

## Chapter 8

# SEXUAL BOUNDARIES: PROTECTING OURSELVES

We live in a culture in which massage is sometimes associated with sex. Many people are uneducated about the manual therapies and do not appreciate that we are professionals who work with therapeutic intention. It's distressing but understandable that some of the public might still think that all massage practitioners offer sexual services. How often have we seen massage therapists portrayed in television sitcoms or movies as crossing the line? How often have new acquaintances made sexual innuendoes and jokes about our work? To complicate matters, those who do offer sexual services often bill themselves as practicing massage. The intimacy of our work leaves us open to misunderstandings and false accusations.

### *Protecting Yourself from the Public's Misunderstanding*

Unfortunately, the accusations aren't always false. Somatic practitioners do sometimes cross ethical boundaries about sexual behavior—probably no more than other professionals do, but our profession is particularly vulnerable to being linked with sex. When other practitioners violate sexual boundaries, it can damage not only their own reputations but also those of the professionals in their community. How do we protect ourselves from potential confusion and harm, both from the public and from within our ranks?

### *Mistaken Identity*

Whether you are in private practice or work in a spa or even a medical office, you may not be able to avoid the occasional low moment of someone assuming that you are offering sexual services. If you have your own practice and advertise publicly, you have to be prepared for the occasional inappropriate or offensive questions on the phone. Here's an example:

A colleague was befuddled when a prospective client asked if she provided “a happy ending.” Not having heard this euphemism for sexual

release, she said, “Oh, yes, I like my clients to enjoy their massages.” When he then described what he wanted in plainer language, she was quick to tell him she didn’t offer sexual services and that she wouldn’t work with him if that was what he wanted.

While fielding such questions on the phone can be uncomfortable, dealing in person with a client who expects sex can be annoying and frightening. Although it’s only a remote possibility, this situation could also be dangerous, especially if you work alone.

### *Self-Protection: Working for Others*

While those in private practice are more vulnerable, those who work for someone else also need to be careful in choosing their employers. If you are employed, you want to make sure in the initial interview that your employer has strict policies banning sexually inappropriate behavior by clients and that those policies are made known to all clients. Select an employer you know will back you up if you choose to end a session or choose not to work with a client who has made sexual innuendos or requests.

### *Self-Protection: Private Practice*

There may be no foolproof way to avoid clients who are sexually inappropriate, but there are ways you can lessen their frequency and protect yourself.

#### CHOOSE YOUR CLIENTS WELL

Those in private practice need to take care in choosing their clients. Some female practitioners avoid these problems altogether by limiting their practice to female clients. (Women clients are generally less sexually aggressive than men. They can be seductive, for instance, but aren’t as likely either to expect sexual services or to ask for them.) Some practitioners don’t work with anyone who hasn’t been referred by someone they trust.

#### ADVERTISING AND BUSINESS CARDS

Regardless of your gender, if you advertise or post your business card in a public place, you may attract the wrong kind of client. Be careful when you advertise in a publication. Find out where your ad will be placed. Will it run next to the ads in which “massage” is a code word for sex? Will it show up next to ads for places with dubious names such as Buffy’s Massage and Pleasure Spa? If so, you might want to reconsider advertising in that publication.

It’s also helpful to consider the nature of a publication’s readership. If you live in a big city, running an ad in a smaller, weekly, more trendy newspaper is usually safer than using the daily newspaper or the Yellow Pages. Readers of the

smaller papers are often more attuned to alternative health practices. Wherever you advertise, it's also a good idea to avoid the words "release," "total relaxation," and "full-body massage." These phrases can sound like veiled sexual references. Avoid them too when you're on the phone with prospective clients.

Make sure your business card doesn't send a mixed message. Cards that give no last name, that simply say "Massage by Bill" or "Relaxing Massage by Jennifer," are less professional and may give clients the impression you have something to hide. Since sex workers usually don't give their last names when they advertise, it's important that you provide your full name and credentials (professional association membership, state license number, and so forth) to establish that you're a legitimate massage therapist. Using the term "therapeutic massage" and naming your particular specialty, such as sports massage, are also helpful. To ensure your privacy and professionalism, list your business number, not your personal one.

