

ETHICS, SCHMETHICS:

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MASSAGE ETHICS & HOSPITALITY

A Continuing Education Course for Massage Therapists

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INTRODUCTION

“Thanks for the hospitality.”

My brother hugged me and boarded his plane from Las Vegas to San Francisco. My downstairs bedroom had provided shelter to my brother and sister-in-law for three nights, and his words spoken in gratitude also conveyed a compliment: We noticed the little things and we appreciated them.

At least this is how I took it. Maybe the homemade granola I doled out in sandwich bags before our hike that Saturday tasted like sawdust. Perhaps the steel cut oatmeal I cooked up that morning, knowing it was their breakfast food of choice, resembled inedible cement that was consumed out of sheer politeness. It's possible that the brand new, silky, microfiber sheets on the air mattress, virgin box of Charmin wet wipes on the bathroom counter, and fruit plate that I ordered for my hungry family members to munch on in our pool-side cabana were a complete and utter disappointment – but I don't think so.

This was pure, unadulterated hospitality – a phenomenon I enjoy studying, experiencing, and lavishing upon the masses, world willing.

But this course is also about ethics, a far less glamorous topic that seemingly doesn't have much to do with cabanas, vacations, or multiple Vegas buffet dinners. Over my years as a nationally certified massage therapist, I have found that my mental resources, when dedicated to dry and boring ethical matters (standards, guidelines, blah blah blah) become exhausted rather swiftly. What usually remains are feelings of tedium, rigidity, and perceived judgment by an invisible high court of academics and, speaking as a massage therapist, other massage therapists. I doubt I am alone in thinking “the powers that be just don't get me” in this area.

Then, one evening, lightning struck. Or maybe it was the flash of the neon lights on Fremont Street. I saw something that had been there all along, but was obscured by “ethics requirements” and corporate customer service mandates: great hospitality is built on a structurally sound foundation of ethics! Eureka!

In this ebook, we're going to explore the relationship between massage ethics and hospitality. We'll cover professionalism, customer service, the NCBTMB's Standards of Practice, and a few other helpful topics. Some portions of this course will deal with one side of the equation more heavily than the other, but I promise we'll tie it all together if you stick with me to the end.

With Endless Appreciation,

Andrea Lipomi, LMT

www.ConfidentMassage.com

ETHICS

ethics: an individual's or group's standards of behavior

(*Ethics for Massage Therapists*, Yardley-Nohr, 2007)

ethics: the study of moral principles and appropriate conduct

(*The Ethics of Touch*, Benjamin & Sohlen-Moe, 2005)

Well that's kind of confusing, isn't it? The word "ethics" can mean a few different things. (This is when I usually start simultaneously smacking myself in the forehead and taking a snooze.) To add to the confusion, say hello to the similar concepts of:

values: Personal convictions that are important to the individual, tangible or intangible, that are deemed to have worth. An example could be that I value maintaining healthy relationships with my loved ones. This is worth a lot to me, but just because I think it's important doesn't mean I expect you to share my feelings on the matter.

principles: Personal fundamentals that allow an individual to behave with integrity. Our values (convictions on what is of worth) influence our principles. I act upon the principle of making quality time spent with loved ones a priority because I *value* healthy relationships with these folks.

morals: Usually based on standards stemming from religious or cultural beliefs, morals have to do with judging behavior or attitudes to be right vs. wrong, or good vs. bad. Moral standards are subjective, and can depend on factors as varied as cultural identities, or levels of religious adherence. (Because of all the finger-pointing that I perceive to be associated with making moral judgments, personally I find this concept to be the least relatable – but maybe that's just the *value* I place on personal freedom – influencing the *principle* of my refusal to judge others – speaking.)

laws: Because we're trying to live in a society, we try our best to enact and enforce rules of conduct that the majority (usually) of citizens agree will keep us and others safe from harm. Thanks to the concept of laws (and order), I was able to watch Christopher Meloni kick ass as a cop on the small screen for twelve years (and as an inmate on HBO's OZ for six).

