

Sexual Boundaries: Protecting Our Clients

Many of us are led to this work for high-minded reasons. For many, there's a wish to bring greater ease into the lives of others. Some even see this work as a sacred calling, a way to heal the soul and enliven the spirit. But despite the good intentions we bring to our sessions, because we're working closely with the physical body, we can't avoid the murkiness and confusion of sexual issues.

Sometimes clients are sexually attracted to their practitioners. Sometimes practitioners, like any other professional, are attracted to their clients. The intimacy of our work can be confusing to both client and practitioner. We are touching people, often with a tenderness and gentle attentiveness that is almost like a lover's. When the professional boundaries are clear, it can be wonderfully healing for the client. When they aren't, it can be harmful or even disastrous.

The honest pleasure of sensuality is part of the profession, but the dark possibilities of seduction and exploitation are lurking in the background. Whether we are in private practice or work for someone else, how do we keep our sessions safe for our clients and avoid even subtle boundary violations and misunderstandings about sexual boundaries?

To begin with, we need to be able to talk honestly with others about these issues. When there isn't enough dialogue, we don't learn from one another. During the time I spent on our state board, participating in disciplinary hearings of therapists who had been accused of wrong-doing, and during the time I spent doing research for this book, I realized how complex and painful the stories were from both clients and practitioners. I heard of well-meaning and presumably well-trained practitioners who had stumbled into tangled, destructive situations that might have been avoided had they known the warning signs and acted on them.

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- A male massage therapist ends sessions by kissing female clients on the forehead, a seemingly small gesture that could nevertheless be seen as offensive and invasive (and did in fact end with a complaint and disciplinary hearing resulting in sanctions).
- A female practitioner works close to a client's genitals and is accused of sexual harassment.
- A bodyworker who became sexually involved with a client only later sees how harmful the relationship was to the client (and to her, ultimately).

The emotions in these situations run deep for both client and practitioner. Even if falsely accused of violating a client, a practitioner's distress can be long lasting. And because of the power difference between client and practitioner, the effect on the client when sexual boundaries are crossed, whether intentional or not, can be deeply damaging.

Transference, Countertransference, and Sexual Boundaries

It is in the arena of sexual violations, the most potentially destructive of violations, that we see the powerful protection that professional boundaries can provide. Here's where being sensitive to boundaries and to the effects of transference and countertransference really pays off, steering us clear of harmful mistakes.

The situations described in this chapter present examples of how transference and countertransference can cloud our own judgment and that of our clients.

Positive Transference: Crushes

Sometimes a practitioner is bewildered or even put off when a client develops a strong crush on him or her. In Chapter 4, practitioners are warned not to take crushes personally, not to assume that a crush means that the client wants to have a romantic relationship. It's so common for a client to have a crush, and so easily misinterpreted, that it's worthwhile to explore crushes further: how do they happen and how should we handle them?

It's not unusual for people to develop crushes on any professional who works closely with them, especially when the practitioner is kind to them when they feel vulnerable. For example, clients often become attached to their divorce lawyers, and patients often idolize compassionate physicians.

We have to keep in mind the special intimacy of a bodywork session. Clients bring all kinds of tender longings, old hurts, and broken hearts to their sessions. And there we are—the picture of kindness, warmth, and selfless giving. We can seem to be the perfect parent, friend, or confidante they have always wanted. It's easy for clients to “fall in love” with us.

Even though there may be a hint of sexual interest, crushes are usually not the same as grown-up feelings of sexual attraction. These crushes are more similar to the kinds of feelings a third grader has for her favorite teacher or the adoration a young boy might have for the star high-school athlete.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with crushes so that both client and practitioner are protected.

Don't Take It Personally

There's no need to be either dismayed or flattered when a client has an innocent crush on you. You don't want to let your awareness of a client's feelings diminish your warmth and friendliness.



Innocent crushes need to be treated as a sign of the client's trust. The client has judged you to be safe, and you shouldn't make any more of it than that. It can be flattering to have someone wide-eyed over you, hanging on your every word and laughing at your jokes. But you can't let it go to your head. You have to remember that clients have special feelings about you because of the role that you take on,

not because of who you are in everyday life. Do your best to remain centered and respectful with clients who have crushes on you.

If a client's attachment to you is upsetting to you, recognize that the problem lies with your discomfort, not the client's feelings (assuming that the client isn't overstepping boundaries). Talk with a trusted teacher or even a mental health counselor to help turn the experience into a healthy learning, one for both you and your client.

Don't Embarrass the Client

A colleague reports:

- *When I had just graduated from massage therapy school, I was concerned when one of my clients seemed to have a crush on me. I could tell she just adored me. It was kind of flattering, but even though she didn't make any suggestions and I knew that she was happily married, it made me uncomfortable. I wasn't sure whether I should talk to her about it or not, so I talked to my consultant who helps me with problems related to client dynamics. He said not to say anything to her and just to keep focusing on giving her a good massage. That was good advice. Gradually, the crush seemed to dissipate, and we had a solid and warm professional relationship. She was a client for many years.*

As you can see, there was no need for the practitioner to talk with the client about her crush. If he'd mentioned it, she might have felt embarrassed or patronized, which wouldn't have been helpful in resolving her feelings for the practitioner.

Protect Yourself from Inappropriate Clients

There are times when you do need to protect yourself. Don't assume a crush is innocent if a client touches you inappropriately, makes a pass at you, or asks you for a date. You need to set firm limits with such clients. First, make it clear that such behavior isn't appropriate and that you don't date clients. Then, if you feel comfortable continuing the session or continuing to work with this client, you may do so. However, if the client seems disrespectful, you just don't trust them, or you feel uneasy, you can tell them the session is over and that they're not welcome as a client again, and then immediately leave the treatment room.

Take Care with Boundaries

Clients who have crushes sometimes invite their practitioners to socialize with them. What they often want is not the usual give-and-take of a social relationship but a continuation of the therapeutic relationship in which the focus is on them.

Boundary Lessons

When I was attending massage school years ago, there was no dress code at our school and everybody seemed to be pretty casual. One day I traded massage with a male student I had not worked with before. He was face up on the table, and as I was working on his leg at the side of the table, bending forward, and he said "Nice boobs." I took my hands off him and said "That is totally inappropriate!" He said "I know it is, and I didn't mean anything by it. The fact is, when you're bent over me, I'm getting a clear view. I just wanted to point that out, because you need to be careful when you're working on clients." I took a look at what I was wearing and realized he was right, even though I had not been attempting to dress "sexy." I started paying closer attention to myself in the mirror every morning, bending forward, making sure I wasn't exposing cleavage. It was a good lesson and I'm grateful it was a fellow student that pointed it out before I got into professional practice.

—A.O., LMT

It's not a good idea to see any clients outside the office setting—this is particularly true of clients with crushes. If you're tempted to do so, be honest with yourself. Are you enjoying the crush? Are you hoping to flirt or take it further? If a client with a crush on you asked you to a party and you showed up, couldn't that give the message that you're interested in the client? You have to respect the vulnerability of your clients by keeping the relationship within professional boundaries.

Positive Countertransference: "Special" Clients

Feeling that one client is exceptional and different from your other clients, finding yourself really looking forward to their appointments, wanting to rush into dating that client, and thinking that others wouldn't understand the "special" feelings the two of you have—all these are warning signs. Intense feelings about clients are generally indications of countertransference. When there is that adolescent sense that the intensity of the attraction or the specialness of the relationship between the two of you justifies breaking the rules, it is a red flag.

Of course, all your clients are special and need to be appreciated for their uniqueness. But being overwhelmed with attraction to a client or intensely identifying with a client is different from having compassion for or even loving your clients. A sense of specialness about a client is a problem when it leads you to treat that client differently from others, when you feel that the client is so special that you don't have to adhere to the usual boundaries when working with him or her. In the therapeutic relationship, this can be traumatizing for both parties, as in the following story told by a colleague:

- *A woman related that during the course of seeing a bodyworker for many months, she developed an intense transference—she was deeply infatuated with her practitioner. She also felt that the practitioner was very drawn to her and that the practitioner had lost objectivity. The relationship developed into an inappropriate situation in which, under the guise of therapy, the therapist had touched the client’s breasts and genitals during several sessions. The client ended up feeling emotionally and physically seduced and damaged. Her confused feelings of shame and guilt were so powerful that she didn’t discuss this relationship with anyone, until several years later, when she was able to talk with a counselor about it.*

No matter how seductive the client or how equal you feel the relationship is, practitioners are responsible for keeping good professional boundaries. It’s important to remember that your relationships with clients are never equal and that you can damage your clients if you act on inappropriate feelings. When clients have crushes on you, those feelings can be part of a positive therapeutic experience if boundaries are kept. If you are tempted to take the relationship further, get a consultation from a mental health professional to help you sort out your feelings. If you are at risk of violating boundaries, you need to dismiss the client—*before* you do something wrong.

Dating an Ex-Client

Given the dynamics of transference and countertransference, you can see the problems with dating an ex-client. Is it ever ethical or safe for the client? The answer is, it depends. It depends on the professional relationship, the intensity of the trans-

Remember, our clients are not obligated to adhere to the code of ethics and standards of practice as put forth by the massage board—we are the one who are obligated to adhere to them. The responsibility is on us.

ference, how emotionally stable the client is, how emotionally stable the practitioner is, how long the therapeutic relationship lasted (was it one or two massages or a long-term relationship), and how much time has elapsed since the therapeutic work. The most important questions are whether the transference and countertransference issues are resolved, and that’s a complex issue to gauge, and whether the therapist is remaining in compliance with the law.

The rules of many state boards have requirements about dating clients after ending the professional relationship, usually 6 months to 1 year. Practitioners need to check with the licensing laws in their states and the ethical guidelines of their professional organizations. Of course, if you work for someone else, you need to know your employer’s rules about dating ex-clients.

The reason for delaying social interaction after concluding the professional relationship is to make sure that neither the client nor

the practitioner is still caught up in the rosy glow of transference and countertransference. There needs to be time for reality to set in.

Regardless of what the board rules allow, however, there may be clients that you could never ethically date. There are some circumstances that would make the transference so strong that a sexual relationship would never be appropriate with the client. For instance, if a client has been helped out of great physical or emotional pain by a practitioner, he or she might always see that practitioner as a larger-than-life hero. A practitioner who is able to provide relief from pain when all other methods have failed may always seem like a savior to that client. Also, any circumstances that would make a client look up to a practitioner may help create a relationship in which there can never be equal power—for instance, if a bodyworker is a teacher or is well-known in the community.

However, in some circumstances, dating an ex-client might not bring problems. For example, if a bodyworker is in a health spa and only saw a client once, it is more likely that a strong transference did not develop. Even then, the bodyworker would have to consider how dating an ex-client would affect their reputation and the reputation of the profession.

- *A former client with a crush on his bodyworker asked her for a date. Because she was able to honestly say that she never dates ex-clients, he was able to save face and continue feeling positive about their work together. Suppose the bodyworker had refused him and he knew of other ex-clients she had dated? Suppose she had accepted and had developed a relationship with him, and it had ended in quarrels? Aside from the personal pain on both sides, unhappy ex-clients are not good for public relations, and that's magnified in a small town or rural area.*

You also have to consider that if present clients heard that you were dating an ex-client, it might interfere with their therapeutic relationship with you.

Practitioners of **emotionally-oriented bodywork** that often evokes deep transference should give serious consideration before beginning to date an ex-client. The possibility for taking advantage of a former client's transference is strong. Practitioners of such work are often walking a dangerously thin line between manual therapy and psychotherapy—something that is *not* within our scope of practice. Taking continuing education in such work may be valuable for having more insight into the psychological dynamics of the therapeutic relationship, but it does not mean you have a license to practice counseling or psychology.

Emotionally-oriented bodywork:

It is also called psychologically oriented bodywork: Manual therapy that is based on the idea that physical tension and restriction are related to unconscious patterns of holding that the client has adopted, often early in life, to cope with his or her emotional environment. The practitioner facilitates the client in releasing these holdings for the greater emotional and physical well-being of the client.

In any circumstances, you must take into account the emotional stability of the client. For instance, does the client have solid self-esteem, or are they prone to depression, easily influenced, in crisis, or facing any other situation that would make them emotionally fragile? Some clients may not be able to see themselves as equals with their practitioner.

Whether to date an ex-client isn't a decision to make lightly. Even if you are certain that you're not taking advantage of a client, just by dating an ex-client, you're opening yourself to scrutiny by your colleagues and clients and possibly risking damage to your reputation and that of the profession.

Dual Relationships

You would think that the more someone knows you, the less likely it is that they would misread your intentions. However, the opposite is often true.

Dual relationships can cause problems with sexual boundaries; in such relationships, the boundaries are already blurred. Working with people you know in some other way, doing trades, or working with people who share a community with you may sometimes lead to confusion about sexual boundaries. You would think that the more someone knows you, the less likely it is that they would misread your intentions. However, the opposite is often true.

Here's how the dynamic of transference affected a trade between two colleagues:

- *Sally, a massage therapist who had been sexually abused by her father, agreed to do a trade with Jim for sessions in his form of emotionally-oriented bodywork. As the trade went on, transference factors caused her to unconsciously see Jim as a father figure. At the same time, the bodywork was bringing up memories and feelings about her abuse. To fulfill her side of the trade, she gave Jim a massage every other week. On a deep level, it was confusing to Sally. It was too hard to relate to Jim as both her therapist and a client whose naked body she was touching. For instance, she began to wonder if Jim was sexually interested in her, even though he seemed happily married. Although she discussed her concerns with Jim and believed him when he said he wasn't attracted to her, she realized she was too uncomfortable with the trade and ended it.*

Trades can make it difficult to maintain clear and clean boundaries. Although they can work out well, it usually takes extra effort to make sure they do. Practitioners doing emotionally-oriented work or deep structural work should probably avoid trades for bodywork, especially those that are ongoing. The confusion brought about by transference and countertransference makes such trades potentially problematic.

The same confusion can occur if you are working with someone who is part of a “family” group that you’re in—for instance, you’re both serious students of the same yoga teacher, you’re in the same Buddhist community, or you’re members of the same church. When you’re working with such a person, you need to be alert to the negative transference about “family” that can get projected onto you because of your mutual association with that group; not everyone has good memories of family. Even though whatever group you both belong to may be spiritual and well-intentioned, your client may have buried in their unconscious the idea that “family” means abuse and may associate you with that negative picture.