Since individual sex workers aren't likely to go to the trouble of setting up a legitimate-looking website, having a website and listing it in your advertising also helps establish your work as nonsexual.

#### SCREENING CLIENTS BY PHONE

Clients who are looking for more than just a massage may not always say so in the initial phone call. Before the prevalence of cell phones, it was easier to figure out which prospective clients wanted something else. When I first started out as a massage therapist, there was a type of call that I called "the dreaded phone booth call." When I could hear traffic in the background, I always said I wasn't in. The traffic noise told me that these people were calling from a phone booth, and it seemed too likely that the callers were avoiding calling from their home or office because they thought they were doing something illicit.

Since almost everyone uses cell phones these days, the sound of traffic noise is not unusual anymore; however, there are other red flags that signal the wrong kind of call. If people call on Friday afternoon around 5:00, they may be more likely to be facing a weekend alone and looking for "companionship." Such callers often don't want to make an appointment unless you can see them immediately, within an hour or two. Also, look out for callers who initially don't give their full name or who give no name at all.

Here are some other ways to screen out clients who are calling for the wrong reason:

#### ASK FOR INFORMATION

Ask for callers' full names and callback numbers. If they refuse, don't make the appointment. Also, you can ask about their previous experience with massage. If they've been to a massage therapist you know is legitimate or if they seem to be familiar with professional bodywork, that's a good sign.

### CLARIFY YOUR BOUNDARIES

When in doubt, you can say, “I like to make it clear to all new clients that I offer only a nonsexual, therapeutic massage.” This is not always convincing, however, because sex workers who call themselves masseuses or masseurs will say the same thing in case the caller is from the vice squad.

### TRUST YOUR INTUITION

If you have an uneasy feeling about someone, don’t make the appointment. It is better to lose a session fee than to put yourself in danger.

*If you have an uneasy feeling about someone, don’t make the appointment.*

### *Staying Safe During the Session*

Usually, the worst a client interested in sexual services does is injure your professional dignity and pride. However, in rare cases, massage therapists have been assaulted by such clients. As long as there’s even a slight danger, there’s no need to take risks. Here are some ways to stay safe:

#### WORK IN A SAFE SETTING

Working in an office building is usually safer and appears more professional to prospective clients than working out of your home. Leading a client through your home to where the bedrooms are (and your office now is) can be suggestive to new clients.

Don’t work in an isolated office with clients you don’t know. Don’t schedule new clients late in the day or at times when no one else is around.

#### BE ESPECIALLY CAREFUL ABOUT OUTCALLS

Outcalls require you to go into someone else’s home and be at the mercy of any hidden agendas the client might have. Screen such calls carefully or do outcalls only with people who have been referred by someone you trust.

One male massage therapist related a story of being set up by a female client who wanted to make her boyfriend jealous. During the outcall, the client threw the draping off her chest just as her boyfriend burst through the door. The boyfriend made angry accusations, and the massage therapist fled, unharmed but wiser.

#### SPELL OUT YOUR POLICIES IN WRITING

As part of their intake process, some massage therapists ask new clients to sign an agreement stating that the practitioner has the right to terminate a session if the client speaks or acts inappropriately. The clearer you can make it from the beginning that this is a nonsexual massage, the easier it will be for you to avoid inappropriate requests.

### *Educating Clients: Setting Limits*

No matter whether you are in private practice or work for an employer, you need to know how to set limits with a client who asks for sexual services. There is no set way to respond when a client on the table asks you for something that is inappropriate. It depends on your own comfort level, how safe the setting is, and your history with the client. When a client misunderstands what you are offering, you don't need to waste your energy on a fit of righteous indignation. Some clients are simply misinformed; sometimes all you have to do is educate them and set clear limits.

If a client makes an inappropriate sexual suggestion during the session, respond to it immediately. Hesitating will give the client the impression that you may be open to the idea.

- Stop the massage.
- Take your hands off the client's body.
- Address the situation.
- Define your boundaries.