And finally...

ethics: For the sake of this course, we'll use dictionary.com's second definition of *ethics*: "the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc." This will keep things as uncomplicated as possible as we explore the relationship between hospitality and the professional codes of ethics set forth by the organizations that set the standards for massage therapy in the United States.

Many professions, especially those that have a direct impact on the physical and mental health and welfare of the public, draft their own codes of professional ethics. These conduct guidelines ultimately serve to protect clients or patients by setting forth standards that steer a professional's decisions toward outcomes that benefit the client or patient, assuming that undue harm is not inflicted upon another individual in doing so.

Some of the most well-known massage organizations in the US with their own codes of ethics include: The American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA), Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP), and the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (NCBTMB). Members of the NCBTMB must also agree to abide by the guidelines set forth in the organization's 69- item *Standards of Practice* document, which basically expounds on the 18 ethical guidelines spelled out in the NCBTMB's *Code of Ethics*. Because this is an NCBTMB-approved ethics course, and because the NCBTMB's ethical guidelines make good ethical sense (comprehensive yet not overbearing), we'll focus on the main points in these two documents throughout this book. (If you desire to possess your own personal copies of these documents, please visit NCBTMB.org.)

To summarize my personal take on *ethics* in general, I'm a golden rule kind of girl: I strive to treat everyone that I encounter in life and in the massage room the way that I would like to be treated. If you forget your two carat diamond ring on the table in my room, I will make sure you get it back. If it's my fault that your massage started late, you will not be shorted on time. Your sheets will be clean and neat. If I'm massaging you and I apply too much pressure or you're uncomfortable in some way, I want to know so that I can correct the situation and *wow* you with my understanding of ethical behavior AND hospitality. (I can also be counted on to tell you if you have a huge chunk of spinach between your front teeth, FYI.)

We've made it through one whole chapter on ethics! I'm still writing, and you're still reading, so let's celebrate with an adventure in the land of hospitality.

HOSPITALITY

"Service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient *feel*." – Danny Meyer, NYC-based restaurateur and author of *Setting the Table*

Before I was a massage therapist, I was a customer service supervisor employed in the printing industry. Although I was—and am—far from being a perfect human being (and was even further from feeling any excessive passion for the printing industry), I did excel at two things: channeling my obsessive-compulsive personality toward spot-on quality control, and making clients feel welcomed the minute they walked through the print shop doors. It didn't matter if they needed a single full-color enlargement of a photo of their grandkids, or an order of 10,000 coupons conveniently due yesterday. In my world, every would-be client who even considered spending a few bucks with us deserved as much respect and hospitality as the next.

I've never truly understood why anyone in the "customer service" field would stop short of making as many customers as possible feel special through the use of great hospitality, yet I manage to encounter lackluster, disappointing service and hospitality on an almost daily basis. If we are given the opportunity to make someone feel appreciated, unique, and heard – if we are given the opportunity to put a smile on someone's face – why wouldn't we want to? In addition to the obvious perks like positive cash flow and word-of-mouth advertising, our little errors are so much more easily forgivable if we've already exchanged currency by way of hospitality.

If you've already perfected the task of providing excellent customer service (getting a quality product to the people in an efficient, effective manner), adding a flourish of hospitality should take minimal additional effort. Think of it as the whipped cream on top of the banana split: peeling the bananas, scooping the ice cream, and heating the hot fudge are the labor-intensive parts of sundae-crafting; sending nitrous oxide through dairy with the gentle press of a nozzle, and spooning a teaspoon of rainbow sprinkles and a cherry onto your creation are the easy parts. A naked sundae can still be eaten, but it's so much less satisfying without those delicious toppings. What's the payoff in taking half-measures?