Secrets

You are headed for trouble any time you are doing something with a client or even having a feeling about a client that you want to keep secret (we are not talking about the client’s confidentiality here) or that you would not share with your colleagues. When you feel that desire for secrecy, the best thing to do is get it out in the open (without violating the client’s confidentiality, of course). As hard as it may seem, share your secret with a teacher or consultant. It could be that there is no reason for you to feel uncomfortable. Or it could be that you need help with the client before the situation turns into an even more difficult problem.

Clients Who Have Been Sexually Abused

As we have seen, transference can lead clients to unconsciously associate us with past authority figures. This transference can be especially charged if a client was sexually abused as a child.

When children are sexually abused, the abuser is often a member of the family—perhaps a father, a mother, or an older relative, or an authority figure they trusted, such as a teacher or priest. Abused children can rightfully feel betrayed: someone who was supposed to be protecting them and taking care of them has taken advantage of them. Sometimes those feelings of betrayal and mistrust linger, usually on an unconscious level, even after the individual becomes an adult. Although it is not true of every individual who was sexually abused, some clients who were abused as children will transfer those feelings of mistrust onto anyone who is a caregiver or an authority figure, which can include massage and bodywork practitioners.

Because of these associations, some clients come to sessions with an underlying (and usually unconscious) distrust of the practitioner and perhaps with the expectation that the practitioner will, at the least, not take good care of them and, at the most, exploit them.

Other kinds of behavior may be seen in clients who have been sexually abused. They may be hyper-alert to signs of danger or seduction and, therefore, more likely to misread a careless word or gesture. They may have a distorted sense of what

appropriate boundaries are: they may be blind to a truly dangerous situation when a therapist is being inappropriate or may even test the practitioner by being seductive themselves.

Interactions with sexually-abused clients can be complicated if the practitioner has also experienced such abuse. Practitioners who have a history of being abused can have the same kinds of distorted perceptions that clients do. They can assume that a client has sexual intentions when he does not, or they can fail to respond adequately when a client actually is being offensive. Practitioners who have been sexually abused may also be unable to see their own seductiveness or inappropriateness with a client. Crossing boundaries may unconsciously feel comfortable and familiar to them.

Here are a couple of examples of what can happen:

- *Before the session begins, a female massage therapist announces to a new male client who has not shown any signs of acting inappropriately that she has pepper spray that she will use if he gets out of line.*
- *A male bodyworker flirts with all his female clients and often accepts social invitations from them. He doesn't initiate the invitations, but justifies it in his own mind with "they asked, so why not?"*

In the first example, the practitioner is being overly self-protective; in the second, the practitioner cannot see the violations he is committing. (Of course, practitioners can overreact or commit violations without having a history of being abused.)

Because of the potential for confusion and missteps, the safest way to avoid making serious errors with clients is to stick to accepted boundaries and provide a stable framework. We may never know what history a client brings to the table, and it is not our place to ask clients whether they have been sexually abused. However, we are safer if we treat *all* clients with the care that we would use if we knew that they were in need of special sensitivity.

Working with Clients Who Have Been Sexually Abused

Statistics on sexual abuse vary. Some say that at least one in three women and one in twelve men have been sexually abused. Because so many people have experienced sexual abuse that you probably cannot avoid working with someone who has, it is a good idea to be educated about how to work with such clients. Also, if you are in private practice and you have a client who is actively dealing with issues of sexual abuse in psychotherapy, you need to contact the client's psychotherapist (with the client's written permission) to make sure that the work you are doing is beneficial to the client. Consulting with that psychotherapist or another mental health professional also is very helpful.

REAL EXPERIENCE

When I was in massage school, I was working in the student clinic with a female client. It had been impressed on the class that male therapists needed to exercise extra diligence when working with female clients, and that some females would not be comfortable having a male therapist. The client was face up on the table, and I asked her if she would like to have her abdominals massaged; I never did that (and still don't, 15 years later) without asking permission. She said yes, so I put a towel drape over her breasts, and started pulling the sheet down from under the towel to expose her abdominal area. I had not even gotten as far as her navel when she loudly screamed "That's far enough!" She yelled so loudly that the clinic supervisor came to the door to see if there was a problem. It almost made me afraid to ask any other clients about abdominal work. I've never had another experience like that—thankfully—but it scared the daylights out of me. We never know what's going on inside someone's head or what will set them off.

—C.A., LMBT

Not every client who has been sexually abused is in need of counseling. However, if you have reason to believe that a client needs to see a psychotherapist—for instance, a regular client seems depressed or self-destructive—you can suggest counseling. While you may provide your regular massage therapy services to such a client, never attempt to delve into a client's sexual abuse issues on your own. Such work takes experience and training. For your own safety—for instance, to avoid being falsely accused of sexual harassment by an overly vigilant client—it's a good idea to seek outside help with the psychological dynamics of the relationship.

All manual therapists need to educate themselves by reading relevant literature and attending workshops on working with clients who have been sexually abused. On rare occasions, such clients have flashbacks during the session: they experience the memory of the abuse as if it is happening in the moment. Education can prepare you to deal with such situations and can help you feel more confident with other signs of sexual abuse.

Most of the effects of sexual abuse that you will encounter are not dramatic. The signs of abuse that you will see most often are usually less obvious. As noted previously, such clients may be more wary and slow to trust. They may seem controlling or demanding. They may have a more difficult time letting go and relaxing. Or they may be seductive. (Of course, not every client who is wary, controlling, tense, or seductive has been abused.)

There are simple ways that you can help sensitive clients feel safer. Of course, these precautions are valuable in working with any client.

Don't Push Clients

If clients seem numb in a particular area, don't push them to feel it. Work somewhere else. If a client shares a memory of abuse but doesn't have a complete picture, don't push him or her to remember it. Remembering an incident of abuse isn't necessary to healing, and it can often be retraumatizing for the client. Leave the treatment of sexual abuse issues to those who have extensive training and experience.

Stay Sympathetic but Objective

If a client tells you about an experience of being sexually abused, be a sympathetic listener but be careful about sharing your opinion or experience. For instance, talking about what a bad person the perpetrator was is not a good idea. If the perpetrator was also someone the client felt close to, he or she may have mixed and confusing feelings about the person, including loyalty or affection.

Make Sure Clients Have a Voice

Because of transference and feelings of dependency, clients often don't speak up when you're making them uncomfortable. This is especially true when the discomfort is around a sexual issue. Even if the client is an acquaintance or a colleague and even if the person is usually assertive in the outside world, once in the role of client, she or he can have a hard time saying no.

- *A successful businesswoman receiving a massage in a spa thought that the practitioner was working too close to her genitals. She didn't think the massage therapist, an older woman, was making sexual advances, but she was still uncomfortable. In the business world, the businesswoman had a diplomatic but straightforward style of dealing with people and gave critical feedback easily. In the role of client, however, she said nothing but never went back to that therapist.*

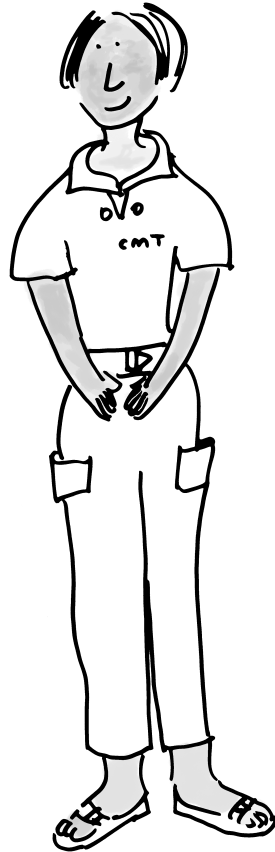
It can help clients voice their feelings if you demonstrate in many ways your interest in hearing how they feel and what they have to say. Be sure to ask clients to let you know if anything you do makes them uncomfortable. Let clients know that they can always ask you to stop, even if they do not have a reason that seems rational (to you) and even if they feel that they are being rude by doing so. Avoid the appearance of dominating a client.

Other Cautions and Red Flags

There are a number of other areas where it makes sense to be cautious and to think of the potential for misinterpretation by a vulnerable client.

Professional Appearance

Short shorts, tank tops, and cleavage are for off-hours. Don't dress as if you're going out on a date to the club or to the beach. You can be comfortable and still look like a reliable professional. Basically, you want to wear clean, neat, loose clothes that don't draw attention to your body.



In some parts of the country, especially small towns and rural areas, a purple Mohawk, visible tattoos and unusual facial rings, such as nose or eyebrow rings, raise other people's eyebrows and make you work harder to convince them that you are safe and professional. Let your work show people how special you are—not your jewelry or body art.

Language

You need to be careful that your language isn't even remotely suggestive or flirtatious. For instance, it's best not to tell clients, "Take off your clothes." That sounds

CONSIDER THIS

Many massage therapists work barefooted. In fact, Ashiatsu practitioners perform massage with their bare feet. The client usually (but not always) knows when they request an Ashiatsu session what it is going to be. However, for those who aren't practicing that, consider how that appears to the client. If you walked into the doctor's office and the physician and nursing staff were in their bare feet, would you have confidence in them, or would you think they were flaky and unprofessional? If you made an appointment with a licensed professional, such as an attorney or accountant, would you have confidence in them if you arrived to find them dressed in short shorts, a tank top, and in their bare feet? One therapist stated in an online forum that she stopped working in her bare feet when she got a client who had a foot fetish. You may not think that people are going to be sexually excited by your feet, but it happens.

like an order, and it is too close to words that would be used in a sexual encounter. Instead, say something such as, "I'll leave the room for a few minutes so that you can get ready for the session. Please undress to your level of comfort and get under the covers face up."

We should keep in mind that people who have never had a massage—and some who have—may not know what clothing to remove, or that they don't have to remove something they feel uncomfortable removing. It is up to us to educate them, and to bear with whatever the client feels comfortable with. I personally had a rodeo cowboy as a client for several years. He wanted his back massaged, and that was it. Even though I discussed with him that his glutes were involved in his back pain, and that the whole body was connected, he was not comfortable with that. He got his massage wearing his Levi's, his cowboy boots, and a huge silver belt buckle. That was what he wanted, so I just worked with it the best I could.

Some women don't want to remove their bra. You should ask if you may unsnap it to work on their back, or pull the straps down to work on their shoulders, and tell them that it's their choice. We should never assume that it's okay and just do it without asking. If a client has left their underwear on, for example, you may say "Is it okay if I tuck the sheet into your underwear and move it down a little so I may work on your lower back?" Most people will be fine with that. If someone is not, don't make them feel uncomfortable about it and just work through their clothing.

Choose your words carefully when you say anything about a client's body. Even saying, "Why do you criticize your body? You look great!" can sound overly personal or suggestive. You might sometimes want to compliment a client who seems to have a negative body image. When clients make unflattering comments about

their bodies, you can say something general such as, “Gosh, women (or just people) are so hard on themselves about how they look.” To be sure you avoid being heard as expressing sexual attraction, however, you’re better off avoiding all comments about how you think the client’s body looks aesthetically. Besides having the potential to be seen as a come-on, making such a remark puts you in the position of being an expert on how bodies should look, which, of course, you’re not. Avoid sounding critical or judgmental, as well. Don’t make comments like “Don’t you regret getting that tattoo?” or “I could never get a hole in my ear like that.”

Draping

Draping is always a good idea. In most regulated states, it is also the law. When in doubt, go for more cover rather than for less. It’s respectful to the client’s privacy and a way to protect yourself from misunderstandings.

You will sometimes get clients who don’t want to be draped. Even if it is not required by law, it can be one of your personal boundaries. You can say “It’s my policy to drape all clients. I’m not comfortable working on undraped people.” Draping is for us, as much as the client. What if you had a client on the table who had the largest breasts you’ve ever seen, or a penis that reaches down to their mid thigh? Are you really going to be able to avoid staring at that? Draping is for the modesty, comfort, and safety of the client—*and for ours*.

REAL EXPERIENCE

I was in a student massage clinic that was being conducted in a big, open classroom many years ago. There were no privacy curtains; the people receiving massage would go into the bathroom, disrobe and wrap in the top sheet, and then come out and get on the table. There were about 25 tables set up with a student and a client at each one. A male student was giving me a massage. I was face up on the table, very relaxed with my eyes closed, when I suddenly felt the sheet sliding off my body, totally exposing me. The student quickly grabbed it and covered me, but he was so mortified, I thought he was going to have a heart attack on the spot. He was wearing a lotion holster, and when he bent over me, it snagged the sheet and pulled it off me. Most of the people in the room were focused on their own massage, and I don’t think many people saw it happen. He later told me that he felt like he was taking a driver’s test and passed a stopped school bus! He had no intent to expose me; it was an accident. But if it had happened in the privacy of the massage room, instead of in a room full of people, his intentions may have been misconstrued.

Disrobing

Clients need to dress and undress in private, and they need to know that they do not have to undress at all if it makes them uncomfortable. Let them know that they can wear a bathing suit or whatever else is suitable—for instance, athletic shorts and a comfortable bra or tank top. If necessary, you can explain how it will limit your ability to work with them if they choose to leave clothes on, but always make sure they know that they will be covered except for whatever body part you will be working with at the time, that it is their decision, and avoid making them feel badly about it.

Locked Doors

The question of whether or not the door was locked has been a crucial point in some court cases in which a practitioner was sued for sexual harassment. Even if a client isn't locked in or could unlock the door, the point has been raised that the client should be able to leave the room quickly and easily. In many situations, a practitioner may want to lock the door to protect the client from unwanted intrusion, such as a stranger wandering into an office by mistake. A cautious way to handle that type of situation is to explain your reasons for wanting to lock the door and give clients the option of it being locked or unlocked. When there are multiple treatment rooms, it's easy to make a mistake and enter the wrong one; I've done it myself in my own office and unintentionally burst in on someone else's session.

Intrusive Work

Some manual therapies can involve intrusive work. If you have good reason to work in an area near a client's genitals, such as the attachments of thigh muscles, near the coccyx, or near a woman's breasts, you can tell the client in a matter-of-fact way what your intentions are and why it would help them. Use terms they can understand—breastbone or tailbone, for instance, instead of sternum or coccyx. Or if you use anatomical terms, make sure they understand where you will be working. "It might be a good idea to work on the muscles around your tailbone because it could be useful to free them up. However, if that makes you uncomfortable, it's fine to skip that area." Having a muscle chart in your room, or an anatomy app that you can show to clients is helpful. Let clients decide if it's all right. Watch to see if it really is okay, or whether they tense up or seem to be trying to act as if it's fine when it really isn't. The safest plan is to let clients know before the session begins that the session might involve intrusive work and get their consent before they are in the more vulnerable state of being on the table. In some jurisdictions, practitioners are required to get prior consent in writing for such work.