You can say, "I want to make it clear that this is a nonsexual massage and I won't work with anyone who is acting inappropriately." Others, depending on their comfort level, might give a client who has made an inappropriate remark a chance to improve their behavior. Sometimes a client doesn't intend to be offensive; they just don't know better. Of course, if the client is being obviously aggressive—physically stimulating him- or herself or trying to grab you—then you should end the massage, letting them know you are stepping out of the room and that you expect them to put on their clothes and leave. (With such a client, you would want to enlist someone else to wait with you, if possible.)

Also, if you're not sure what the client's intentions are but still feel uncomfortable or threatened by their comments or behavior, trust your feelings and end the session. You can say, "Perhaps you don't mean any harm, but I'm not comfortable working with you any more. I'll wait outside while you get dressed."

Most massage therapists are so grateful when these clients leave that they don't ask for payment. (Others get payment at the start of a session.) Technically, clients may owe the fee for a massage or half a massage, but it's up to you whether to make an issue of it. Of course, if you work for someone else, you need to know their policies about such a situation.

### *Self-Presentation*

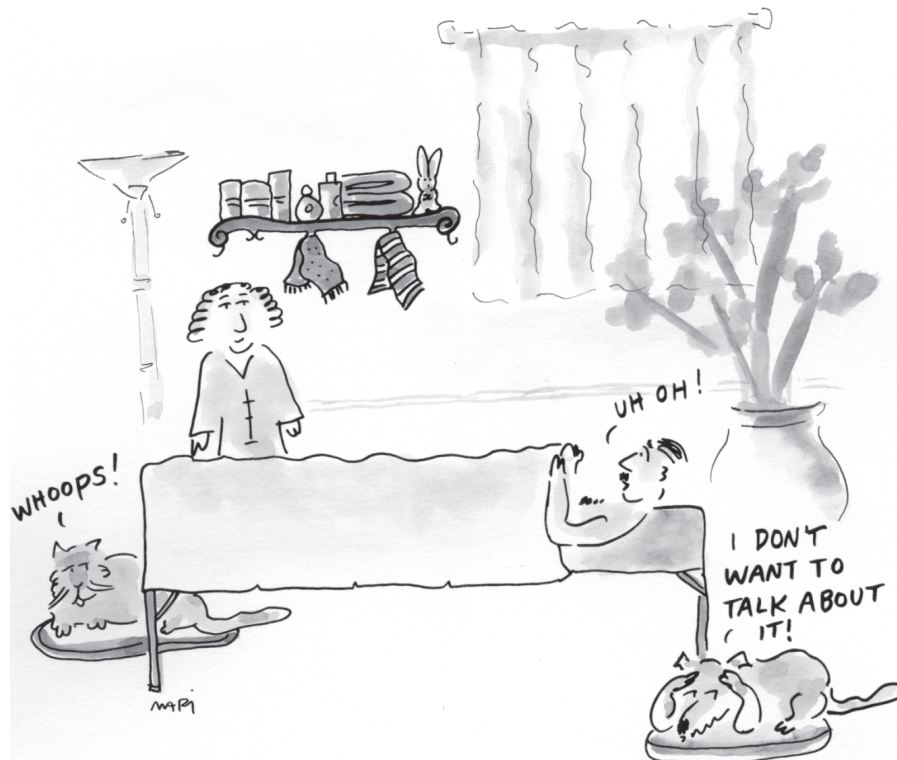
If you're getting a high percentage of calls or office encounters in which the clients think you're offering sex, you need to take a look at how you're presenting yourself. This could be as simple as changing your ads or how you

dress or as complicated as looking at what your intentions really are. You might need to get another perspective—you could ask a mentor or more experienced practitioner for honest feedback.

Perhaps the day will come that when people think of massage, they think only of its many health benefits and the boost it gives to both physical and emotional well-being. Until that time, clear communication in all stages of our contacts with clients can help educate those who need it and protect us from misunderstandings.

### *The Erection Dilemma: Protecting Both Ourselves and Our Clients*

How should a practitioner respond when a client has an erection during the session? Again, it depends on the situation, the client, and your comfort level. Some practitioners wrongly believe that if a man is having an erection, the practitioner must immediately end the massage. There is the misconception that for a man to have an erection, he must be deliberately sexualizing the situation and either mentally or physically stimulating himself. However, the truth is that having an erection can be an innocent accident and just as embarrassing to the client as it may be anxiety-producing for the practitioner.