In my 2011 ebook, *Confident Relaxation Massage: Advice for the Budding Massage Therapist*, I break down the three main components of hospitality that I feel most massage therapists and massage establishments should focus on if they want to up their hospitality quotient. Briefly, these are, in no particular order:

attentiveness: We ought to pay attention to what our clients are communicating, through word, deed, and body language. If we sense that something is off, or that our client has something to tell us, or that we're not quite understanding something that was said, we should politely ask for clarification.

personalization: Let's keep good client records, and keep great hospitality in mind when we do. In addition to jotting down our clients' trouble areas, areas to avoid, what they said they liked or didn't like, specific techniques or products used during treatment, etc., we should make an effort to write down any hints they've dropped about upcoming special occasions (birthdays,

anniversaries, etc.) or conversational topics that we'd like to revisit in future sessions (or not!). Cookie-cutter service is not an option when we embrace the concept of personalization.

anticipatory service: This aspect of great hospitality can manifest in many forms, from a freshly opened bottle of water offered to a coughing client, to an adjustment to a client's bill or a complimentary what-not for an inconvenience that occurred on your watch that was of no fault of his. The idea is that we jump to action while correctly anticipating our clients' needs before they verbalize a request.

Keeping these hospitality components in mind can aid us in consistently making our clients feel special, and recognizing the symbiotic relationship that they share with ethical behaviors makes the topic of ethics easy to relate to on a day-to-day basis. It brings things right back to the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you'd like to be treated. Assuming you're not a grumpy, anti-social masochist, your clients will feel recognized for the individuals that they are, and it shows them that you can be counted on to treat them right.

“In hospitality, one size fits one!” – Danny Meyer

PROFESSIONALISM Standard I

professionalism: the quality of the image an individual conveys

(The Ethics of Touch, Benjamin & Sohnen-Moe, 2005)

Massage providers who behave in a professional manner really make life a lot simpler for themselves. The NCBTMB defines six Standards of Practice that include 69 specific guiding principles. Standard I of the NCBTMB Standards of Practice offers a lot of basic, practical, lifesimplifying advice in this regard.

Let's take, for example, the fact that it's unethical to misrepresent our qualifications as massage professionals. (I would also argue that it's unethical to lie about your age in an online dating profile, but if that's your kink, whatever.) To break it down further, you wouldn't sign up to receive a colonoscopy from a phony physician with a cereal-box-prize diploma, would you? No. Hence it's not OK for us to tell people that we're trained in Manual Lymphatic Drainage/Rolfing/connective tissue techniques/etcetera when we're not.

Enter the concept of *scope of practice*: The public is learning, albeit more slowly than some of us would prefer, about therapeutic massage; however, as evidenced by the frequent questions I get from well-meaning clients (“Do you have to go to school for this?” “It costs \$13,000 to go to

massage school?!?” “You have to pay how much to be licensed?!?!?”) it’s clear that we, as massage professionals, know a lot more about the nitty gritty of massage therapy than the average American. Logically, we shouldn’t depend on our clients to define what’s within our scope of practice – that responsibility falls on the powers that be, and it’s our responsibility to know what’s up and to conduct ourselves accordingly.

scope of practice: the traditional knowledge base and standard practices of the profession

(*The Educated Heart*, McIntosh, 2005)

Scope of practice depends mainly on local laws (for example, perhaps your state does or does not allow massage therapists to perform body scrubs or body wraps), and professional training (knowing and respecting your limits and qualifications). It would be impossible for local regulators to list every possible procedure that falls outside of the “massage therapy scope of practice,” but a bit of common sense dictates that if we weren’t trained and tested on performing chiropractic-style spinal adjustments while enrolled in any formal massage education, it’s outside of our scope (regardless of how many clients we meet that ask for this service).

Maintaining professional relationships, whether within our own places of employment or through professional networks, is a fact of life for massage therapists. The day will come when a client requests work that falls outside of our scope of practice or that may not be our specialty, and we know that our client would be better served by seeing another professional. We ought to treat our clients as we would like to be treated, and refer out.