CONSIDER THIS

In my own state of North Carolina, massage therapists may perform massage in body cavities below the waist, which was not originally in our rules, but was successfully lobbied for by a medical massage association. It's presently a rare state of affairs, but those associations may successfully lobby other states for the right as time goes by. The rules governing body cavity massage are very strict. The client must have a written prescription or order from a licensed medical doctor for the treatment; the therapist must obtain specific written informed consent stating that work will be performed inside body cavities, and stating whether the client chooses to have a third party of their own choice in the room, or are giving permission to work with only the therapist in the room. As with all informed consent, the client has the right to withdraw that at any time, and should never be made to feel bad about doing so. Bear in mind at all times that internal work requires another whole level of diligence in adhering to professionalism and sensitivity.

Cautious behavior protects both you and your clients. In the altered state that clients enter into, they can get confused about both your intentions and where your hands actually are. Bring those things into their conscious awareness by giving clients specifics.

You may not know what areas are sensitive for a particular client, or what may bring up a particular memory for an abuse victim. If someone was pinned down by her shoulders during abuse, working in that area could bring up the memory, and yet, placing the hands on the anterior shoulders to help them relax toward the table is something that most therapists do in every session. We need to be conscious that any work has the potential to trigger a memory of sexual abuse; we don't have to be near the pelvis or breasts for an unpleasant association to arise. Therefore, you always want to keep an eye out for signs of discomfort from the client, such as their becoming more tense or reporting numbness.

Expressions of Affection

Although it may come from genuine caring, initiating hugs with clients isn't a good idea. Mandatory hugs can be very intrusive for clients. The same is true, only more so, for kissing on the forehead or cheek. We may think that clients would welcome any expressions of affection, but we may be wrong about that. As the client is leaving the session, you can show through your body language that you are available for a hug if the client wants to initiate one (assuming that you are open to it, and there's nothing wrong with you if you aren't) without forcing the issue. Giving clients the choice is another way to respect their boundaries. Again, we need to be aware of maintaining a professional demeanor, without appearing stuffy. If you

don't want to hug a client and you think they're about to initiate it, you extend your hand to shake hands while smiling and saying "Thank you for coming, I'll see you at your next appointment."

Unintentional Touching

When asked about uncomfortable experiences, clients often cite situations in which some part of a practitioner's body other than hands touched them or the practitioner leaned against them. This is usually accidental on the part of the practitioner, but it can be disturbing to the client. One woman reports:

- *In the middle of a massage from a male practitioner, he leaned against my hip with his belly to reach the other side of me, instead of walking around the table. I was so uncomfortable that I had a difficult time relaxing for the rest of the session, wondering whether there would be another incident.*

Not every client will react strongly to unintentional or careless touching. However, some will. You do not want to prop yourself against clients as if they were furniture. Of course, if your technique requires you to touch clients with other parts of your body or to lean against them, the reasons for this intrusiveness should be explained to clients, and their consent must be given.

You also want to be careful about wearing sleeves that dangle and things that could brush against clients. Therapists with longer hair should wear a ponytail or other style to make certain that their hair never touches the client as they're bending over the body. In the open and receptive state induced by bodywork, clients shouldn't have to figure out what is touching them.

The Power of Touch

We cannot ignore sexual issues when learning to work with our clients. Because the sensuality of the tender, healing touch that we offer is often so close to the sensuality of sex, we need to be all the more careful to maintain clear sexual boundaries with clients. The manual therapies are intimate and can bring up issues about sexuality, both for us and for our clients. We are touching unclothed bodies, which many people have only experienced in the context of sex.

This work can be a blessing for people who are starved for safe and respectful touch. However, we're always skirting the edge between the sacred and the profane. It speaks to the goodwill and compassion of practitioners that we so often succeed in keeping the balance on the side of the sacred.

Questions for Reflection

1. Has a manual therapy practitioner or other health-care provider ever said or done something that felt like a violation of your sexual boundaries or that made you uncomfortable? Did you say something to the practitioner, either at the time or later? Did you tell anyone? If this has not happened to you, have you heard of such an incident happening to a friend or colleague? What feelings did that person have about the incident?
2. Have you ever looked up to or had a crush on a practitioner of any kind who worked closely with you? Do you feel that it would have been appropriate if the practitioner had entered into a romantic relationship with you? Why or why not?
3. Is there anything in your history that might help you be more sensitive to issues of sexual boundaries with clients? Is there anything that might get in the way of your being comfortable with setting clear sexual boundaries with clients?
4. Imagine that you're single and run into an ex-client (also single) at a party. There seems to be a mutual attraction that you weren't aware of while you were working with the client. You are thinking of asking this person for a date. As a professional, what concerns would you have in evaluating whether it would be ethical or wise to do so?
5. Have you ever had a professional massage in which the draping wasn't adequate? Were you uncomfortable because of it? If you weren't, could you imagine circumstances in which you would be?

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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 trained 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? When traveling, I've personally

The intimacy of our work leaves us open to misunderstandings and false accusations.

noticed billboard advertising that is truly blatant. There's one advertisement for a "spa" about two hours away from my home that actually has a silhouette of a naked woman on it. I recently saw another one that stated, "Open 24 Hours! Truckers welcome!" No wonder the public still gets that impression of massage. To complicate matters, those who do offer sexual services often bill themselves as practicing massage, since there are only a couple of places in the United

States where prostitution itself is legal. Sex workers can't honestly advertise what they do, so they fall back on using massage as a front for it.

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 ethical 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, or testing the water to see what sort of reaction they get from you. 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.

It's an unfortunate fact that some employers are not sympathetic to practitioners, and just expect them to deal with it without any management support. They don't want to lose business, even that of someone who acts inappropriately.

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. Those who do outcalls and those who practice at home, or in an office where they are alone, should be extra careful. Some female practitioners avoid these problems altogether

REAL EXPERIENCE

I was working in a chiropractic office owned by two chiropractors. Several therapists worked there, and the chiropractors just ignored any complaints from us about sexual behavior. One day I was giving a man a massage, and he made the comment that I had a beautiful body and asked if I would do a house call. I stopped and told him I was a professional therapist and that I do not do anything sexual, and I would appreciate it if he refrained from further comments. He said okay, but a few minutes later, I could see his erection waving around under the sheet. I asked him to turn over, and as soon as he did, he started grinding himself on the table. We weren't allowed to have our own music playing in the treatment rooms; they had music that was piped through the whole building, and at that moment, Marvin Gaye came over the speakers singing "Sexual Healing." If the situation wasn't so pathetic, it would have been funny. I just took my hands off him, told him the massage was over and to get dressed, grabbed my purse, and told the chiropractor on my way out the door that I quit.

—K.M., LMT

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. A lot of businesses and public places have bulletin boards on their premises. While you might post a business card on the bulletin board at your local library or local community college, you might not want to post one in a bar.

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 classifieds in the daily newspaper or Craigslist. Readers of the smaller papers are often more attuned to alternative health practices; it's a good idea to obtain several back issues and check out the advertisements before you

decide to advertise. 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, such as professional association membership, state license number (which is required in most regulated states on any advertising), 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 when possible. Many therapists operate with only a cell phone these days, and don't have a number that is specifically dedicated to business. If that is the case, it's wise to make your voice mail message professional, anyway. Your friends and family will know you're using the same phone for business and personal calls, so leave a message such as "You've reached Laura Allen, Licensed Massage Therapist. Please leave your name and number and I'll return your call."

A quick search on the Internet will reveal that people offering sexual massage often have websites that make it pretty clear what they're doing, although they may not actually say they're offering sex. A picture of the "therapist" wearing lingerie is a pretty good clue!

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 p.m., 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.

CONSIDER THIS

While the majority of us prefer the term “massage therapist,” I have visited places where there is no stigma at all attached to the terms “masseur” and “masseuse.” In fact, online dictionaries define those terms as “one who gives professional massage,” “one who practices massage and physiotherapy,” and so forth, and has no sexual references.

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.

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. You may always say you are fully booked, or you are not currently accepting new clients.

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.

Massage therapists, especially those who are just starting out and working alone, are faced with striking a balance between trying to build their business, and keeping their own safety in mind. While you may not want to turn down business, you're always taking a chance if you work alone in an isolated office or home with clients you don't know. If you choose to work alone, it's best to choose office space in a location where other businesses or professional offices are around. A few safety measures that can be taken:

- Avoid scheduling new clients late in the day when someone with sexual intentions might assume that no one else will be coming in.
- Keep your car key and your phone (volume off, of course) on your person in case you feel threatened and need to make a quick escape. Nothing in your office (or in someone's home, as mentioned later about outcalls) is worth your safety. Leave it and you can come back with another person (the police, if there was any actual inappropriate touching on the part of the client or grabbing you involved—that's considered assault) in tow.
- Remember that an intake interview not only serves the purpose of gathering pertinent information about the client, it serves for client and therapist to establish rapport. If someone makes you suspicious about their intentions during the intake interview, reiterate to them that you only practice therapeutic massage; remember that we have the right of refusal as well as the client, and you don't have to let them on the table.

Be Especially Careful About Outcalls

Outcalls require you to go into someone else's home, office, hotel room or other location, 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.*

When going on an outcall, call a friend or family member when you arrive. Let them know the address where you are, and what time you will check back in with them. Always have someone who can check on you if they don't hear from you by a certain time, even if you have to pay for the service. Answering services will often provide such a service as reminder calls. If you are doing outcalls in a hotel, stop at the front desk and tell them what room you are going to and when you should be down.

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 and take a step back from the table.
- 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 his or her behavior. Sometimes a client doesn't intend to be offensive; he or she just doesn'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 him or her know you are stepping out of the room and that you expect the person to put on his or her 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 anymore. 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.

Boundary Lessons

It was stressed in my class in massage school to acknowledge any sexual overtures immediately, whether it's a comment or anything else inappropriate. I was nervous the first time it happened to me, but I remembered the lesson: if you don't address it immediately, you have just given the client permission to carry on with whatever inappropriate behavior he or she was committing. In spite of all efforts to exhibit professional behavior, there are still people who will test your boundaries. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, I always remember that lesson and speak up right then to let them know it won't be tolerated. One warning, and then they're out.

—J.E., LMT

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.

This has become much more of an issue since social media became popular. If you identify yourself as a massage therapist on your social media, beware of the image you're putting out there. If you're casual about your privacy settings, you should assume that anyone in the world may see the pictures of you lounging by the pool in a barely-there bikini and a pina colada in hand. There are plenty of people who troll the Internet just looking for opportunities.

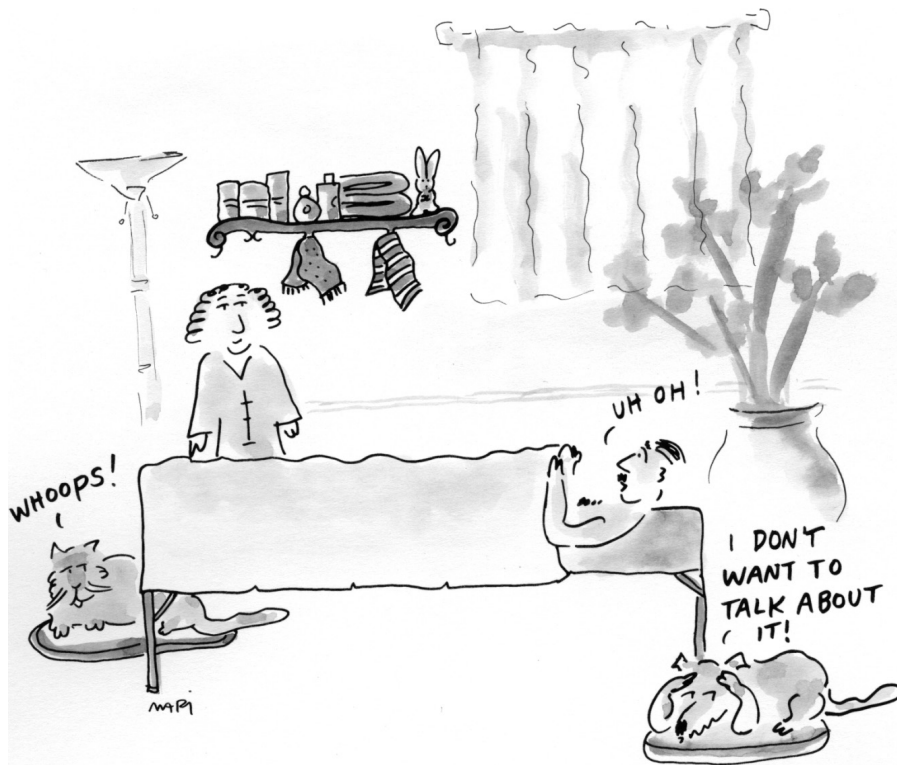
Perhaps the day will come that when people think of massage, they think only of its many health benefits and the boost it gives to both physical and emotional well-being. Until that time, clear communication in all stages of our contacts with clients can help educate those who need it and protect us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

CONSIDER THIS

If a client gets an erection and doesn't acknowledge it at all or say or do anything inappropriate, or if he acknowledges it in embarrassment, or if he is sleepy and relaxed at the time, there's no need to get upset over that. Be cautious about jumping to the wrong conclusion and accusing someone of sexual behavior just because an erection occurs.



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 clients (of either sex) 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

REAL EXPERIENCE

My wife and I attended massage school together. One day while we were still students, I was giving her a massage, and she calmly said "Your penis is on my arm." I stepped back and said "What??" She said, "It's okay, it's *me*, but you weren't even aware of it. The way you were leaning over me, your crotch was right on my arm." She was right—I wasn't even aware of it—I was focused on the massage. I started right then making an effort to be totally conscious about my own body mechanics when doing massage. A client could easily misinterpret your intentions if you're not careful!

—C.A., LMBT

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 is 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 working 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 natural 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 sometimes. 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. 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 they 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 nonsexual massage. I will end the session if you are looking for something else.”

Depending on the response or on your comfort level or your intuition, either state that the massage is over or proceed with caution, letting them know that you will end the massage if they continue 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.” I once personally had an elderly client who signed the section on the intake form relating to inappropriate comments or behavior, and he said “You don’t have to worry about me. I’ve got ED (erectile dysfunction)!”

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.

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

Practitioners can be accused by clients of the same sex, 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.

- *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. 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.