Erections can occur as a natural physiological response to being touched. One of my teachers in massage school described them as being like “a dog wagging his tail”—an automatic physiological response to pleasure. Men report that they can be floating along enjoying the sensuality of a massage without any sexual thoughts or feelings of attraction to the therapist, and then . . . oops, their enjoyment has become visible. Younger men can have erections, as one therapist put it, “if the wind changes direction,” and certainly from the intimacy of a massage.

When an erection occurs, it can make both the client and the practitioner feel vulnerable. If you respond with unnecessary disapproval and fear, it’s a disservice to an already embarrassed client. Yet you have to guard against the threat of a disrespectful, abusive client. It’s a tricky situation.

Aside from the misconception that a man is in total control over whether he has an erection and that any erection that happens during a session is deliberately caused, there are other common areas of confusion.

Sometimes bodyworkers assume that if a client doesn’t say anything or look uncomfortable, having an erection does not bother him. However, many men say that at such a time, they are embarrassed but decide to keep quiet, hoping the therapist won’t notice. You have to remember that even the possibility of having an erection keeps many men from seeking a professional massage.

Sometimes practitioners think that if a client is aroused or has made sexual remarks or requests, they (the practitioners) have done something wrong to cause the arousal or that they have somehow given the client a mixed message. Massage therapists can feel a sense of shame at such times, as if they have been encouraging the client in some way. That confusion can make practitioners uncertain about how to respond. Especially if you don’t know the client well, the situation can be uncomfortable, awkward, and even scary. (Most massage therapists report that it’s rare in their practice for a man to have an erection. If men are frequently aroused by your work, you want to figure out if you are somehow sending out sexual signals.)

Your goal is to protect yourself, your dignity, and your reputation without humiliating a client who means no harm.

First, make an assessment. Is this a natural physiological response, or is the client deliberately arousing himself? What has been your history with this client? If you have no reason to mistrust a client—for instance, you’ve worked with the client many times before and he’s never tried to cross sexual territory—you might continue working and assume that his response is innocent. However, if this is a new client who has already given you reason to mistrust him or a client who has skirted the edges of decency before, then your choices will be different. Or if you’re not sure what the client’s intentions are, then you have another course of action.

### CLIENTS WHO ARE HAVING A NATURAL, UNINTENTIONAL RESPONSE

What should you do when you notice that your client has an erection and you're pretty certain that it's just a physiological response? Should you ignore it or say something? And if you say something, what should you say and when should you say it? Is it a good idea to talk with new male clients about the possibility that they could have an erection? All of that depends on the client's behavior, your professional relationship with the client, and your assessment of him. Depending on all that, you have these choices:

*Ignore It* Under the theory that what goes up must come down, practitioners often choose to ignore an erection. If the client isn't acting inappropriately, most bodyworkers probably wouldn't interrupt the flow of a massage unless the client says something.

*Work on a More Neutral Part of the Body* You can keep doing what you're doing, move to a less intimate part of the body, or ask the client to turn over. Or if you know, for instance, that having work on his abdomen or thighs gets a client stirred up, you can work with that area earlier in the massage when he's less relaxed. You also have the option of totally avoiding an area the client finds stimulating. However, you don't want to make a practice of limiting the range of your massage simply because of your personal discomfort.

*Clear the Air: Say Something* It's not unusual for practitioners, especially women, to be uncomfortable about dealing with a client having an erection. While men and women practitioners seem to feel equally violated by a client who expects sex and is being offensive, men seem to have more locker-room ease with a client who has an unintentional erection. Regardless of your gender, if you think that silence might be adding to your discomfort or the client's, then it's a good idea to clear the air. You can say something such as, "It's really natural for a man to have an unintentional physical response to massage."

If you think he's embarrassed or he says he is, you can say something such as, "Oh, that happens. Would you be more comfortable if you turned over?" or "Try focusing on your breathing." Speak in a matter-of-fact way and without disapproval.

*Use a Towel* While some suggest that you place a towel over the groin, most think that would only draw attention to the area without communicating a clear message.