Another aspect of playing well with others involves how we treat other professionals when they’re not around to hear us. Smearing another massage therapist’s reputation or talking smack about their personal or professional life is a great example of unethical behavior and how it translates to hospitality failure. Treating each other with respect is just as important as treating our clients with respect. Play nice!

Among the most important standards for professionalism are the responsibilities massage therapists bear regarding client safety. We are ethically required to utilize proper sanitation procedures, just as we’d insist that our doctor or dentist do the same. Following *universal precautions* – avoiding potentially pathogenic bodily fluids or skin lesions on *everybody* – shows intelligence on the part of the massage practitioner in addition to healthy, necessary boundaries. Safety first!

Other aspects of professionalism include sensible draping techniques that maintain the massage industry’s standards for client comfort and security, wearing clean clothing of a professional nature, and communicating (online and in real life) in a respectful manner. It is true that some of these standards are subjective. My two cents? When in doubt, keep things simple and err on the side of mainstream professionalism. My four cents? If you wouldn’t want your teenage offspring wearing it in public, maybe you shouldn’t be wearing it to work. My four and a half cents? Respect yourself and others at all times.

LEGAL AND ETHICAL REQUIREMENTS Standard II

I'm not an attorney, and in keeping with the ethical standards set forth in the previous chapter, I'm not going to pretend to be one. If you're looking for legal advice, please look elsewhere.

I am comfortable, however, with conveying the message that the NCBTMB wants you, as a member or prospective member of the organization, to follow local, state, and federal laws. They also want you to alert them if you have any pending litigation or complaints regarding your professional conduct.

In addition to your responsibility to report any personal criminal proceedings to the NCBTMB, you're also obligated to report any actual crimes or valid complaints regarding professional ethics that involve another NCBTMB member or applicant. This doesn't give you carte blanche to get all witch-hunty on your colleagues, however. It's unethical to make false accusations or to pass on unsubstantiated rumors, and such things can end up costing innocent people their livelihoods. I'd also argue that it's also ethically troublesome to intentionally waste someone's time (in this case the good people at the NCBTMB) with bogus "information."

Maintaining quality client records is another Standard of Practice that belongs in this chapter, and it provides us with excellent opportunities to wow our clients on the hospitality front. Truthful, accurate client records are a fundamental building block on which to erect a top-notch massage therapist/client relationship. I gave some examples of helpful tidbits to include in your records under "hospitality" and "personalization" a few chapters back. Here's an expanded view from *Confident Relaxation Massage: Advice for the Budding Massage Therapist*:

Because you've kept good client records, you know that eight weeks ago when you last saw Client X he complained of having tight neck and shoulder muscles pre-massage. You spent extra time in these areas and got those muscles to loosen up. You also applied peppermint essential oil to Client X's trouble areas.

So guess what? When you bring Client X into your massage room today, you're going to recap what happened eight weeks ago. You're going to ask him if he wants you to focus on those areas again, and if he'd like for you to use peppermint oil again. Maybe he does, and maybe he doesn't, but he is going to love the personalized service that you are bestowing upon him because in this day and age, service like this is rare, and we all like to be remembered.

I had a massage at a day spa in Austin, Texas last year. The next time I'm in Austin, I will go back to that same day spa and request Erin, not only because the massage itself was great and Erin embodied the principals that I discuss in this book, but because when I came back to Las Vegas there was a hand-written note in my mailbox from Erin, wishing

me a good trip home and thanking me for my business. It's been 12 months since I spent 90 minutes with her and I still remember her name.

I'm not saying that you need to write an 800-page book on each client's preferences, and your records can be briefer if you have a great memory (which, unfortunately, I do not). By investing a few minutes of your time immediately following a massage session, you will set yourself up for success by writing complete, accurate, truthful, helpful client notes, and if your clients ever request copies of their files, you can oblige them without skipping a beat.