CONSIDER THIS

It should never be assumed that only male clients make sexual overtures to massage therapists. Many male therapists have reported being flirted with and openly propositioned by clients; it's happened to the male therapists who have worked in my own office. The burden is on us all, no matter our gender or sexual orientation, to keep our own sexual desires out of the massage room. If you're a therapist who has been lonely and seeking a relationship or missing sex, for example, the thought of "Why not?" when propositioned by someone may pop into your head. Banish that immediately. A few minutes of fun and/or gratification is not worth the possible consequences of loss of reputation, loss of license, or worse, should the word get out.

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. The situation could arise between a client and a practitioner of opposite genders or between a client and a practitioner of the same gender.

CONSIDER THIS

After licensing was implemented in my state, males practitioners were accused the very first year. Our board was in existence for 10 years before a male accused a female therapist of sexual impropriety. In reality, there were probably more instances where it happened, but men are much less likely to come forward to complain about a woman doing something inappropriate.

- *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.*

In this instance, the practitioner did violate his client’s sexual boundaries; it was unethical to have sex with a client and further poor judgment to have a sexual relationship with a recent student, but even practitioners who don’t violate any 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

REAL EXPERIENCE

I had an appointment with a new female client. She was a voluptuous woman, attractive and personable, and gave no clue while we were in the lobby that she was seeking anything other than therapeutic massage. She stated during the intake that her back bothered her a lot.

I escorted her to the treatment room and left her to get undressed, telling her I would start the massage face up. I had just begun the massage, and had my hands on her head, when she pulled the cover down and exposed her very large breasts. She put her hands on them and pushed them up and said, "Carrying this load around is why my back hurts!" I was shocked, but I quickly recovered, stood up so I could look her in the eye, and pulled the draping up over her. I said "Ma'am, draping is required here and I will have to ask you not to expose yourself again." She apologized, and I carried on with the massage. I don't know what kind of reaction she was expecting, but I don't think that was it.

—W.C., CMT

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, and in nearly every regulated state, it's against the law for a specified period of time.

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, which is simply not true.

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 unsnapped 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." He didn't have any inappropriate intent, but it was a thoughtless action, and the client doesn't realize that without clear communication. The next time the situation occurred, he remembered to ask permission.*

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 should have asked permission to unhook the woman's bra, explaining the therapeutic reason for it. We can note that many female students—and therapists—have done the same thing with no ill intentions, but it's still a violation of the client's boundaries.

It's not fair, but it's a fact, that male massage therapists have their own set of problems to contend with. That may be why about 80% of therapists are female. There are a certain amount of females who don't feel comfortable with a male therapist, and that's not always related to any past issues of sexual abuse. Sometimes it may be a body image issue, or just plain modesty in front of members of the opposite sex. Then there are women who wouldn't mind at all getting a massage from a male, but their spouse objects to it because they have the "I don't want another man putting their hands on my woman" mentality. And then there are homophobic males who don't want another male touching them in an intimate manner. While female therapists may have to deal with the occasional sexual overture, male therapists come to the table with ready-made obstacles through no fault of their own.

We want to *all* be especially careful 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 filed against us with the massage board, a lawsuit, or even an accusation of sexual assault resulting in an arrest.

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. Unfortunately, there are some predators out there who figure the massage profession would be a good environment to meet new victims.

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. The responsibility of ethical professional behavior is not on the client—it’s on us.

The responsibility of ethical professional behavior is not on the client—it’s on us.

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. Like many victims of sexual assault, they may not even want to tell a friend or family member, much less go to the police or message board, in fear that it will become a public matter. Feeling violated seems twice as bad when the victim has to be publicly exposed.

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. If a person has actually been arrested, tried, and convicted, or had his or her license taken away, that is a matter of public record. Until that point in time, it is gossip/hearsay and harmful to his or her reputation. From my time on our state board sitting in on disciplinary hearings, I can truthfully state that not every person who gets accused is guilty.



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 practitioners 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.

There is the caveat that sometimes, predators may get away with their behavior for a long time with no accusations and no loss of reputation. Just like many rapes go unreported to law enforcement because of shame or fear that the victim is carrying around, some people who are assaulted by their massage therapist don't come forward, either. Sometimes, seeing that another person has come forward with a complaint results in others doing the same.

I was once asked to be an expert witness in the trial of a male therapist accused by a woman of sexually assaulting her. At the first trial, the accused person had about a half-dozen long-standing clients, most of them women, show up to be character witnesses for him. The proceedings had just started when the prosecutor asked for a continuance because he had received other complaints accusing the man, who had been practicing for many years. When the second trial was convened, the accused man's defense attorney came into the hallway within minutes and advised him to accept a plea bargain, because the prosecutor had produced 10 more women who claimed they had also been assaulted by the therapist. In another instance, after the license of a therapist was taken at a disciplinary hearing, the board received numerous letters from women saying things along the line of "Thank God this man was finally punished. He assaulted me years ago." If no one comes forward, then the predator may carry on unchecked for years.

If a client tells you that another therapist assaulted him or her, gently encourage the person to come forward and file a complaint, even if it happened years ago. It's not our job to add to someone's feelings of guilt, shame, or embarrassment, but a gentle reminder that if no one complains, the person is still out there preying on others might be the encouragement they need to come forward.

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. In most instances, if it is a minor infraction, the therapist is ordered to attend additional hours of continuing education in ethics, pay a fine, and sometimes have a temporary suspension of his or her 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 with the massage board is time-consuming and emotionally wrenching. The majority of massage boards do not take action on anonymous complaints, which is a double-edged sword. Like a court of law, the underlying principle there is that an accused person has the right to face their accuser; the downside is that many people won't come forward, so a predator may get away with illegal and devastating behavior if no one is willing to come forward. 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?

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Financial Boundaries: Getting Comfortable with Money

Many practitioners in our profession are uneasy about the financial side of our work. Many of us come to this work without formal training in business or a business background. We spend much of our time in school learning our trade, not learning how to deal with money and fees. However, making sure the financial part of our relationship with clients is handled with clarity and grace is an important way that we set safe boundaries for our clients and ourselves.

We may think of the business side of the professional relationship as an unpleasant bit of reality that we tack on to the “true” relationship, the hands-on aspect of our work. But charging a fee (or whatever we ask in return for our work) is actually central to the therapeutic relationship. For the professional relationship to feel safe to clients, they need to know what we expect of them and they need to trust that we will be fair. Also, for the relationship to feel right to us, we need to feel that we are receiving adequate compensation.

This chapter discusses personal issues and attitudes practitioners can have about charging fees that may get in the way of creating effective financial transactions. It is primarily concerned with choices based on individual preference rather than on questions of business ethics.

CONSIDER THIS

Many massage therapists graduate from school with debt from student loans to repay. Many also enter with the “I just want to help people” attitude. That’s a noble attitude, but it’s hard to help others when you are worried about how to pay your rent or your car payment. Having clear financial policies, rather than alienating clients, will actually make your boundaries in this area clear to them, and help safeguard your own financial prosperity.

It is also primarily aimed at those who have or want to have a private practice. Of course, those who work for others have concerns about financial compensation as well. If you choose to work for someone else, your main task is to make sure the financial arrangements are fair to you before you start employment. For instance, you would want to know whether you are paid if a client cancels at the last minute, how much you are paid for downtime, how you will receive your tips, or what else you might be required to do, such as cleaning or laundry. A good book on business practices would be useful.

From Caring One to Cashier: Money Awkwardness

Some of us may feel awkward going from being the one who is compassionate when a client is on the table to being the one who asks for money at the end of the session.

- *You've just finished a session during which you felt touched by a client's revelation of the pain he feels in his life, and you're feeling compassionate toward him. As he gets ready to pay, he says, "Oh, do you mind if I postdate this check for next week?" or "Gee, I forgot my checkbook. Mind if I pay you next time?" How do you then say, "I prefer that you pay me at the end of each session," without feeling callous? It might seem easier to say, "Oh, sure . . . that's fine," even if it really isn't fine.*

Caring about clients and expecting something in return from them are two different aspects of our relationship with our clients, and we may feel uncomfortable making the transition between the two. Medical doctors and other practitioners who do volume business resolve the conflict by having another person, an office manager or a receptionist, handle the finances. If you work for someone else, your employer generally has office staff that takes care of the business end. But those who are in private practice are stuck with the dilemma of sliding back and forth between being the caring one and the cashier.

Perhaps we even feel a little guilty about setting fees. A bodyworker said recently, "I'm not in this for the money. This work is like a calling for me." For those with that attitude, there's often an accompanying sentiment that it's somehow crass to care about making money. While there's nothing wrong with wanting to make the world a better, there's also nothing wrong with being paid adequately for our work. Part of what being a professional means, after all, is that this is how we pay the rent. Charging appropriate fees tells clients that we respect ourselves and are serious about our work.

For practitioners who are uncomfortable because they feel as if they're charging people for nurturing them or caring about them, a colleague has this advice: "Tell them that clients are paying for their time. The caring is free."

CONSIDER THIS

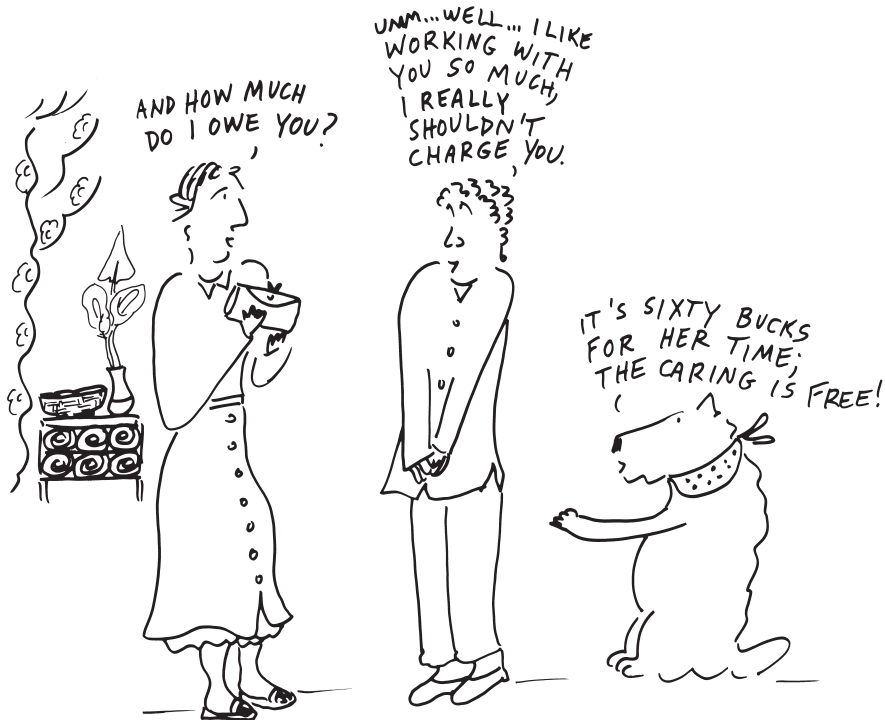
We all have obligations we have to meet. Food, shelter, clothing, utilities, medical care, child care, student loan debt; the list goes on. Those who have children often have worries about how they are going to pay for their education or how they would cope in the event of some unforeseen financial catastrophe. In addition to the necessities, most people want to be able to take an occasional vacation, put money in savings for a rainy day, plan for their retirement, and be able to give something to their favorite charities. The desire to be in service, and help people through massage, doesn't need to exclude the realities of making a comfortable living. If you're independently wealthy, don't need to worry about making money, and truly want to give away your services, then carry on, but if you're like the majority who have real needs that they need to take care of, and the occasional wants, then you have to be realistic about your financial boundaries and how to handle those with clients.

On the other hand, if you have entered this profession because you think it's an easy way to make a living and don't realize the need for a caring attitude, you will find the work challenging in a different way. I've met many therapists over the years who work second jobs to make ends meet, or who end up leaving the profession altogether because they cannot sustain themselves with the amount of income they make.

Money As Part of the Healing Process

For those who are shy about charging, you have to keep in mind that your fees or compensation is actually an important part of the healing process for clients. Our fees clarify clients' obligations to us and ours to them. Giving a service without making it clear what we expect in return can make both parties uneasy.

It is an intrinsic aspect of clients' healing not only for them to give something in return but also to create a balance by giving something that is valuable to them. In *Persuasion and Healing*, the authors studied many kinds of health-care providers—witch doctors, traditional Western medical doctors, and alternative health practitioners. They concluded that in an effective therapeutic experience, patients or clients must give something valuable in exchange; they must make a sacrifice (Frank JD, Frank JB. *Persuasion and Healing*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; 1993). In cultures other than our own, the offering might be a nice fat chicken. In ours, it might be someone volunteering their time so that a new student



can practice on them or a colleague trading a session. However, usually what is given is money.

The idea of the healing value of a sacrifice doesn't justify greed or overcharging, but the concept can help us feel more comfortable with collecting appropriate fees. The element of sacrifice may give clients a deeper sense of the treatment's value and help them benefit from it. Sometimes clients who are given a special deal don't seem to get as much out of the work as those who pay full price.

Although trades can occasionally work out well, money is usually the best way to be compensated. The great thing about money is that it's specific. Sixty dollars isn't the same as \$59.75. Money's clean; it's precise; it's simple.

*Money's clean;
it is precise; it is
simple.*

The clarity of fees is part of a safe professional environment. It is useful to both practitioner and client. Asking for and receiving money (or whatever the terms of exchange) speaks deeply to both client and practitioner about the value of the work. For practitioners, money is a tangible sign of the client's appreciation. For clients, it is a tangible sign of how much they will invest in their own well-being.

REAL EXPERIENCE

Early in my career, I learned a few lessons about doing trades and bartering for massage. I made one barter arrangement with a carpet and window cleaner that has worked out well for over a decade now, but in other situations, I haven't been as fortunate. I made one deal with a painter that turned out badly; I was so dissatisfied with the sloppy job they did in repainting my office, I ultimately ended up paying someone else to do it. I made another exchange with someone who agreed to do weekly housecleaning, and that just turned out horribly—she was constantly calling with excuses why she couldn't come in to do it when she was scheduled. After a few weeks of her constant rescheduling, I just gave up on that. With the exception of my reliable carpet cleaner, which is a trade that just happens a couple of times a year, I have found that things work out better when I just pay the money for the services I need, and collect the money from the people I give services to.