### CLIENTS WHO ARE QUESTIONABLE OR OVER THE LINE

If you're either not sure of the client's intentions or pretty sure that his intentions are out of bounds, use the same tactics as for responding to a client who



is sexualizing the situation: Stop the massage and define your boundaries with a statement such as, “I want to be sure that you know that this is a non-sexual massage. I will end the session if you are looking for something else.”

Depending on his response or on your comfort level or your intuition, either state that the massage is over or proceed with caution, letting him know that you will end the massage if he continues being offensive.

### EDUCATION BEFORE THE SESSION

Whether to say something before a session begins is a judgment call made on a case-by-case basis. For instance, it might be helpful to talk with a client if he usually gets erections during the massage. Talk with him before he has taken off his clothes or gotten on the table. You could say, “I noticed you had an erection during the last massage, and I wanted to clear the air and say that I know that erections are usually just a physiological response to touch and it’s not unusual for clients to have them.” If he is a relatively new client, you could add, “Since you’re a new client, I want to make it clear that this isn’t a sexual massage.” A legitimate client shouldn’t be offended and might be relieved.

Of course, if a client expresses concern before the massage about having an erection, then you want to educate him that erections can happen without sexual intent and they aren’t necessarily a cause for concern. A colleague had a humorous way to clarify the boundaries for an elderly client with a twinkle in his eye who asked, “What if I get an erection?” She said, “If you don’t pay any attention to it, I won’t, either.”

Most massage therapists say they don’t bring up the possibility of an erection unless the client mentions it. They think that even saying “You might have an erection” could make a client wonder if you’re sexualizing the situation. Of course, that’s not always the case. For instance, if a white-haired grandmotherly massage therapist talked to an 18-year-old man about what’s normal, he would probably appreciate the reassurance.

### SUPPORT AND SUGGESTIONS

If you still find yourself anxious about a client having an erection even though you know it’s an innocent response, you could talk with colleagues and mentors for support and advice. Unless you limit your practice to women, you will occasionally encounter erections.

This work is intimate, and nowhere is that more evident than with “the erection dilemma.” The potential embarrassments on both sides challenge us to hone our communication and boundary-setting skills. Whether we’re dealing with a major creep or a minor “oops,” we’re called on to use our professional judgment and our common sense. It’s all just part of the job.

## Protecting Ourselves from Ethics Complaints or Legal Charges

Chapter 5 discusses keeping good framework and boundaries as a way to avoid ethics complaints. This section focuses specifically on ethical issues related to sexual complaints. Although maintaining good boundaries and solid framework is always a protection against ethics complaints, some red flags and troublesome situations are unique to sexual issues.

Here are some warnings that may help you make your way through the troublesome situations that can arise:

### *No One Is Immune*

Any practitioner can be complained against by any client. Any practitioner, male or female, gay or straight, can be accused of sexually violating a client. Seductive or careless practitioners are not the only ones accused. Even good-hearted, conscientious practitioners can have clients misread their intentions.

Heterosexual women practitioners can be accused by heterosexual women clients, for instance, as the case below shows. Sexual abuse and violation issues are about power, and they cross all lines of gender and sexual orientation.

The body holds the unconscious, and the unconscious is often primitive and irrational. That's why we have to provide clear boundaries when we do this work.

*Sexual abuse and violation issues are about power, and they cross all lines of gender and sexual orientation.*

A heterosexual female practitioner was working around a female client's sacrum and was suddenly accused by the client of violating her anally. The practitioner was horrified and immediately removed her hands from the client. She worked the rest of the session to calm the client's concerns, but the client never seemed to regain trust in her and stopped coming for sessions.

In retrospect, the practitioner realized she might have avoided the misunderstanding if she'd taken more care. She was doing deep emotionally oriented work, and she knew this client was fragile and confused about boundaries. There are a number of ways she most likely could have avoided the misunderstanding: (1) by asking the client to leave on her underwear or by working on top of the draping, (2) by getting the informed consent of the client (during the session she could have explained where she wanted to work and the purpose of working in that area and then asked the client's permission), or (3) by postponing the work. If she thought the client was too deep into an altered state to give informed consent at that point, she could have not worked in that area for that session. Then, at the next session, before the client was on the table, she could explain the possible need to work in that area and ask for the client's consent.