CONFIDENTIALITY Standard III

Have you ever shown up for an appointment to see your doctor, dentist, or another professional where privacy would be expected, only to see a stack of client records on the receptionist's desk, just inches from prying eyes? If you were so inclined, you could most certainly read names, contact info, and the reasons for their last ten office visits. You hope that your file is at the bottom of the pile and if it isn't, you hope that the next several clients who walk through the door will have the decency to avert their eyes from your medical records.

How would you feel if you were thumbing through your local newspaper and you came across a full-page advertisement for [insert the product or business of your choice]. Right there, smack dab in the center of the ad, you spy a 10-inch tall photo of YOU. Sure, you're enjoying a better-than-average hair day and the photographer caught your good side, but this comes as a complete shock because you never gave permission for your name or photo to be used in this manner. Heck, you never even received any freebies or a "thank you!"

What do these examples have in common? In addition to being really bad ideas manifesting as really bad business practices, they both relate to the NCBTMB's Standard of Practice III: Confidentiality. Respecting our clients' privacy is both ethical and a huge plus in the hospitality department.

Your first instinct may be to assume that protecting client confidentiality is more important when working with VIPs and celebrities as opposed to everyday peeps like you and me. Nope! Protecting client confidentiality is important whether you've just massaged your 11-year-old neighbor (with their guardian's permission, of course), a feisty B-list Hollywood actress, a scandal-proof politician, or your mom. Every client deserves to feel safe, comfortable, and respected.

If you work in a setting where multiple people may be walking by your treatment room, make sure the door is shut before you begin discussions of a personal nature with your clients. Other clients don't want to hear about your client's torn rotator cuff tendons and they'll question whether their privacy will be disrespected in a similar manner. Your client may hold back certain health information if she thinks there's a chance that other people may overhear her. I've had clients come into the spa with family members who did not yet know that my clients were pregnant, yet in the privacy of the massage room and in hushed tones my clients told me. I did not want to be the weak link in that chain! Keep your door (and your trap) shut.

We may be tempted to dish-dish about our clients with our other clients from time to time. Resist! For every client that gets off on the gossip that their massage therapist has unethically provided – and who would probably insist that they wouldn't care if we did the same about them

– there’s a client who knows that if you’re OK with disclosing the goods on Client X’s private life, there’s a good chance that their own privacy is at risk too. The risk/reward ratio is skewed. Lost business and lost respect over irresponsible self-indulgent behavior is illogical at best.

Standard III stipulates that there are certain instances when it is appropriate to share client information with other parties. These would generally include providing info to the client themselves if they request it, if it is required by law or is medically necessary, or if doing so is in the best interest of public safety. If you perform massage in a group setting where client files are shared among the massage therapists, managers, and/or receptionists *for professional purposes only*, this is acceptable as long as your co-workers are ethical folk who respect your clients’ privacy as much as you do.

Client files should be securely stored and disposed of in a manner that makes them illegible to potential identity thieves. The NCBTMB requires that client records be held for a minimum of four years.

To sum up my take on confidentiality: keep it simple and make it a habit. Make sure others are out of earshot when you’re discussing personal and health matters with your clients. Keep your desk and all public areas free from papers, keep your computer screen turned toward you and away from others, keep your records secure, and keep your mouth shut. When in doubt, refer to the Golden Rule!

BUSINESS PRACTICES Standard IV

Most of us have seen commercials for fast food restaurants where the burgers look thick, juicy, and stacked to the ceiling with fresh toppings. How often are our expectations completely shot down when we actually open the wrapper? Have you *ever* purchased a sandwich that looked even remotely as tasty as the one featured in the ad? This example could also easily apply to the smiling help shown on TV commercials for a big box retailers or discount department stores, or to any number of diet product commercials out there that grace the small screen in our living rooms. Nowadays, we tend to be skeptical of advertising in general, but what if we really didn’t know that these advertisers were taking artistic liberties? What if we took them at face value?

