

Ethics Overview

General Definitions

- Countertransference = The emotional reaction of the massage therapist to the subject's contribution
- dual relationships = A situation where multiple roles exist between a massage therapist and a client
- ethics = Moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity
- morals = Of, relating to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct or the distinction between right and wrong
- professionalism = Conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person
- transference = The redirection to a substitute, usually a therapist, of emotions that were originally felt in childhood or with another person and/or situation
- virtue = Moral excellence; goodness; righteousness, conformity of one's life and conduct to moral and ethical principles; uprightness; rectitude
- boundaries = a protective circle around the professional relationship that separates what is appropriate within that relationship from what is not
- therapeutic relationship = a relationship between client and practitioner that is focused on the well being of the client
- informed consent = the client's authorization for services to be performed by the practitioner. The client or the client's guardian must be fully advised of what the service will entail and its benefits and any contraindications and must be competent to give consent.

The Basics

- Ethics aren't always black and white, and ethical dilemmas are often unexpected
- Ethical practice is a little more nuanced than simply "doing the right thing," in reality comprising the elements of virtue, morals, ethics and professionalism.
- Honoring your client's privacy at all times is required for ethical practice
- Be sure to obtain informed consent and spell out, verbally and in writing, what the client can expect from you

Following are some general guidelines you can use as a foundation for ethical practice:

- Be client-centered
- Set client expectations
- Set your expectations
- Be honest
- Beware of scope, in all things

Misconceptions about ethics

- I'll just use common sense.
- When there are standards to follow, it allows us to take a look at what is right and wrong, without adding in our personal biases
- All I need to know is technique.
- Technique is such a large part of being a massage therapist but you need to continually remind yourself of the importance of creating and maintaining boundaries with your clients—for your safety and theirs.
- Professional boundaries create barriers.

It's important to remember that there is a power differential in your relationship with your clients, and you do not want to put your clients in a position where they feel like they have to take care of you—which can happen if you start to share too much personal information with them.

Dual Relationships

Common types of dual relationships and when they occur include:

- **Familial:** When close or extended family members become massage clients, or when massage clients become family members.
- **Social:** When the practitioner's close friends, or friends of current clients, become massage clients; or, when clients become members of the practitioner's social circle.
- **Financial:** When a client purchases a product(s) from the practitioner, or when the client sells products/services to the practitioner.
- **Supervisory:** When a practitioner's employer, instructor or mentor becomes a client; or, when a current client becomes the practitioner's employer, instructor or mentor.
- **Romantic:** When a client and practitioner experience mutual attraction and share the impulse to initiate a personal, more intimate relationship.

Following are some ways you can prepare for—and mitigate—the potential risks of dual relationships:

- Written policies
- Create scripts
- Discuss risks
- Maintain confidentiality

Client Misconduct

It is crucial for massage therapists to self-monitor interactions with clients so that signs of transference (or other red flags) that may indicate a problem can be caught early.

Signs of client misconduct include:

- Repeated compliments on the massage therapist's skills, accompanied by comparisons to the lesser skills of other massage therapists.
- Flattery of the massage therapist's business acumen, intelligence, communication skills and professional success, again compared favorably to others.
- Refusal to receive massage from other practitioners, accompanied by disappointment and jokes about feeling "abandoned" when appointment requests are not possible.
- Requests for special appointment times and longer-than-usual massage sessions.
- Telling jokes or stories that are off-color, accompanied by surprise that such behavior could cause offense "between friends."
- Writhing or "humping" while on the table, or indications of ejaculation or orgasm. Male arousal during therapeutic massage can occasionally occur when the client falls asleep during treatment; it is the practitioner's sense of client intent that determines whether this is a violation of safe touch.
- Requests for the practitioner to use certain words or phrases during treatment, for the practitioner to allow masturbation during treatment, for inappropriate or sexual touch from the client, or actual physical restraint or attack of the massage therapist.

Any interaction with a client that is judged to be outside accepted therapeutic interactions must be documented in order to initiate a dated record of conduct:

- Documentation should include date, time and location of the incident, as well as names of the client, practitioner and any others involved. Massage therapists should also write a detailed narrative of the events and the resolution of the incident at the time (such as termination of treatment, refusal to leave the premises, etc.).
- If the interaction violated safe touch boundaries, the documentation should be shared with supervisors and other practitioners who may have worked with the client.
- Because such documentation is part of a client file that is confidential, it should not be shared with general staff, although front desk staff may be alerted so they can decline to schedule subsequent appointments for the client.
- If law enforcement personnel were summoned, a narrative of that interaction, along with names of the officers and copies of the reports, should be placed in the client's file, too.

Following is a concise list of each step you need to take to terminate a massage session. You do not need to offer a client lengthy explanations:

1. Remove hands from the client's body.
2. Re-drape the client.
3. Describe the behavior you observed.
4. Inform the client that the behavior is not tolerated, that the massage therapy session has ended and that you'll be leaving the room.
5. Instruct the client to promptly dress and leave the premises.
6. Leave the room.
7. If you work in a spa, franchise or another practice, inform supervisory staff why treatment has been terminated, describing the incident in detail.
8. If others are not on the premises, leave the premises until the client has departed to prevent personal endangerment.
9. If the terminated treatment is taking place in the client's home, leave the premises immediately. If you feel threatened, do not linger to pack belongings. Return for them at another time, accompanied by law enforcement.

Maintaining Ethical Practice

- Modeling: Adhere to the highest standards of conduct.

- Enforcement: Unethical behavior should not be tolerated.
- Communication: Maintain an open dialogue about ethics.
- Transparency: Openly post codes of ethics and mission statements.

Practice Equality

In a massage practice, equality means transparency and equal access. In other words, each client can choose from the same therapeutic services (within the bounds of safety) and is subject to the same policies and procedures, regardless of ethnicity, gender identity, and economic or other status. Equality ensures access but may not achieve fairness for every client. Be aware of legal requirements.

Social Media Boundaries

Social media can be a valuable tool, but if not used with care and purpose, social media can lead to misunderstanding, too.

Following are a few simple guidelines:

- Identify intentions
- Create a list of objectives
- Ask yourself the tough questions
- Craft mindful posts
- Always preserve confidentiality
- Control perception

Create and Maintain Ethical Boundaries

Office space: Your office and treatment room help you establish boundaries because they speak to your professionalism.

Pressure: Massage therapists should establish pressure goals with each client.

Draping: Discuss proper draping with your clients, and give clients permission to establish those boundaries, making sure you're clear about the therapeutic intent and goals of the massage session.

Introduction and intake: Whether you're a sole practitioner or work in a spa, franchise or another practice, creating clear boundaries starts when you first meet your client.

Professional appearance: Remember, the most important person in your practice is your client. Professional dress should be respectful and comfortable, but clearly specific to performing massage therapy.

Stay current, and practice what you know: Practicing ethically and creating clear boundaries also depends on massage therapists being aware of their own skills and committing to regular continuing education.

Remain within scope of practice: Enforcing boundaries also requires you stay within scope of practice for the massage therapy profession.

Be aware: You're in a profession that focuses on helping people, some who may be facing chronic illness or pain or dealing with debilitating stress or anxiety.

Keep clients, clients: Social boundaries include not having personal relationships with your clients.

Practice equality: In a massage practice, equality means transparency and equal access.

Ensure fairness: Fairness means there is transparency and negotiation between client and massage therapist to create the most appropriate treatment plan, utilize the most effective massage techniques, and deliver the highest level of care for an individual client.

Importance of Laws and Regulations

- Review the state board of massage therapy website which you reside and/or will hold a license for massage therapy for laws and regulations.