—L.K., LMT

Money: An Emotional Issue

As we all know, money can be an emotionally-loaded issue. Most people have strong beliefs, opinions, and habits around money. Very few people are indifferent to the subject. The fact that both practitioner and client may have strong feelings and attitudes about money makes it both more important and more challenging to keep consistent boundaries in this area.

Regardless of their actual material wealth, some clients may be concerned about whether they are getting their money's worth. They may be sensitive to being slighted on time or effort. They may think our fees are too high. Perhaps not being aware of the expenses of running a small business or the physical and emotional exertion that our work involves, they may think a professional who makes \$80 an hour is lavishly paid. Or they may take our fee setting personally, thinking that we don't like them if we raise our fees and we do like them if we give them a discount. (We have to be careful that the latter isn't true and that discounts are based on objective criteria.)

Some of us may have old, unexamined ideas that get in the way of making good decisions about policies concerning money and fees. We might have deep feelings about whether money is "good" or "bad," whether we are competent with it, or even whether we deserve to be financially successful. Sometimes, this is related to the attitudes and financial circumstances we were raised in. Someone who grew up in a home that struggled in their financial circumstances is apt to have a much different attitude about money than someone who grew up in a well-to-do family.

We might have unrealistic ideas about how hard or how easy it is to make a living; unfortunately, many massage school students are told that “you’ll get out of school and immediately be making \$75 an hour!” or similar rubbish. Truthfully, we work in a profession that usually doesn’t make us rich. In a culture that measures personal worth by one’s bank account, we have to learn to value our work nonetheless.

Talking to Clients About Money

Because money is an emotional subject for many people, we can quickly offend or even lose a client if we are clumsy in setting limits or unclear about our expectations around fee paying.

Here is a summary of the basic guidelines for setting limits for any practitioner who has to explain financial expectations to clients. These were first discussed in Chapter 6:

- Be clear about expectations in advance.
- Be careful about your tone.
- Speak in terms of your general policy.
- Practice what you will say in various situations.

The importance of these guidelines is worth repeating. First, the clearer you are about what you expect from the beginning, the easier your job will be. Second, when you talk with clients about money policies, your attitude and tone make a world of difference. You want to sound straightforward, businesslike, and confident—neither apologetic nor punitive. Third, when you have to set a limit, if you speak in terms of general policies rather than about a client’s specific behavior or circumstances, the client will be less defensive. Avoid making it sound like a personal issue. Instead of saying, “You should have let me know you couldn’t come. You have to pay me for the appointment you missed,” you can say, perhaps with a sympathetic tone, “As it states on the office policies that we gave you during your first visit, I charge full fee when someone misses an appointment. I can always fill your appointment with another client if I have notice you need to cancel.

The ability to set limits well doesn’t come naturally. Just as you use friends and colleagues to practice massage strokes, you can also use them to try out what you will say in different situations. Even though it’s a make-believe situation, friends and family can give you valuable feedback about how your words sound and your attitude comes across.

Basic Fee Policies

There are a number of common situations or practices that most practitioners in private practice have to deal with around fee setting. As with other aspects of your relationship with clients, it’s a good idea to establish fair boundaries and stick with

them unless you have a carefully thought-out reason to make an exception. You also need to be familiar with the appropriate laws in your city or state to be sure you are in compliance with regulations governing various aspects of running a business, such as refund policies, raising fees, marketing, expiration dates on gift certificates (yes, this is regulated), and so forth. In the event you are working in a state that allows insurance billing for massage, or are accepting personal injury or Workman's Comp cases, bear in mind that you cannot bill for missed appointments on any type of insurance, but you may try to collect it from the client. Of course, if you work in a spa or as the employee of a doctor or chiropractor, you have to abide by their basic fee policies. As discussed earlier, it's a good idea to find out whether the employer's policies are agreeable to you before you take a job. Even one missed appointment may make a difference to a therapist who is on a tight budget, and if several people in a week miss an appointment and are not charged, your salary can dwindle pretty quickly.

Setting Fees

If you're starting a practice, you can determine the appropriate fee to charge by researching what other practitioners in your community are charging, especially those who offer your kind of bodywork or massage and have your level of experience.

Your rates affect what both clients and colleagues will think about you. If you charge noticeably more than the norm, some clients may be put off, while others may think you must be offering something special for the extra charge. If you charge substantially less than the going rate, some clients may be attracted to the bargain but may not value the work as much.

You must also consider how colleagues in the massage therapy profession will view you. If you are charging way less than the other therapists in your area, they may perceive that you are just trying to steal business by undercutting them. Competition is a healthy thing, but alienating every other massage therapist in the area is not. You may need someone to refer clients to in the future, or be in need of a massage yourself. It's best to practice friendly competition without using cutthroat business practices.

Sometimes even a \$10 difference in fees can set a practitioner apart. Colleagues may feel you are arrogant if you charge more than they do without having more training or experience. On the other hand, it's more acceptable to offer discounted rates in order to boost business if you are a recent graduate, a practitioner new to an area, or even an experienced practitioner whose practice is in a slump. And surroundings do make a difference. A practitioner who works at home, or doing out-calls, does not have the same overhead as the therapist who rents a nice office in a professional building, but that doesn't mean their time and skills are less valuable. There is a lot to consider.

The amount you charge also affects how you feel about your work. Make sure that your fees are fair to you and that they take into account all of your expenses—for instance, your office rent; travel expense if you're doing outcalls; the time and cost of either laundering your own sheets or having them cleaned; and the costs of advertising, taxes, massage oil, phone service, or a website and all the other expenses that come with operating a business. Charge enough so that you won't begin to resent your clients. Also, make sure you don't feel as if you are overcharging. If you're not comfortable with your fees, clients will sense it and feel uncomfortable also.

Raising Fees

How often and by how much practitioners raise their fees can vary. Many raise their fees by \$5 or \$10 about once a year. Some raise rates when their overhead, such as office rent, becomes higher. To be fair, you need to give adequate notice—a month or two, at least—to let clients get used to the idea of the higher rate and be able to budget accordingly. You can post a notice by your door so that clients will be sure to see it, mail or e-mail a notice to your regular clients, post it on your website, send it out in your newsletter if you have one. You can also tell them (before they are on the table): “I want to let you know that starting in November, my fee will be \$65 instead of \$60.”

There's a good deal of variation in how you can carry out fee hikes. Some practitioners begin charging the higher fee immediately for new clients but wait a month or two before applying the rate for existing clients. Some never raise rates for existing clients; their clients never pay more than what they paid for in their first appointment.

There's no set way to raise fees. Whatever you decide, your policy needs to be one that you can live with, that you feel is fair to you and to your clients, and that you implement consistently. There's no need to feel apologetic about raising your fees. As a colleague said, “We don't need to send clients a sympathy card when we raise our fees.”

Special Deals

What about giving discounts or using sliding scales? Most of the practitioners I have talked with find it works best to stick with one fee, with rare exceptions.

As discussed in earlier chapters, making special arrangements for a client in any area of your work generally brings up a red flag. Because money issues are often so emotionally loaded for both client and practitioner, going outside your usual boundaries in fee setting is often a big mistake. It can also be a sign of deeper problems with your professional relationship with a client; you may be allowing the client to manipulate you.

Giving discounts and charging on a sliding scale that depends on the client's income are the most common examples of special deals. A colleague reports:

- *A prospective client called and said she was under a lot of stress, and she knew it would help her to receive regular massages. She had heard good things about my work but said that massage was “outside her budget” and asked if I would give her a significant discount. Since she was working full time, I told her that I only offered discounts to senior citizens. When she began pleading with me about how much she needed the work, I almost gave in to her, but then realized that I was inappropriately beginning to take on responsibility for her stress level. I told her that I couldn't make an exception for her, suggested that she might go to the clinic of the local massage school, and I gave her the names of a newly graduated practitioner who might be willing to give her a discount. Although she was not happy about being refused, I felt that she had not given me a good reason to change my policies—and she had given me good reason to be wary of being manipulated.*

You're under no obligation to discount your fees. In many ways, charging everyone the same fee creates the safest, clearest boundaries for both you and your clients. If you do want to consider discounting your fees or making special arrangements from time to time, consider the following points:

Know Your Motivation

You want to take care that, for one, you're not trying to rescue the client. A “rescue” attitude means you treat the client as if they were in some way inadequate and, therefore, not able to be held to normal business arrangements. Sometimes you may make a special deal because you don't want to say no to a client, you want to be “nice,” or you think you need the money, even if it's a lower fee. All of these motivations are different from making an adult-to-adult business arrangement with someone who has a legitimate reason to need a discount, such as an elderly person on a small fixed income. Equally important, when you depart from your normal framework, you encourage clients to do so as well. A colleague reports:

- *Even though I don't usually do this, I made a special payment arrangement for a client who said he was down on his luck. He was to receive a 10-session series at the rate of two per month but was to pay me for only one each month. After we finished the 10th session, he would continue to pay me a monthly fee until all sessions were paid off. Unfortunately, once we started working, I found that he was an inconsiderate client. For instance, he was often late to sessions,*

even after I urged him to be on time. Once he missed a session without giving adequate cancellation notice. When we were finished with our work, I had a hard time collecting what he owed me. Lesson learned. I had started out badly with this client by making a special fee arrangement without good cause. By not respecting my own professional boundaries, I had encouraged him to not respect them either.

You can avoid confusion if you have clear guidelines concerning the circumstances under which you will make a special arrangement.

Offer Discounts to Groups of People, Not Individuals

Those who do offer discounts often restrict them to certain groups of people, rather than deciding merit on an individual basis. Some school clinics and private practitioners, for example, offer discounts or pro bono work to veterans, elderly people on a small fixed income, people with life-threatening illnesses, or spiritual or religious teachers. A special fee can work well if it's motivated by your heart or your convictions and not by guilt.

A special fee can work well if it's motivated by your heart or your convictions and not by guilt.

When you make such an exception, you need to keep checking in with yourself to make sure your heart is still in it and your bank balance isn't suffering.

Be Wary of Sliding Scales

Using a sliding scale to determine fees means that you offer a range of fees based on the client's income. For instance, someone who has a low salary would pay your lowest rate of \$40 per hour and a wealthier person would pay your standard rate of \$90 an hour, with gradations in between. Sliding scales are basically discounts, so you need to employ the same caution about using them. Using a sliding scale to determine fees based on a client's statement about his ability to pay automatically creates a dual relationship. In a sense, you become the client's banker, involving yourself in his finances in ways that aren't supposed to be part of your role. For instance, you may find yourself concerned about whether the client is spending his money wisely in other areas of his life or whether you should renegotiate his fee if his income rises. The complications created by going outside the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship in this way can interfere with the relationship and with your ability to put your best effort into your work. Imagine these scenarios:

- *A client has convinced you that, as a student, she can't afford your full fee. You have agreed to accept \$50 per session instead of your usual \$80 fee. After you've seen her for a couple of months, she tells you she can't make her appointments*

for the next few weeks because she's going to a concert and "had to pay \$200 for the ticket!". How do you feel?

- *A client who is paying you less than full fee complains after several sessions that she's not getting enough from the work, that she doesn't feel as good as she wants to. Would you be able to handle this complaint with the same objectivity as you would if she were a full-fee client, or might you secretly feel that she's being ungrateful?*
- *A client who has been receiving a discounted fee arrives for her session in a new car—a much more expensive model than the one you drive yourself. When you mention it, she says "yes, I've always wanted one so I saved up for the down payment." Do you feel that you contributed to her ability to save for a fancy car by discounting your fee?*

Ask Yourself Some Pointed Questions

Even if you offer to do pro bono or discounted work for what seems like purely altruistic reasons, you want to look at the difficulties that may be hidden in such relationships. Here are some good questions to ask yourself any time you consider reducing fees:

- Do I have a standard policy for fee reduction, and am I veering from that policy?
- Am I reluctant to say no to this client?
- How do I decide how much of a discount to give?
- What are the possibilities that the special financial arrangement will affect the therapeutic relationship?
- Am I expecting special gratitude and appreciation in return for this special fee?

Monitor the Number of Discounted-Fee Arrangements You Have at One Time

Determine how many discounted or pro bono (no fee) clients you can realistically afford to see in your practice at one time. You don't want to work all week and end up with little cash to show for it.

It's difficult to make blanket statements about when it's appropriate to give a discount. Some practitioners can handle giving discounts and making special arrangements more easily than others. In deciding what policies you are comfortable with, you have to be honest with yourself about your own limit-setting abilities and

your own feelings and biases about money. The bottom line is to consider honestly whether the arrangement could be detrimental to you, your client, or the professional relationship.

Common Financial Dilemmas

A number of common situations that arise in the work life of a somatic practitioner in private practice can create difficulties. Although solutions to the problems may vary from practitioner to practitioner, it's best for each practitioner to establish his or her own policy for each of these situations and then stay with that policy.

Missed Appointments

You've booked a new client at 3 p.m. You're not at the movies, you're not taking a nap, you're not attending a class. And most important, you're not able to schedule another client for that time slot. You're all prepared: you've warmed up the room, put clean sheets on the table. Maybe you were counting on the money and you've already mentally spent the fee. And then . . . no client. No phone messages to explain . . . nothing. The missed appointment is that dreadful thud in the professional life of a manual therapist.

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Along with the dreadful thud goes the pesky question of whether to ask the client to pay for the missed session. If the client had a genuine emergency, you wouldn't charge. But what constitutes an authentic emergency? Certainly, someone's child breaking an arm is a genuine crisis, and it's understandable that they'd rush off to the emergency room instead of thinking about your appointment. Sometimes no-show clients truly can't anticipate problems, but often they can. Illness rarely comes on so suddenly that they wouldn't have the time to call and tell you they aren't coming. Business people usually know that meetings can run long. It's hard to know where to draw the line.

In most circumstances, standard practice is to charge a full or partial fee for someone who breaks an appointment without adequate notice or just doesn't show up. (Manual therapists sometimes make exceptions and don't charge the first time a client misses an appointment.) Some practitioners—especially new ones—find it hard to ask a client to pay for a missed appointment. They feel awkward asking payment for “doing nothing.” The point is that you could have booked another client in that slot, and even if no other clients wanted that time period, you lost the time it took to prepare and the 20 minutes or so it took to determine that the client wasn't coming. A missed appointment is time and money lost. Also, if you allow clients to be disrespectful of your time once, chances are they will do it again.

Sometimes practitioners are concerned about making the client angry, so they rationalize that they wouldn't have filled the vacancy anyway. But you have to consider whether you want to work with a client who doesn't respect your time. Also, if you are angry with a client for missing appointments without notice, can you be compassionate when you work with that client? If you're resentful of their treatment of you, that's likely to come through in your attitude with them.