A huge component of the NCBTMB’s Standard IV: Business Practices section relates to truth in advertising. There’s no good reason to mislead our clients and potential clients in regard to what our services can do for them. False advertising damages not only our personal reputations as massage providers, but when a person finds out that they’ve been lied to by a member of a certain profession, it can be very difficult for that person to trust another professional in the future.

The NCBTMB also prohibits the use of “sensational, sexual or provocative language and/or pictures” in massage therapy advertising used by its members. Massage therapists have worked

very hard over the past several decades to be viewed by the general public as members of a profession who provide a valuable service, often viewed as a crucial adjunct to the modern healthy lifestyle. It benefits massage therapists everywhere when our advertising is truthful, professional, *hospitable*, and can stand up to the bright light of public opinion. A related message is apparent in the standard's call to "comply with all laws regarding sexual harassment."

Initiating conflicts of interest and taking advantage of the trust that our clients put in us are pretty obvious ethical no-nos. How would you feel if you had been referred to another professional, not because the individual was the best service provider for the job, but because the referring party received a kickback for every referral? How would you feel if you found out that you had been talked into paying more than fair market value for an item of dubious benefit from someone whom you trusted? Treating someone like an ATM machine makes for crappy hospitality, and this applies to how we treat our colleagues as well.

Maintaining professional progress notes (if applicable) and adequate liability insurance are also important business practices. These items will not only take care of our clients should they need them, but they can give us peace of mind and can protect us from related career-battering circumstances (should we ever encounter the misfortune of having to experience them).

The NCBTMB puts heavy emphasis on the ethical financial responsibilities of running a massage business. Keeping financial records for at least three years, paying taxes, using sound accounting methods, making rates known prior to each session, and employing payment procedures that are on the up-and-up are super important. Aside from the obvious problem of messing with the government's money, clients like to know what they're spending in exchange for what they're receiving before they commit their hard-earned dollars to our cash registers.

The requirement of providing a safe environment for our clients appears in Standard IV as well, and I think that we can all agree that that one's always a good idea.

ROLES AND BOUNDARIES Standard V

role: 2: proper or customary function

(*dictionary.com*)

boundary: 1: something that indicates bounds or limits; a limiting or bounding line

(*dictionary.com*)

Our roles as massage therapists are to provide massage therapy to our clients in an ethical, professional manner. Our roles as massage therapists who give a hoot about providing outstanding hospitality to our clients are to provide massage therapy to our clients in an ethical, professional manner while making our clients feel special, valuable, and welcome. Boundaries exist where these role descriptions end – and it's up to us to respect them and to call the shots.

The NCBTMB (and many states that legislate massage therapy) place a huge amount of emphasis on the importance of roles and boundaries in our line of work. The refusal to follow ethical guidelines in this realm can leave massage therapists feeling insecure at best, and on a bad day can leave them open to career-ending accusations and formal complaints. This focus exists for good reason. Let's explore!

Harking back to our chapter on *professionalism*, Standard V: Roles and Boundaries makes it clear that massage therapists should be aware of their personal limitations and practice within them at all times. This standard can be applied in a multitude of ways. Here are some real world examples:

* A massage therapist works at a day spa. As she's walking through the retail area on her way to lunch, a spa guest stops her and asks her for advice on which facial moisturizer to purchase.

Since our massage therapist wouldn't know face cream from hemorrhoid cream if it bit her in a hemorrhoid-affected region, she politely recruits help from a more knowledgeable co-worker.

* Ten minutes into a sixty-minute massage, a client asks his massage therapist if he would be able to crack the client's back. The massage therapist politely explains that a chiropractor would be qualified to help the client with that, but that he would not be able to intentionally adjust the client's back. (If handled appropriately, i.e. the client asks for a good referral and the massage therapist knows of a qualified professional, a referral to a chiropractor could be provided.)

