power and trust. As a precaution, professionals in all fields must take care to ensure that their clients will never misinterpret their motives or services as being sexually oriented. This is especially true in the case of massage professionals. The physical contact of a massage therapist may be misinterpreted as sexual contact by an inexperienced or uneducated client. To avoid misunderstandings, always educate each client regarding the massage techniques to be used; such as, body part, type of strokes, pressure, possibility of pain, etc. Explain thoroughly the duration of the treatment and the reason for the type of massage to be used. Create a shared goal with the client for the outcome of the session. Reassure your clients that they may accept or reject any suggested technique prior to beginning a session. Urge them to be open in communication with you concerning the massage before, during and after each session. Keep all communication and actions professional.

Some people have a misconception about massage and do not see it as therapeutic. Instead, they see it as sexual. Beware of those clients and refuse to treat them. Prior to all sessions, clearly communicate to your clients the non-sexual nature of the services you provide.

If you provide massage services to minors, always have a consent form signed and insist that the parent be physically present during the session. Once a minor reaches legal age, they have a legal right to file suit against a professional whom they perceive as having had sexual contact with them or whom they may allege caused them physical harm. It is important to be aware of the perceived power differential between a clothed professional and an undressed client receiving massage. Practitioners must be conscious never to exploit a position of perceived power and trust. Clients must feel relaxed to properly respond to massage techniques.

A client’s right of privacy is to be respected at all times. Clients should dress and undress in private. Clients should be given a clear choice as to whether or not they wear articles of clothing during the session. Work is never performed on the genitals or anus of any clients, or on the breasts of female clients. Be careful not to accidentally touch any private body parts.

Only the hands, arms, elbows of the practitioner are to be utilized when giving massage to clients. The therapist’s knee, side of the hip, and lower leg are the only appropriate body parts to be used for bracing. Appropriate draping procedures must always be practiced; only the areas worked on should be exposed. Informed consent must be met with each and every client and a special consent must be signed if any work is performed near the genital area, high on the thigh or abdomen.

If massage therapists respect these sexual issues, there is little room for breach of ethics.

**Precautions**
Even when the massage therapist is committed to an ethical practice, negative incidents can happen. Unfortunately, a common problem faced by many massage therapists, females in particular, is that of unwanted sexual advances from clients. How are these situations handled? The very first thing to consider is personal safety. If the therapist is on an out call, stop the massage immediately and get out. Even if you must leave your table behind, you can always return later accompanied by a friend or the police.

If the therapist has an isolated business location, set up some safety practices. Alert a friend when you will be giving a massage and check in with that person when you are finished. There are documented reports of rapes and assaults committed on practitioners who practice alone in their homes, in the homes of their clients, in hotel rooms, or in isolated clinics.

Always be conscious of your surroundings and have a plan of escape if necessary. If you are giving a massage in a hotel, tell the desk clerk who you are, what room you are going to, and the time that you will be finished.

If an inappropriate advance or comment is made by a client, immediately cease providing services and insist that the client leave immediately. If he refuses to leave, you leave. If your safety is not threatened, insist that you be paid for the entire appointment. Many therapists insist on payment in advance for new clients to eliminate the problem of collecting the fee for the scheduled appointment. However, since rape is a crime of violence and not a crime of passion, you could be setting yourself up for a violent incident if you insist on payment for the session when it is prematurely terminated.

Document these incidents immediately. Get to a safe place and report any incidents to the police. Always carry a cell phone with you for your safety. Use your common sense. Your intuition will tell you when something is wrong. Get out if you need to. As always, let someone know your schedule and where you will be in case of emergency.

Know your clients, get references and verify telephone numbers. Never leave your home phone number for client call backs. Instead use your office number or cell number. Think personal safety and ethics at all times.

**Sex and the Client/Therapist Relationship**

The relationship and boundaries between client and practitioner must be clearly communicated and understood. Massage therapists have a responsibility to maintain the highest level of ethical standards. A number one priority is to be clear on your own sexual issues. Don’t take them into the therapy room. Firm boundaries of appropriate behavior must be maintained, even if a client is being provocative. Flirting and/or sexual contact of any kind is highly unethical and prohibited by the ethics and bylaws of the massage profession. Inappropriate terminology when speaking about body parts is never to be used by the practitioner or tolerated from a client, not is any type of sexual innuendo. If a sexual relationship between a therapist and a client is desired, the professional relationship must be terminated.

All massage therapists must strive to maintain high standards of conduct thus ensuring a safe and comfortable environment and preserving the image and ethics of the massage profession.

**Sexual Harassment and Massage**

Massage therapists are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment cases. Therapists must be constantly on guard to prevent any suspicion of sexual misconduct. Massage
therapists can be accused of sexual harassment even though their intent is purely professional. A strict code of ethics must be respected to prevent any subtle appearance of wrongdoing. For instance, hugging a client after a massage may enhance the client’s perception of the sexual nature of the massage. Experienced therapists are aware that inappropriate bodily contact can open up problems for the therapist as well as the client. It is important for the massage therapist to consider each encounter with clients separately and use introspection to see if any boundaries may be crossed. It is important also to establish a mentor relationship with other therapists and to discuss any situations that do not feel right. Usually if something does not feel right, the professional needs to trust his/her intuition. It helps to discuss these issues with other therapists and learn how they handled similar situations. Remember, our first duty is to do no harm.

**Ethics and Survivors of Abuse**

Some clients may be survivors of sexual and/or physical abuse. These situations impact our ethics and professionalism. Those who have been abused may be more sensitive to physical contact and will have a greater need for trust, respect, safety and comfort. Prying intrusively into a client’s emotional or sexual history or suggesting that they discuss their background is entirely unethical. Remember as massage therapists, we are not counselors.

All clients must feel free to let you know right away if they feel uncomfortable with any part of the massage session. That is why upon informed consent that the therapist inform the client that they should communicate when something does not feel right or that the touch is uncomfortable. Any touch that is perceived to be uncomfortable or threatening to the client must be ceased immediately. Protect the client’s privacy at all times. If the client discloses any emotional or sexual history, the massage therapist must not offer any opinions or analysis. This can be very disconcerting to the therapist who is suddenly confronted with a client's strong emotional response or recollection of past sexual abuse. Such instances are not uncommon, since clients relax during a massage session and often let go of various psychological barriers.

In such instances, massage therapists are **NOT** psychotherapists, psychologists or psychiatrists and are **NOT** equipped with the necessary knowledge and training to treat such clients. There is no place for ego in these situations. Massage therapists must recognize their limitations and refer the client to a qualified professional for treatment. As a massage professional, being supportive and non-judgmental when faced with a client’s strong emotional response during massage may help ensure the client’s safety and stability until qualified help is obtained by the client.

A massage therapist must protect a client’s right to privacy and confidentiality. The only exceptions would be if the life of the client or someone else was in danger or if a client disclosed that they were sexually or physically abusing a child. By law, child abuse must be reported to the appropriate authorities.
Summary

Ethics and professionalism are a life-long journey. Massage therapy is a career path that requires many complex and often perplexing dilemmas or choices regarding client care. Many such choices will impact the massage therapist’s personal, moral, and professional life. In short, it is important for therapists to understand their role as moral and ethical agents within society and within the profession and to trust their own abilities to make sound ethical decisions after personal introspection and an awareness of professionalism and respect for the law and values.

For more information, see CEUonline’s other related programs: Ethics and Boundaries and Ethics: Standards of Care.

There
Is
No
Right
Way
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Do
A
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Thing

References