No one is immune to being misunderstood by a client. However, if you consistently attend to framework and boundaries, you'll be more likely to head off trouble from the start.

### *Some Are at Greater Risk*

Although anyone can be complained against, if you are in a group that is generally perceived as sexually aggressive, whether or not that perception is accurate, you may be more likely to be complained about or sued. Since most complaints are by female clients against male practitioners, men, as a whole, are more at risk. In conservative parts of the country, minority men can be even further at risk, as can homosexual practitioners. All of us who touch people need to be cautious about sexual boundaries, but practitioners in those groups should be extra careful.

### *Seductive Clients Call for Proper Boundaries*

There are instances of seductive clients causing problems for male bodyworkers. All of the instances I've heard about involve female clients and male practitioners, but the situation could arise between a male client and a female practitioner or between a client and a practitioner of the same gender.

A male massage school teacher allowed a female client, who had recently been a student in his class, to seduce him. He described that she had "an exquisite sense" of how to connect with him and make him feel special. He said, "She made me feel that making love to her was a heroic and generous act."

But her unbalanced nature soon showed when she began to talk publicly about their sexual relationship as though she had been an unwilling victim. Her stories damaged the teacher's reputation.

Although in this instance, the practitioner did violate his client's sexual boundaries, even practitioners who don't violate boundaries can be falsely accused.

A male bodyworker described narrowly escaping a disaster when a client pleaded with him to have sex with her. She gave him assurances that she wasn't the type to get attached. When he still refused, she retaliated: She went to the police to check the legalities of his license, and she called his landlord and reported he was having wild orgies. None of these actions caused him permanent damage, but he was glad that he had been firm in his refusal.

How do you guard against such emotionally disturbed clients? What are the warning signs? Sometimes you can tell by the feelings these clients bring up in you. One red flag is feeling the need to rescue the client. The bodyworkers in these stories reported feeling that they were, as one put it, “nobly responding to the true needs of the client” by becoming intimate. He said, “I thought of my client as an extraordinarily sensitive being who only needed support and recognition to realize her full potential.”

When you feel like a noble rescuer, you may be responding to the client’s deep need to be saved. This kind of intense transference from a client is highly volatile and can, as the stories show, quickly change to disappointment and rage.

Another warning sign is a feeling of specialness—that either the client or you are special and do not have to stay within normal boundaries. Some mentally unbalanced clients are experts at making practitioners feel special. They know just the right buttons to push.

The intensity of the feelings of specialness goes beyond normal transference. If a client makes you feel unusually attractive, competent, or sensitive and is suggesting that the two of you become lovers, or if you have started thinking about that possibility, you are in a dangerous situation.

Your countertransference in these cases can feel as if a spell has been cast over you. You can break the spell by getting a good dose of reality from a grounded professional you trust. And you can also remember this: There’s never a good reason to have sex with a client or student or even a recent ex-client or ex-student.

Getting a consultation from a trained mental health professional can help you understand the dynamics of the situation. Seductive clients, for instance, do not always want you to be their lover; they’re telling you how they habitually deal with power in relationships. They’re telling you how they usually get into trouble in their lives or how they get attention. A consultant can help you protect yourself and the client by not playing into the client’s unhealthy patterns.

### *Be Aware of the “Nice Guy” Blind Spot*

As well as being aware of clients who may play on our vulnerabilities, we have to be aware of our own blind spots. Many of us don’t fully appreciate all the effects of transference; however, the danger is greater for male practitioners who don’t have a good enough grasp of this dynamic. If these practitioners don’t fully realize the power of women’s unconscious attitudes about men and the possible memories of sexual abuse that women may bring to the table, they can be stepping into trouble. Some men may think that because they are “nice guys” or happily married, female clients will somehow automatically feel comfortable with them.

Charles Wiltsie, a massage therapist who conducts ethics classes for male practitioners, says that many men do not understand that the possibility of inappropriate touch and behavior can be quite frightening to many women. Male practitioners, he feels, don't sufficiently understand that for women clients, "The smallest error or slip of a hand can change a relaxing experience into a nightmare." (Wiltsie CW. *Uniquely male: ethics in massage therapy*. *Massage and Bodywork*. 1999;April/May:46.)