* A client asks her massage therapist if she could stretch the client's hamstrings. Although our massage therapist took a class on stretching five years ago, she hasn't practiced it in a long time and she doesn't feel comfortable performing a hamstring stretch on this client. Our massage therapist politely explains that stretching is not her forte, but that there's another therapist in the office who specializes in sports massage and stretching should the client be interested in scheduling with her.

* A client has booked a deep tissue massage, and our massage therapist is using as much pressure as he feels is appropriate for this client. The client requests more pressure, and says he "wants it to hurt." When our massage therapist goes even a little bit deeper, the client flinches and tenses up. Our massage therapist lightens up enough to prevent injury to himself and to the client and the flinching and tensing subside. If the client repeats his request, our massage therapist is completely prepared to politely inform the client that firmer pressure will be counter-productive and that he will not be able to go any deeper than is appropriate.

* A new spa client is asking her massage therapist to work on her inner thigh where the adductors attach to the pelvis. In the massage therapist's opinion, and in keeping with the spa's employee handbook, this is too close to the client's genital region for the massage therapist's comfort, especially on a brand new client. The massage therapist politely explains that work in that area is prohibited per spa policy.

What do all of these examples have in common? They all feature massage therapists who respect their limits and who don't let their egos or insecurities get them into trouble. These therapists also place high importance on communicating *honestly* and *politely* with their clients – making hospitality a top priority. Although the occasional client will be unhappy about not getting what they want, it makes zero sense for an ethical massage therapist to put a chink in their integrity in an attempt to please a difficult client who will inevitably become even more difficult as time goes on, regardless of how diplomatic the massage therapist is in their encounters with this person.

Standard V also brings us back to a subject discussed in our chapter on *business practices*: it is unethical to take advantage of someone who puts their trust in you. Please don't convince someone that they need to see you every other day for an expensive treatment when seeing you once a week would have the same (or better) effect. Don't sell them on a pricey, unnecessary product, or refer them to another unscrupulous individual who will then in turn pad their pockets (and yours) with cold, hard, ill-gotten cash. Here's an example of something that happened to me several years ago, and I wish I had reported it back in the day:

* My husband and I went to see a chiropractor for general back and neck discomfort. The doctor's adjustments were fine, but he would check off boxes on our insurance billing forms for services that he did not perform. When I finally noticed this after my third visit and questioned the front desk staff, they blew me off. That chiropractor lost two clients that day, and in my mind, his reputation has been irreparably damaged.

Another facet of this subject involves the complications of engaging in dual relationships (where you act as a massage therapist AND as a friend/family member/teacher/used car salesperson/etc. to the same person). I learned a while back that entering into business relationships with friends and family members can be a sensitive situation and it seems to be one of those lessons that I need to be reminded of every now and again. For example, I know some massage therapists who just adore the idea of trading services with other bodyworkers and professionals, but I have never felt 100% at ease with this arrangement. If I want something, I prefer to pay for it to keep things simple. That being said, every so often I will enter into a business arrangement with a friend where I make it clear that I would like to pay them for their product or service, and at their insistence we instead enter into a trade agreement. There's a 50/50 chance that I will regret this decision, for various reasons. Here are two personal examples of trade situations gone wrong:

* I give 100% of what I've got to give when I perform a massage. That goes for cash-paying clients and trades. On rare occasions where I felt like I had given a more thorough/professional/client-centric service as a trade than the one I had received in return, I ended up feeling dissatisfied.

* I had massaged an acquaintance a few times in the past, one time in exchange for a professional service. Although I had offered to pay for this service, he indicated that he preferred a trade so that was what we did. He appeared to be happy with the arrangement from start to finish and it wasn't mentioned again – until several months later when again I indicated that I'd like to pay him for a professional service, giving him the trading possibility as a secondary option. I must have hit a nerve because what resulted from my offer was a barrage of misdirected and off-topic inappropriateness, culminating in the end of our relationship. (This also served as a valuable lesson in *transference*...more on that in a minute!)