Sticking to your guns about charging for missed appointments shows that you value your time as a professional. Unfortunately, if the no-show client doesn't call either to explain or to make another appointment and won't return your calls, obviously you can't do anything about it. Such a client probably wouldn't respond to a written bill, either.

To be fair about the adequate-notice policy, you should show clients the same courtesy. Let them know that if you have to cancel an appointment without 24-hour notice, you will give them a free or discounted session. Even with a firm policy that has been communicated to clients, most practitioners have an occasional no-show. Here are some suggestions to make missed appointments less frequent:

Set Your Policy When the First Appointment Is Made

When a client schedules a first appointment, always make sure you let her or him know you will charge for appointments cancelled without 24-hour cancellation notice (or whatever you think is adequate).

Put It in Writing

- During the first appointment, ask clients to sign an agreement accepting the 24-hour cancellation policy (and whatever other policies you have, such as being paid at the time of the session). Even if you are certain you have told clients, they may not remember that you did.
- Be sure to include in this agreement the amount of time you will wait—for instance, 15 or 20 minutes or whatever you feel comfortable with—before you decide that the appointment has been missed. Let clients know that it's possible that you might leave the office at that point, so that even if they do finally show up, they may not be able to have even a partial session.
- Have your cancellation policy on your website, your brochures, your intake form, a sign in your lobby...make it so visible that people can't possibly miss it.

Confirm Your Appointments

Ask permission to call or text the client with a reminder a day or two in advance of the appointment. Giving clients an appointment card is helpful, but if they stick that in their purse or wallet, they may forget it's there. It's a good idea for clients to get used to having standing appointments, whether that's once a week or once

a month. It will help them to remember that every Monday at 4 p.m., they'll be seeing you.

Many therapists are using online scheduling now, which can be set to automatically send clients reminders of their appointments.

Explore Credit Card Payments

If you are able to take credit card payments, you can ensure payment in the way that other businesses, such as hotels, do. When a client makes an appointment, take her or his credit card number and let the client know you will charge for a missed session unless the appointment is cancelled by a certain time. Using the credit card method is particularly useful for those who work a great deal with one-time clients, such as vacationers in resort towns. Many of the previously mentioned online schedulers require the credit card before confirmation of the appointment.

Gift Certificates

Some practitioners offer gift certificates as a way to promote business or bring in extra income, especially around the holidays. While they can bring in extra income, gift certificates can also bring some problems.

Many experienced practitioners say that gift certificates are often not worth the trouble. For instance, the giver of the gift may be much more enthusiastic about the benefits of massage than the recipient; the recipient may be reluctant, for whatever reason, to have a massage. As a result, recipients sometimes drag their feet about collecting their massage. Sometimes as much as a year can pass before they make an appointment. Because of this, some practitioners put an expiration date on gift certificates. However, most practitioners say they wouldn't turn down such a client regardless of when she or he calls.

Federal law enacted in 2009 requires that gift certificates must be honored for 5 years. Some states are more restrictive than the federal law, and require that they not have an expiration date at all, in which case you are obligated to abide by the more restrictive law. You may find the information about your state at www.ncsl.org/research/financial-services-and-commerce/gift-cards-and-certificates-statutes-and-legis.aspx.

Although there are these downsides to gift certificates, they work well for some practitioners. And for some, the process of advertising and selling gift certificates is a good exercise in learning how to promote their businesses.

Extreme Deals

The Internet abounds with companies such as Groupon, Living Social, and other sites that businesses can use to promote themselves. You agree to discount your services very steeply on these sites—maybe even as much as 75% off. In exchange, the site

keeps a portion of the sales, which buyers must pay for on the site, and they advertise your deal to their subscribers in your area. You may set a limit on how many deals you can offer and when they expire—because it’s a discount—not a gift certificate.

Some therapists have reported being satisfied with the results they realized from participating, while others felt that the new people who came in were just chronic shoppers for cheap deals who would come once to get that \$20 massage and never come again.

You need to be extremely careful about your participation in such deals, because you may find yourself giving months’ worth of discounted massage and cutting substantially into your income. You also need to ask potential employers if they participate in such steep discounting, and if you will be paid your normal rate of pay for such deals, or if they plan to pass that steep discounting on to you in the form of a pay cut.

Refunds

It’s often wise to offer a dissatisfied client a full or partial refund even if there has been no negligence or harm on your part. If a client is upset enough to ask for his money back, you’re generally better off honoring that request. Aside from wanting to respect the client’s wishes, you don’t want the bad publicity of an angry ex-client complaining about you to others, especially now that so many people leave reviews on the Internet.

If a client has an unpleasant experience during a session, whether or not you were totally responsible, then you want to make it up to the client. Regardless of whether you had control over the situation that caused a client’s discomfort, you bear some of the responsibility. Also, if you want to stay on good terms with the client, refunding all or part of a fee and offering a discount on a future session are good options. Here are two examples:

- *A massage therapist charged a client for only half a session when the last 20 minutes of the hour were disrupted by the loud barking of the neighbor’s dog.*
- *A practitioner gave a total refund to a client who had had an allergic reaction to his scented massage oil. Although the client had not told the practitioner that she was sensitive to perfumes, the practitioner was still sorry that the client had had a bad experience and didn’t want the client to have a negative feeling about his work.*

Certainly, if it is your fault that the client feels dissatisfied, you need to offer a full or partial refund:

- *A woman had received four sessions from a bodyworker. The bodyworker ended the fifth one 20 minutes earlier than the others, and the client felt the quality of*

the work was below what she'd come to expect. After leaving the bodyworker's office, she realized she felt shortchanged and called him, explaining what she had noticed. He told her that she was right—that he had been on the verge of catching the flu when he worked with her. He didn't explain that at the time—most clients would have been understanding, if the therapist said "I'm sorry, but I'm not feeling well. If we can cut this short now, I'll make it up to you during the next session." He did not apologize or offer a refund or a discount, or offer to make up the time on another session. Not surprisingly, the client never went back to him and never referred anyone else to him.

This example doesn't mean that whenever you feel you've performed less than your best, you should rush to offer a free session. Those who are very self-critical would be constantly offering free sessions. However, it was the practitioner's responsibility to monitor his own energy level and health and cancel the appointment to avoid giving an inadequate session (and in this case, to avoid the possibility of giving the client the flu).

To steer clear of an irate client making a complaint to your professional association or filing a lawsuit, you may need to make it clear in writing that in giving the refund you are not admitting that you have been in the wrong. Also, along with acknowledging receipt of the refund, you may want the client to agree in writing to take no further action and make no further complaints against you. If you have doubts about how best to make a refund without giving the client fuel for further action, you would be wise to get professional legal counsel. Some therapists go so far as to have a clause on their intake form about arbitration, in the event the client is dissatisfied to the point of wanting money refunded.

Gratuities and Gifts

Whether to accept gratuities (tips) and whether to accept gifts are two other common money issues and affect both those in private practice and those who are employed.

Gratuities

Whether or not to accept gratuities can be a controversial subject for somatic practitioners. Some practitioners question whether it's professional for massage therapists to accept tips because other professionals do not. Most think that practitioners who work for themselves should charge adequate fees and not accept tips. However, for those who work for lower wages in a spa or salon, tips can be a necessary financial supplement.

There are ways to make the tipping issue less confusing and awkward for clients. Customers who receive a massage in a spa or salon often aren't sure whether

REAL EXPERIENCE

After the first professional massage I ever received as a client, I was unsure of the protocol, so I asked if she accepted tips. She said "The best tip you can give me is to refer someone else to me." She's still my therapist 10 years later, and I have referred many people to her. When I made a mid-life career change and became a massage therapist myself just a couple of years ago, I decided to have the same policy. A tip is nice, but referrals are better—more business—and I think clients may look at me more as a member of their health-care team because I don't accept tips.

—M.H., MT

to tip. The owners may make their tipping policy clear by posting a sign on the premises or adding a statement on their list of services: "Gratuities are appreciated," and having a gratuity line on their credit card slips.

When the practice of tipping is encouraged in a spa or salon or other setting with more than one therapist, it's best if there's an envelope for each employee at the check-in desk (and that the clients know that) so that a practitioner won't necessarily know how much a particular client has given and can concentrate on doing a good job for *all* clients. Clients may prefer that the therapist *does* know who left it for them, because they want the therapist to know that they appreciated them.

Gifts

Gifts from clients are a more personal sign of appreciation than tips. Whether to accept gifts needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the size and value of the gift and what the client's intention seems to be.

CONSIDER THIS

It's *not okay* to pressure clients for tips, or to give them less service and attention because they're not good tippers. I've had many therapists over the years ask me how they can let clients know they "expect" a tip, and in some cases, they've been blatant: "How can I let my clients know I expect a \$20 tip?" My suggestion is that you set your fees at the amount of money you really want—and do not "expect" a tip—ever.



Inexpensive gifts given on holidays or special occasions as signs of clients' affection or appreciation are generally fine to accept. You might think twice, however, about accepting frequent gifts, larger gifts, or gifts that you know are an extravagance for the client. Also, if you are uncertain about the intention behind the gift—for instance, if you know a client is interested in dating you and may want to win you over—it would be best to refuse the gift. Clients who give lavish gifts may, at some level, hope for some special treatment in return. Suppose a client gave you an expensive gift and then wanted the work to continue past the end of the hour.

If you want to refuse a gift for whatever reason, you may do so with a smile and a firm, “Thank you for thinking of me, but I really can’t accept this.” Whether to give discounts or refunds, offer gift certificates, or take tips are questions that practitioners have to decide for themselves. Whatever your decision, it always needs to be with an eye toward creating clear and comfortable boundaries for yourself and your clients. The question to ask yourself always has to be the same: “Could this action harm the therapeutic relationship?”

Rewards for Referrals

Is it a good business practice to reward clients or other professionals for referring clients to you in hopes of stimulating more referrals?

Here are two examples:

- *Massage therapist Margaret offers a free massage to any client who refers five new clients who make and keep an appointment with her.*
- *Bodyworker Bruce has an arrangement with a chiropractor (for whom Bruce does not work) to give the chiropractor \$10 for each new client the chiropractor refers.*

In many jurisdictions, these practices are known as “kickbacks” and are illegal as they are considered unethical and unprofessional. Prospective clients need to be able to assume that the person recommending you is doing so because he or she appreciates your competence and skill, not because he or she is getting a fee or a reward of any kind in return. Even though the referrer may appreciate your abilities, the reward can influence his or her judgment.

As a professional, you should expect that clients and other professionals will find your work valuable and want to tell others about it. Although you want to be courteous and thank them for any referrals, a professional should not be in the position of seeming overly grateful for a referral, and when you are not rewarding the referrer, that is an assurance that they feel grateful for having a skilled and trustworthy practitioner to whom to refer friends and colleagues. On top of a verbal thank you, people really appreciate getting a handwritten thank you card. That is sufficient—and not unethical.

Becoming More Comfortable with Money

Sometimes we graduate from our manual therapy training expecting that we should be able to easily make a good living with our work. However, it may take a while for this expectation to become a reality, and we can feel isolated in grappling with the situation. It’s rare for people to share the details of their financial struggles with others, so we may not realize that other practitioners are often having the same problems.

It’s not unusual for practitioners to occasionally make mistakes in dealing with clients about money, especially when just starting out in business. At some point in their careers, most practitioners have backed down from charging a client for an appointment cancelled at the last minute, for example, or have given a special discount that backfired, or have undercharged or overcharged a client.

There are ways that we can become more secure with financial dealing. We can

Mentor:

A trusted colleague who provides guidance and education. Mentors are usually helpful in advising on both the details of establishing oneself as a professional and the broader general aspects of taking on a professional role or of taking on the role of a particular kind of bodywork or massage practitioner.

first examine our own attitudes about money. Having **mentors** who are comfortable in their relationship to money can be a major help with business issues. Because just about everyone has some issues about money and business, peer group discussions can also be helpful. In a group, others will have clarity about issues that we struggle with. Consultations with a professional counselor can also aid us in getting to the deeper issues that we have about money. (Peer groups and consultations are discussed more fully in Chapter 12.)

Some manual therapists are starting to use coaches—individuals specifically trained to help practitioners create business goals that suit their values. A coach

can help us figure out the steps to reach those goals and then, like a personal exercise trainer, hold us accountable for making progress. However, be choosy about choosing a coach! Someone who has actually been the proprietor of their own business is apt to know more about the realities of business than someone who just took training in being a coach.

Some workshops specialize in improving attitudes about money. To find a good workshop or coach, seek out recommendations from satisfied customers. For practical advice and legal information, it's useful to attend a workshop, such as one at a local community college, about how to run a small business. Many Chambers of Commerce, as well as the Small Business Administration, and local merchant's associations often sponsor such classes.

The ability to set good money boundaries is a crucial part of our work. Clients need the comfort and safety of a clear financial relationship, and so do we. Keeping clean and clear about money is, like most boundary issues, a skill and an art that we will practice and improve throughout our careers.

Questions for Reflection

1. Fill in the blank with the first words or phrases that come to mind: In my life, money is _____. (You may have several answers.)
2. Think about how or where you may have gotten the feelings or thoughts about money that you wrote in question #1. Did they come from your family? From the culture? Do those answers reflect the attitude you want to have about money? If not, what attitude would you like to have? Fill in the blank to reflect that attitude: I want money to be _____.
3. Do you think it's true that clients will value a service according to what they pay for it? For instance, will they value a service they pay for more than a free one? Will they value a more expensive service more than a less expensive one? For instance, if a massage costs \$10 rather than \$60, will that make a difference in how the client perceives the service? Why or why not?
4. Draw up a list of money policies that you would be comfortable with as a practitioner. If you are already in practice, are there any changes you would make to your current policies?

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CHAPTER 10

Dual Relationships and Boundaries: Wearing Many Hats

Dual relationships—having more than one kind of relationship with a client, such as being friends with a client or trading sessions with a colleague—are practically a tradition in our profession. We almost feel as if we have a right to them. Some of us become indignant at the thought of limiting or eliminating dual relationships:

Dual relationships:

Having a relationship with a client other than the contractual therapeutic one, such as having a client who is also a friend, family member, or business associate.

“What! I can’t have coffee with a client?” “My buddy Bill has been coming to me for years, and it’s just fine.” “Where would I get clients if not from people I know?” However, many experienced therapists have discovered that such relationships can be more troublesome than they at first appear.