Similarly, the take-charge behavior that is expected of men in many situations may not serve them well as manual therapists. Here's an example:

A male massage therapy student was partnered with a female student to learn the techniques for back work. When he began working, he un-snapped her bra without asking her. A teacher noticed both what he'd done and the woman's startled reaction. When the male student was asked to explain his actions, he said, "I thought it would be easier for me to get to her back muscles without the bra in the way."

It's understandable for a student to be focused on learning technique, but goal-oriented behavior isn't necessarily helpful in manual therapists. As practitioners, men are safer from misunderstandings if they let the client run the show. Clients need to know they are in charge of what happens, especially when the gender dynamics involve a male practitioner and a female client. In this case, for example, the student could have asked permission to unhook the woman's bra, explaining the therapeutic reason for it.

We want to guard against the kind of behavior that could be misunderstood or that could cause us trouble, either the relatively minor trouble of losing a client or the major trouble of a complaint or lawsuit against us.

## Protecting the Profession

There are people in every profession who use their roles to take advantage of clients sexually, and ours is no exception. To protect the profession, we need to distinguish between the well-intentioned practitioner who stumbles into a destructive situation or makes a mistake in judgment and the practitioner who habitually seduces clients or violates their sexual boundaries and who is indifferent to the emotional damage he causes. This practitioner is considered a predator and is the most damaging to clients and the reputation of the profession.

### *Predatory Behavior*

Predators are practitioners who deliberately misuse the power of transference to take advantage of their clients sexually. They may date clients, misusing

the affection and attachment that some clients feel toward them. Or they may be sexually inappropriate during a session—taking advantage of the client’s trust, altered state, and reluctance to question their actions.

Predators who cross boundaries during a session generally follow a pattern. They start by being friendly and gaining the client’s trust, then during the session, they “accidentally” touch the client’s genitals or a woman’s breast. If the client says nothing, the practitioner continues, gradually touching the client with more sexual intent. Clients often report feeling confused by this but fear they will insult the therapist if they question him. To add to the confusion, sometimes the practitioner has been referred by the client’s friends, who spoke well of him. Clients may find it hard to believe the “friendly” practitioner is doing something inappropriate. In some instances, a client’s confusion and passivity are related to a history of sexual abuse. This experience can be psychologically harmful to any client, but especially those who have suffered childhood abuse.

In other cases, the client participates, flirting with the practitioner and even consenting to sexual behavior. However, even if the client has appeared to give consent, the practitioner has committed a serious breach of ethics.

Over the years, our profession has become increasingly sensitive to sexual harassment and misuse of power. We have become increasingly aware of the damage that can be done by crossing these boundaries. We have come to understand that seductiveness isn’t about sex and affection; it’s about dominance and aggression. Practitioners involved in habitual predatory behavior are often sociopaths who have no concern about the harm done to others.

Later, when not in an altered state or in the presence of the engaging predator, victimized clients often begin to question the practitioner’s actions. However, even when they realize they have been violated, they may be reluctant to make a complaint against the practitioner, not realizing that they are not the first and won’t be the last to be mistreated by the predator. Also, they may find it hard to explain why they didn’t protest at the time.

### *No Witch Hunts*

Habitual predators do great harm to clients and to the reputation of the profession. It’s in the interest of the profession to find ways to expose them and shut them down. However, I’m not advocating witch hunts. You don’t want to be quick to point the finger, jump into lawsuits, or drag people’s names through the mud for little or no reason. There’s no healing in such actions.

Be very careful about making accusations. Spreading rumors and unsubstantiated gossip can harm the reputation of an innocent person, affecting that person’s livelihood. Aside from being unkind and unethical, it can make you vulnerable to slander suits from the accused.



### *Dealing with Rumors of Sexual Misbehavior*

As noted before, there are generally two different kinds of practitioners who are sexually inappropriate with clients: the well-intentioned practitioner who is momentarily off-balance and has made a bad judgment and the uncaring, habitual predator. It's important that colleagues, licensing boards, and boards of ethics recognize the difference and not be unnecessarily harsh with the well-meaning practitioner or too easy on the predator.

The main way you tell these two kinds of practitioner apart is by their histories and reputations. Even if a predator is recently graduated, he will often have been inappropriate in school. Another way to distinguish them is by how they react to being confronted. Approached in a diplomatic way, a well-meaning practitioner will usually be reasonable and even repentant, whereas predators may not return calls and, if they do, will become angry and vengeful.

Only the victimized clients themselves can file complaints with a licensing or ethics board or with the police. However, other practitioners may become involved out of concern for the reputation of the practitioner or the reputation of the profession. They may want to talk with the practitioner or provide emotional support or advice for clients who are lodging complaints.

### DEALING WITH A PRACTITIONER WHO IS MOMENTARILY OFF-BALANCE

Many practitioners, hearing rumors of a practitioner crossing the line with a client, will choose to ignore it; that's a better response than spreading a story you don't know to be true.

However, if you know the practitioner well enough to be concerned and you believe he or she is usually ethical, you may wish to contact him or her. You can approach the practitioner directly in a manner that shows you haven't yet drawn conclusions. Perhaps you could call or write to the person: "I've heard this about you. I thought you needed to know what is being said so that you can respond to it." While the practitioner may be defensive, many in those circumstances would appreciate hearing the rumors. Unless there is a client who wants your support in filing charges, you would have no more responsibility in this matter.

Should such practitioners come to the attention of an ethics board, they usually need education or counseling and can return to an ethical practice without severe punishment or losing their license.

### *Dealing With Predatory Behavior*

If there are persistent rumors about a practitioner taking sexual advantage of clients, or if a client has come to you for help with making a complaint, you may want to get involved out of concern for the clients and the reputation of the profession. You need to let clients know that taking action against a predator isn't easy. As in other professions, such suits usually involve female clients and male practitioners. Female clients who have been harassed or mistreated sometimes wrongly feel that they colluded with the predator and are ashamed to take action. Also, women who are taken in by predators are frequently already emotionally fragile and may not make good witnesses. The accusers themselves—either the victims or those acting on their behalf—can become the target of either hostility or legal action from the accused or his supporters.

Taking someone to court or filing a complaint is time consuming and emotionally wrenching. However, those pursuing such a complaint are performing a service both for the profession and for future would-be victims of that practitioner.

### *Confusion and Imperfection*

Because of the public's misconceptions, manual therapists have to make an extra effort to combat the public misconception that links our work with sexual services. However, we don't need to go too far in the other direction and have unrealistic expectations of ourselves—for instance, to expect ourselves never to have even fleeting sexual thoughts about our clients. We need to be able to be honest with ourselves and each other about our mistakes and humanness.



The sexual issues related to our work can be potentially problematic for manual therapists, as individual practitioners and as a profession. Misunderstandings, inappropriate behavior, and accusations related to sex are the most damaging to both the practitioner and the profession. How do we lower the risk and keep our work environment safe for ourselves and therapeutic for our clients? We should seek outside professional help when we need more clarity about sexual issues that interfere with our work. We need to have more honest discussion among fellow students and colleagues. And we need to soften our attitudes so that we can allow for imperfection and confusion in ourselves and others, while stopping the behaviors that harm clients.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 If you are a manual therapist or studying to be one, do you have any fears about sexual issues related to this work? What could you do to lessen those fears?
- 2 Imagine how a female practitioner might feel while working with a new male client who appears to be having an erection. What would her concerns be? How might she act? Imagine how a man might feel who finds himself having an erection while he is getting a massage from a woman practitioner he does not know well. What would his concerns be? How might he act?
- 3 Have you ever known of a professional of any kind who was habitually sexually inappropriate or habitually seduced his or her clients? How would you feel about reporting such a person to his or her professional association? What would make you hesitate? What would make you want to go forward?
- 4 How would it feel to have people assume that because you are a man, a homosexual, or a person of color, you might be more sexually aggressive or less trustworthy than other people? What would you do to combat that image? What could you do to not take it personally?
- 5 Do you think you could be easily attracted to a client who acts seductively? Or could you imagine circumstances in your life (being lonely, feeling unsure of yourself because of a recent rejection, and so on) that would make you more vulnerable to such a client? What could you do to keep yourself from acting on such an attraction?