Dual Relationships: Complicated Dynamics

Dual relationships can seem so easy—it can feel natural to become friends with a likable client. It can seem logical to work with friends and family—who better to share our gifts with than people we already love? However, the confusion of changing roles and the power of transference and countertransference can add complications.

When we try to become friends with Client Carrie, who knows you only as a selfless, always-caring massage therapist focused solely on Carrie’s needs, it may be hard for her to get used to you as a regular person who is sometimes grumpy, insensitive, or needy herself. Or when Big Sister Sally, who knew you when you were throwing baby food on the floor, becomes Client Sally, she may have trouble taking you seriously and viewing you as a competent professional. With dual relationships, each person must shift back and forth between an existing role and a new one, and the transition is not always smooth. More often than not, it is messy and can lead to misunderstandings and stress in our practices.

Here's an example:

- *A massage therapist decided to barter with an old friend—she would give him massages, and he would wallpaper her living room. He wasn't a professional, but he said he could do a good job, and he was willing to do the exchange.*

As the work progressed, she became unhappy with both her own behavior and the client's. They both began treating sessions like social visits. She found herself talking about their mutual friends or her own concerns during sessions. His behavior was equally casual—he usually showed up late for his massage appointments and then made business calls on his cell phone before getting ready for the session. Because he was a friend, she had a hard time asserting herself about his loose time boundaries.

To make matters worse, she was unhappy with the quality of his work on her home. When he'd finished the living room, she told him that she felt his work was inadequate. He was surprised and offended when she pointed out flaws in the work. She ended up feeling dissatisfied, he felt offended when she said she should have hired a professional to begin with, and their friendship suffered.

We can't know all the reasons for this unhappy outcome, but it was no doubt complicated by the effects of transference. The client involved in the trade said later that he had become accustomed to seeing his friend as the nurturer. He had come to expect her to take care of him, forgetting that he had an adult responsibility for his side of the bargain. He then felt hurt when she criticized his work. When we are switching roles, the effects of transference and countertransference can create confusing situations.

In this story, we also see examples of two problems that are discussed later—how easy it is for both parties to be casual about framework when we are working with friends and the difficulty of **bartering** services or doing **trades**, especially with someone who is not trading his or her own professional services.

Many experienced practitioners stay clear of dual relationships because of the built-in problems. Whether we're trying to turn a client into a friend, doing a trade, or any of the other possibilities, both sides can end up feeling shortchanged.

Bartering:

Exchanging a manual therapy session for goods or services other than another manual therapy session.

Trade:

Exchanging a manual therapy session for a manual therapy session with a colleague.

Common Problems with Dual Relationships

Here are the most prevalent kinds of dual relationships and how they can be problematic.

Becoming Friends with Clients

It's not unusual for clients to want to become friends with us. Clients feel the heart connection in our work and want that connection to extend outside the sessions. We may feel the client's affection toward us and mistakenly think that affection should be carried into our daily lives rather than remain as part of the professional relationship, where it belongs. Or perhaps we find ourselves really liking a client and wanting to build that into a friendship. Despite those feelings, it's often a mistake to try to change the therapeutic relationship into a social one.

The effects of transference can make it hard to ever have an equal relationship. Because clients often give more weight to what we say and do, it may be unrealistic to expect them to adjust to the normal give and take of a friendship. On some level, clients usually have difficulty seeing us as real people with flaws and our own concerns. Even outside the office, they may expect us to be always focused on their needs, as we are during a session. There is also a chance that they would always see us as better or wiser than they are—and that we really are—and that we would exploit that in some way, even unconsciously.

Socializing with clients should occur rarely, if at all. Take an honest look at your friendships; if most of your friends are clients, then ask yourself how that came to be, and whether or not it's healthy for both you and the clients. The waters of the therapeutic relationship can get very muddied if we're not careful.

There is also the possibility that we would disappoint the client by showing our humanness. A colleague reports:

- *A client I had seen for several months asked me to have lunch with her, and we began to socialize. Prior to that, she had been an enthusiastic client—she saw massage as part of a new, healthier way of life, and she saw me as part of this new and exciting direction. Unfortunately, as she got to know me, she found out that I wasn't as perfect in my lifestyle as she had imagined—for instance, I declined several invitations to attend her church, and mentioned that I sometimes go to a hookah bar in town. She became disillusioned and discouraged and stopped making massage appointments.*

Befriending some of our clients can also interfere with our relationships with other clients. They may hear about these friendships and become jealous or uncomfortable about the limits of our boundaries.

Here are some guidelines for dealing with the temptation of becoming friends with clients:

Ask Yourself if the Change in Roles Would Benefit the Client

Be sure you're not using the client. When you're tempted to become friends with a client, ask yourself if changing the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship truly helps the client or primarily fulfills your own needs.

REAL EXPERIENCE

I moved halfway across the country with my husband when he got a job transfer. Our new home was a much smaller town than the city we had moved from, and there was no massage therapist in town. I got my new license, rented a small office space, and started to slowly build a clientele. People were friendly and when they found out I was new in town, they invited me to their churches, community potluck suppers, their parties, and social occasions. I soon found myself in the position of having several new friends who were all clients. In retrospect, I'm sure it was because I was in a strange place and lonely without my old circle of friends, but it was not without its problems. I found out that everybody knows everybody else's business. My office is on Main Street, and I couldn't go in the grocery store without someone saying "I saw Mary Jo coming out of your office today. Is she feeling better after having that nasty fall last week?" or other nosy questions and comments. I wasn't used to that, and when I would say "I can't talk about my clients," people would look at me like I'd sprouted horns. It was a big adjustment. The town was so small that there was really no way to avoid dual relationships, so I had to educate people about keeping my work life and my social life separate.

—J.G., CMT

Here is a colleague's experience:

- ▶ *I never socialize with my clients or even ex-clients, so I was surprised to find myself thinking about asking my client Mary to attend a concert with me. I realized that I was drawn to this unusual boundary bending because I was lonely. A good friend had recently moved away, and I had a gap in my social life. I felt tempted to fill it with a client I really liked. Once I realized what the problem was, I began thinking of other ways to find new friends.*

Evaluate Whether This Client Could Ever See You As an Equal

Honestly ask yourself whether the client could ever be a friend with you or whether that client has you on a pedestal. A colleague reports:

- ▶ *I was thinking of accepting the invitation of a client to attend a movie together. I liked this client and sensed that she wanted to be friends, but I was concerned that if she saw me in my day-to-day life, I might do something that would interfere with the professional relationship, such as saying something that would*

hurt her feelings. When I expressed my doubts to her, she said, “Oh, I know it’ll be okay to be friends. I know you would never do anything that would be harmful to me.” Her saying that helped me see how idealized I was in her mind. I knew we could never really be friends. I had to tell her that I thought it would be best to stick with my policy of not socializing with clients.

Socialize with the Client, but Keep Your Professional Role

Sometimes it’s not a problem to socialize with clients or ex-clients if practitioners remain aware of their roles and responsibilities.

Vivien Schapera, co-director of Alexander Technique of Cincinnati, says that although she does not initiate social invitations with clients, she does sometimes accept them. She has wise advice about socializing with clients and former clients:

- *We can be social, but we can’t show what I call our “lower selves.” We can’t show our pettiness, neediness, jealousies, and so on. We tend to work from our higher selves, so clients tend to think we are better than we really are. We may thrive on this adulation. However, once we become friends with our clients, we may find ourselves resorting to our lower selves in the same way we do in the comfort of our own homes and with our closest friends. If we get into a difficult situation with a friend who is also a client, if they push our buttons, we have to pull ourselves out of being 3 years old, regardless of how justified we might feel. We must remember that we are the practitioners, always. It never goes away. No matter how hard it is, we have to be “big,” we have to be the role model, we have to be generous, we have to give the benefit of the doubt, and so on. It’s a delicate and fragile thing to have multiple roles. So if we take someone on as both a client and a friend, we are never justified in letting them down.*

Learn How to Turn Down Invitations

Practitioners can feel awkward or unkind when they have to refuse a client’s invitation. It’s a good idea to assure them that it’s part of your professional policy, not a personal rejection. You can say, “Thank you so much for thinking of me; however, I have a policy of never socializing with clients. The relationship we have is special and important for the work that we do together. It would change if we tried to take it outside these walls. I hope that you understand.”

Working with Friends and Relatives

There are several reasons why it’s not a good idea to work with friends and relatives. Professionals need to work with an objective, nonjudgmental attitude and not

have their own agendas for a client. Clients need to be able to focus on themselves and not be aware of our needs. These goals are impossible when we work with people who are involved in our lives in other ways.

Here's an example of having a personal agenda:

- ▶ *Your friend Bill is very uptight about his job these days. Aside from being concerned about him, you want him to lighten up because he's not fun to be around. When he comes in for a massage, you are highly motivated to help him to relax. Rather than gently coaxing him to let go at his own pace, as you would for any other client, you try to force his muscles to soften. Your haste says, "Hurry up and relax, Bill!" However, it's hard for him to let go because he senses your impatience. It's a frustrating experience for both of you.*

We can also take friends for granted and not give them the same courtesies we give other clients:

- ▶ *Your friend Heather comes to you as a paying client because she's stressed out. You've got some errands to do before the session, and since it's just Heather, you know you can start late. Also, you haven't seen her for a while, so you use the session time to catch her up on your news. Is that fair to Heather?*

Working with people we know can be hard on practitioners, too. Friends and family don't always appreciate the amount of time, energy, and money we've put into learning a skill that's now intended to support us. They may think that what they're receiving is just a friendly back rub. Also, friends often don't give us the

Boundary Lessons

While I was attending massage school, I was required to do 50 massages outside of class and document them, so naturally I called on friends and family to be the recipients, and I did not charge them anything, as it is against the law in our state for students to receive any compensation, including a tip. Unfortunately, I found that the friends who had willingly gotten free massage when I was practicing never came to me as a client after I had my license and started charging for massage, which made me feel resentful. I found that my family members expected me to give them a discount just because they were family. It seemed like nobody had respect for my work just because I had prior relationships with them. It made me wish I had offered my practice massages to total strangers instead of friends and family.

CONSIDER THIS

I don't massage my own mother, unless she's in great pain and it's some dire emergency (and no, she doesn't pay, I gladly pay one of my staff members to massage her). The fact is that if I am her therapist, she spends the session filling me in on the family gossip—who's getting married/divorced/going on a trip/got fired from their job, or whatever it is. When she's with another therapist, she settles down and relaxes, and gets much more benefit out of the work than she would if she was with me. I'd prefer to skip the family gossip while I'm working, and she gets the bodywork she really needs. That's sometimes the danger in massaging family members or friends; the focus ends up being somewhere other than the massage.

respect we deserve or take the work as seriously as they would with someone they don't know. They may show up late, not call to cancel, or, especially if we work at home, want to hang around after their sessions.

Occasionally, we can make exceptions, but not often. We can sometimes see a friend or family member on a one-time or occasional basis and not have problems, but we have to give serious consideration to whether we want to work with them regularly.

Mixing Social Occasions with Work

Just as we don't want sessions to be about socializing, social gatherings aren't an appropriate place to display our professional talents. Even students who don't charge for their work shouldn't comply with requests to rub a sore shoulder outside of an office or a workspace. (An exception can be made for students who get together after school to socialize. The social occasions discussed here are those with prospective clients.) It sets a bad precedent to work during our off-hours.

It can be difficult to turn down friends who want free samples like a little back rub, but we can just smile and say, "I'm off duty." Friends and family need to know that it's unfair to ask us to be available during our off-hours for even a shoulder rub. Also, we can tell them that we don't usually take family or close friends as clients, and if they want a professional massage, we can refer them to someone else. The same applies for consulting at a party about someone's bad back. It's tempting to want to show off or sell our work in a social gathering, but it's not an appropriate place for a professional consultation. We can simply give out our business card and ask the person to call during business hours. We can say, "I'd really like to discuss it with you, but I can't really do you justice in an atmosphere like this. How about calling me on Monday, and I'll be glad to talk with you more."

CONSIDER THIS

People may be drinking at a social occasion, and that's all the more reason not to do massage at a party or other social situations where people are consuming alcohol. People are less inhibited when they're drinking, and may be more inclined to make an inappropriate remark about massage, to flirt, or to act in other ways that may make it uncomfortable for you to consider them as a future client.



The Complications of Trades and Bartering

Trades and bartering used to be seen as a charming hippie sort of thing, a way to bypass the supposed crassness of money, a way to live more simply. Some people still feel that way about bartering and trading services and goods. However, trading and bartering have the potential for being real pains in the neck and sources of misunderstanding, especially if they are ongoing rather than one-time practices. Many of the practitioners I interviewed have discontinued doing trades or barter. This is an issue primarily for those in private practice, who have the freedom to make their own financial arrangements.

Trading and bartering are problematic because, along with having the potential confusion of changing roles, they lack the clarity and simplicity of a money

exchange. We have to work harder to be sure that each side is happy with what is received and each feels the exchange to be balanced. Here's an example:

- *Mary agrees to an ongoing trade of massage with her colleague Donna, but as the exchange progresses, Mary feels less and less satisfied. Although Mary treats Donna as she would a regular client, Donna doesn't do the same. She's never on time, she interrupts the massage to take phone calls, and she seems halfhearted in her efforts.*

In general, trading for bodywork or massage is more likely to be a problem than bartering, when we exchange our work for a tangible object or a service other than bodywork. The intimacy of our work and the possibilities of transference and countertransference can make trading sessions more difficult. When we trade bodywork, each person finds out about the other's physical and sometimes personal problems. That can interfere with how the person who is the client experiences the massage. For instance, if you know that your practitioner has a persistent wrist problem, would you ask her to go deeper? If you know that she's upset over her divorce, would you complain if she were late for your massage?

Here are some ways to minimize the confusion when doing trades and bartering:

Do Only One-Time Trades

Trades have a better chance of working if they are one-time-only practices and not ongoing. For instance, many practitioners who are new in a community trade as a way to introduce their work to other practitioners.

Be Clear About the Details of the Trade from the Beginning

The challenge with trades is to be very clear what the exchange is. It is best to write it down for both parties to see. Some practitioners say they don't like doing trades because they often end up trading one of their \$70 sessions for someone else's \$50 session. You can trade two sessions for one or one and a half sessions for one, but the point is to enter into the exchange knowing exactly what the trade is and that both parties are satisfied with it.

CONSIDER THIS

If you charge less than a therapist you do a trade with, how would you feel at the conclusion if she says "That will be \$20, since I charge more than you do?" You might be shocked that she doesn't consider an hour of your time and skill equal to an hour of her time and skill. Be sure that the expectations of both parties involved are very clear.

Be Careful if You Barter for a Service Rather Than for Something Tangible

Some forms of barter are unprofessional. For example, bartering for psychotherapy isn't generally considered legitimate in the professional psychotherapy community. But what about bartering for other services? One of the difficulties is in being precise. Suppose you're bartering a session for 2 hours of house cleaning. The client's idea of how a house should look after 2 hours of cleaning can be different from yours. If it's not as tidy as you want, then it's awkward to switch from the nonjudgmental practitioner's role to that of the complaining customer. It's also less than desirable for a client to have such an intimate glimpse of your private life and personal habits. A colleague says, "I don't want clients to see what's inside my car—all the clutter and mess—much less what's inside my house." Another colleague says "I was bartering with my hairdresser. Then she used a new perm solution on my hair and I wound up looking like I had stuck my finger in a light socket—not the look I was going for. She assured me it would 'calm down' in a few days, but I was very unhappy with the way it looked, and she wasn't happy when I broke off the trade."

However, it can work to barter for other services that have a set fee and are not highly personal, such as bartering for yoga classes.

Be Clear About Value When Bartering for Goods

The happiest exchanges can be for various goods, particularly artwork. It's important that the value of the item be clear and agreed on by both parties beforehand. Also, if you're bartering for something you haven't seen, you may want to decide what will happen if you don't like the finished product.

REAL EXPERIENCE

When I opened my own business, I bartered with a local artist for some very nice paintings for my office. I couldn't have afforded to buy them outright, and she referred to herself as a "starving artist" who could not have afforded to get regular massage. It was a win-win for both of us. I also bartered with a woman who made a beautiful quilt to cover my massage table. I have a personal policy of not bartering for services, only for goods, and only when I've actually seen the goods the person is offering. I've heard too many horror stories about therapists bartering with other people for and being unhappy with what the end result is, so I just decided from the outset not to do that.

—M.M., LMT

Spell Out How to Terminate the Agreement

Be clear ahead of time about what will happen if one of the parties decides to quit before the exchange is even. Suppose a practitioner is bartering massage for guitar lessons. She's given \$200 worth of massage sessions and has received only \$100 worth of guitar lessons. At that point, she decides she doesn't really want to practice, and doesn't want any more lessons.

Because they hadn't already resolved how to handle this possibility, they now have some potentially sticky questions to resolve. Since she is the one who changed her mind, does the guitar teacher owe her anything? And if he does owe her the \$100 balance, does he have to pay it all immediately? The details can vary, but it's best to work them out ahead of time. Putting them in writing makes clear that you both understand the terms.

If Possible, Trade or Barter with Professionals

It's easiest to trade with someone who is a professional at whatever the service or work is. Professionals usually have a clear idea of their prices and know how to work with clients. In the earlier story about the therapist who was unsatisfied with the wallpaper job in her living room, she would likely have been okay with the trade if the client she had bartered with had worked at the wallpaper store for years and been a professional who was experienced at hanging wallpaper. If you need a professional service, that's probably going to work out much better if you get a professional to do it, whether it's cash or trade.

Be Willing to Say No

Don't agree to a trade or barter just to please the other person, and don't barter for something you don't want or need.

Don't agree to a trade or barter just to please the other person, and don't barter for something you don't want or need.

These situations are unbalanced from the start and can breed resentment. You should also be careful about how many such exchanges you take on at once so that you are not working all week and ending up with no cash. Remember that trades and barterers can take more energy than regular clients because of the time spent on negotiating terms as well as the likelihood of misunderstandings.

Despite all the possible problems, trades sometimes work out well. Some practitioners have established workable trades with colleagues, often those who were fellow students, in which the trade feels mutually beneficial and the two give each other valuable feedback.

Other Relationships

Clients that we have other relationships with can sometimes be problematic. So can clients that we've never even met—but have some knowledge of. For example, your

friend suffered through a very painful divorce after her husband left her for another woman. What if the “other woman” calls for an appointment? Could you treat her like any other client? What about the parent of the child that you feel bullies your son at school? Or the client who turns out to be the brother of the neighbor that you don’t get along with? It can be a challenge to leave our prejudices out of the treatment room. If you don’t feel you can, it’s best to turn that client over to someone else.

Business Relationships

The ethics of selling products to clients or involving them in business deals is covered in more detail in Chapter 5. To review, there are two main problems:

1. Because of transference, the client may not be as free as a nonclient to refuse to buy whatever the practitioner is selling. Even just a suggestion from a respected or beloved practitioner can feel like an offer the client can’t refuse.
2. If something goes wrong—the lotion is messy, the stocks drop, the pillow doesn’t seem to help the neck pain—the client may not feel as free as a nonclient to complain or ask for a refund. And you could lose a client if a business deal or product doesn’t pan out.

Some spas strongly urge or require their massage therapists to push clients to buy products from the spa. As discussed in Chapter 5, you want to check out a spa’s policy on selling to clients and decide whether you are comfortable with it before you commit to the job.

Involving clients in other business transactions can cause resentment, lower the client’s respect for the practitioner, and interfere with the therapeutic relationship.

Just as we don’t want to engage clients in business, we want to be careful about taking on business associates as clients. Here’s the kind of confusion that can happen:

- *A massage therapist who is a part-time operating room nurse gave a massage to one of her nursing colleagues. During the massage, when the colleague talked about problems she was having at home and cried, the therapist was appropriately sympathetic and understanding. After that, the colleague started slacking off at work. She excused herself for not doing her part by saying to the nurse/massage therapist, “I know you understand what a hard time I’m having these days.”*

Practitioners also report having problems when they work with someone who is their boss or has authority over them in another setting. For instance, sometimes bosses want to continue acting as if they are in charge when they become clients.

They can be demanding clients, expecting to be given extra time or special concessions. Setting limits with the boss or even contemplating having to set limits can be uncomfortable.

Also, sometimes practitioners rightfully do not wish to know the people for whom they work that intimately, or are afraid the boss might make an inappropriate comment or sexualize the situation.

Minimizing Problems

It's often hard to avoid dual relationships. Sometimes we have good reason to take on a friend as a client, do a trade, barter, or even socialize with a client or an ex-client. For example, we may be the only one in town who practices a particular kind of bodywork, and we think a friend would greatly benefit from that method. We may be the only massage therapist that a shy friend would be comfortable seeing. We may live and work in a small community in which it's hard to avoid social contact with our clients.

When are dual relationships likely to lead to trouble, and when might they work? How can we manage dual relationships with the least stress to clients and to ourselves?

Dual Relationships to Avoid

There are a number of circumstances in which a dual relationship would be likely to lead to problems or be harmful to the client.

Working with Friends or Relatives Who Are in Physical or Emotional Crisis or Actively Dealing with Abuse Issues

The likelihood of intense transference or dependency when a friend or relative is dealing with deep emotional issues makes it difficult to work well with that person. Also, we generally have too much investment in such people to have the objectivity to be helpful. A colleague reports:

- *My friend had a chronic back problem that flared up right before a vacation. I really wanted to help her. In spite of my best efforts, after an hour she was still in a good deal of pain. Had she been a regular client, I would have been concerned, but I probably would have been able to be more objective. I would have stopped at the end of an hour, knowing that I had done my best and that there may be other factors involved, such as emotional issues. But since it was my friend, I kept trying, which only seemed to make things worse. The fact that I couldn't help her was hard on our friendship, and it took a while for us to be able to talk honestly about what happened.*

Doing Emotionally Oriented or Psychologically Oriented Bodywork

Practitioners of emotionally or psychologically oriented bodywork should avoid dual relationships. These practitioners are always working with deep transference issues and cannot risk the complications that would arise from dual relationships. As with other dual relationships, people who do emotionally-oriented work cannot become friends with clients and can rarely become friends with ex-clients. And it always bears repeating: being trained in such modalities does not make you a psychologist.

Having Sexual Relationships with Clients

As discussed in Chapter 7, maintaining ethical boundaries means that sexual relationships with clients are forbidden and those with ex-clients are entered into with caution and care.

Bringing Clients into Outside Business Deals

As discussed in Chapter 5, involving clients or ex-clients in another business relationship, verges on being unethical.

Tips for Working with Dual Relationships

If you decide to have a dual relationship with a client, here are suggestions for making it less of a problem:

Discuss Your Misgivings with the Prospective Client

If friends or family members want to work with you, talk with them about the problems with changing roles. Let them know they would probably benefit more from going to a practitioner they don't know. If you both still want to proceed, check in with them regularly to make sure no problems are arising.

Keep Your Usual Boundaries and Framework Standards

Because you're already bending boundaries by working with someone you know in another way, you need to be more aware of all other boundaries and framework, not less. You may be tempted to think, "Oh, it's just Bob. I can still be eating my sandwich when he arrives." That would give Bob a message that the setting is not quite professional or safe for him. Aside from interfering with his ability to relax, it's bad advertising for you. Every client is a potential source of referrals; if someone asks Bob how he liked his massage, you want him to endorse you with enthusiasm rather than think, "I hope she acts more like a professional when she's with other clients."



Keep Confidentiality and Session Boundaries

Assure clients with whom you have another relationship that what they say and do inside a session will be held in confidence. Let them know that it's best for the two of you to keep work-related questions and comments inside the office space.

Separate Social Time and Professional Time

Advise clients that they will get more out of their sessions if you don't mix session time with either social or business time—if you don't chitchat during sessions, talk about business, or go to lunch together right before or after sessions. You might want to stop seeing a friend socially while he or she is a client or, at the very least, not take the friendship to another level. If someone is, for instance, a friend that you see socially every few months, you don't want to start having lunch once a week during your work together.

Special Considerations for Students

It's particularly common for students to work with friends and relatives while they are learning their trade. Although this is not usually a good idea for a professional practice, this can be a useful way for students to acquire experience, become accustomed to doing a certain number of sessions a week, and practice their "tableside manner."

Even in a practice situation, the problems of dual relationships arise. Massage students who haven't yet had a lot of experience may be stressed over things that

CONSIDER THIS

We all have a life outside work, and we're all entitled to have fun, but we may still need to be on guard. What if you're in a club with some girlfriends, having a few drinks and celebrating your pal's birthday, and a client you've seen several times professionally comes up and asks you to dance? You don't want to appear rude in refusing—but it's probably for the best if you do refuse. You're drinking, the lights are down low, the music is playing, and you're wearing a sexy outfit. It may be tempting to forget that you are this person's massage therapist and just be a woman out for a night on the town—but you have to consider how that might affect your future professional encounters with this person.

might seem more ordinary to them a few years into their practice, like the friend or family member who shows up late for their massage. One therapist said “My Aunt Marge is chronically late for everything. Everyone in the family jokes that she'll be late for her own funeral. Since I know that, when she says she's coming at 2 p.m., I put that appointment in the book for 2:15 p.m., because I know she isn't going to get there until then. But when I was working in the student clinic, it really stressed me out the day she had an appointment there and showed up late. I felt like the clinic supervisor was waiting to see how I handled it, and I was nervous about it.” The same “little things” that come up for students also come up for more experienced professionals when they have dual relationships—keeping a friend's massage from becoming a social occasion, dealing with friends who forget their appointment, expect a free foot massage, and so forth. However, these situations are more common and troublesome for students who are starting their practices and may feel insecure about claiming a professional role and setting appropriate boundaries.

Here are some suggestions to help students start out on the right foot:

Set Boundaries from the Beginning

When you begin to do practice sessions with friends and family, let them know what to expect from the beginning. You can say, for instance, “I appreciate your being a guinea pig now as I'm learning my trade, and the session will be free. When I've graduated and gotten my license, I'll charge all my clients \$60” (or whatever amount you plan to charge).

It's easier to set limits at the time the initial appointment is arranged, not after resentment has built because a friend has stayed for 2 hours after her massage. “I'll have an hour available from 2 to 3 o'clock, and then I'll have to take care of some other business.” This is often an issue for therapists who work from home;

It's up to you to let friends and family know the boundaries. They may not realize that they're taking advantage of you.

sometimes family and friends don't realize that working at home is still working! You may need to make it clear to those in your circle, if you're working in a home office, that you're seeing clients throughout the day and can't handle drop-in visitors or stay on the phone to chat. It's up to you to let friends and family know the boundaries. They may not realize that they're taking advantage of you.

Treat Free Sessions As if They Were “Real” Sessions: Practice Boundaries

A good way to develop professionalism and help the boundaries stay clear is to treat each session as if the client were paying. Let friends and family members know that they will be treated as regular clients and explain what that means: you want to start and end on time, you'll use appropriate draping, and they may talk if they want, but you won't respond by chatting in the way that you would in a social situation. You can explain that this framework is helpful to you as a student and will also help them get the most out of their sessions. An added bonus is that friends and family members will have the experience of seeing how professional you've become and will be more inspired to recommend you to someone else.

Be Wary of Dual Relationships

Sometimes we're lucky and squeak by without problems with a dual relationship. Usually, though, these relationships lead to anything from minor annoyances (putting extra energy into sorting out misunderstandings) to major problems (being in hot water for unethical behavior). Clients who are entangled in dual relationships with us often don't benefit from our work as much as other clients do. There just isn't the same amount of attention and therapeutic focus.

Decisions about whether to take on a person as a client need to be based on solid professional judgment, not ease and convenience. However despite the drawbacks, dual relationships will probably always be with us. It helps if we realize the problems intrinsic to their nature and take extra precautions to make the professional relationship safe for both parties.

Questions for Reflection

1. Outside of massage or bodywork, have you ever been part of a dual relationship with a friend or family member? How did it work out? If it worked out well, what do you think made it successful? If not, what got in the way?
2. Have you ever been part of a trade? Were you satisfied with what you received from it? If not, what would have made it better?

3. Have you ever been in a situation with a professional or a businessperson in which there was a dual relationship? Were there any problems related to the dual relationship? If not, what do you think helped? If there were problems, what would have helped lessen or eliminate them?
4. At a social occasion, have you ever gotten involved in essentially giving a free consultation or sample of your work to a potential client? How did that work out? If it worked out well, what made the difference? If not, what would you do differently to avoid problems next time?
5. Have you ever gone from being a client to being a friend of a professional of any kind? Were there any issues to work out—for instance, were you disappointed when you found out more about the professional? If it has worked out well to be a friend, do you think that it would always work out well to become a friend of the professionals in your life? Why or why not? If it didn't work out well, what made the difference?

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