Standard V also brings us back to the potential for complications resulting from engaging in sexual relationships with clients. The NCBTMB Standards of Practice specifically state that massage therapists must “not engage in any sexual activity with a client,” and it's probably clear to most of us why this could be a bad idea: altering expectations for the massage therapy profession as a whole, dual relationship confusion, disregard for our scope of practice, potentially exploiting our clients' trust, opening ourselves up to accusations of sexual misconduct – the list goes on and on.

I recently heard a story about a male massage therapist who ended up dating a female client. When the relationship went south shortly thereafter, she accused him of behaving inappropriately during her massages. Regret is expensive as are lawsuits!

This seems like a good time to talk about those ethics course staples known as *transference* and *countertransference*. This can be a heavy topic, but I'll try to keep it as light as possible so that we can frolic through the rest of our ethical adventure with a minimal dose of headache medication. But first, let's tackle the concept of *power imbalance*.

power imbalance: Understanding that we, as massage therapists, are often granted increased power, trust, and authority in our therapeutic relationships is crucial to understanding the concept of transference. Power imbalances exist in most relationships where clients or patients reveal their private circumstances to someone who is not required to reciprocate with an equal exchange of information: nurses, counselors, religious leaders, etc. In the massage room, our clients tell us about their medical conditions, sources of stress, aches, and pains. In addition to the emotional vulnerability just described, they're also often in a physically vulnerable position during their treatment, sometimes without the perceived security that comes with donning a few layers of clothing.

transference: When a client unconsciously projects (transfers) unresolved feelings, needs, and issues – usually from childhood and usually related to a parent or other authority figures – onto a practitioner.

(The Educated Heart, McIntosh, 2005)

Transference is encountered more often than many massage therapists realize. It can be hard to identify and once recognized, the practitioner may never understand exactly what had occurred in the client's past to result in the transference.

Transference can take on a positive or negative connotation. If, for example, a client sees her massage therapist as a kind, attentive authority figure, she may develop an innocent crush on him or feel unusually possessive of him. This is positive transference. Negative transference may manifest as controlling, critical, distrustful behavior, or "Type A" personality traits, to name a few examples. Perhaps a client was made fun of as a child, felt abandoned, or grew up in an abusive household, and has brought these feelings with him into adulthood.

Before you start wondering if you display any tell-tale transference behaviors as you go about your daily activities, keep in mind that transference is a normal thing. Personally speaking, in day-to-day life, I can get a tad short with people who display bully-esque behavior. My guess is that this happens because, like many kids, I had my fill of being at the receiving end of mean kid antics during the formative elementary and middle school years. If someone attempts to intimidate me or someone close to me through strong-arm tactics, I've got a zero-tolerance policy and a hair trigger. I view this as learning from the past: If something makes you feel bad enough, you'll reach your saturation point and rock the boat if it comes up again. Again, normal *and* common.

Transference can become magnified in the massage room due to the intimate nature of our work and the power differential that exists between massage therapist and client. Because we are in the position of power – and because we are professionals who adhere to solid ethical standards – it is up to us to recognize potential instances of transference and to react accordingly. Although appropriate reactions will vary based on the situation’s specific circumstances, it is never a good idea to step outside of our scope of practice to discuss our client’s transference-like behaviors with them on the level of a counselor or other mental health professional.

So what are the signs of transference? We’ve already discussed the examples of crush-like admiration, possessiveness, controlling behavior, signs of distrust, criticism, and Type-A personality traits. There truly are countless behaviors that could potentially be indicators of transference at work. Have you ever had a client who tugged at the edge of the drape near her upper thigh while prone, when the client’s nether regions were in absolutely zero danger of being exposed? How about a passive-aggressive client who never spoke up about the pressure/music/draping during their treatment, only to complain to management or on Yelp days after her appointment? (Every time I hear about this last one occurring—involving any massage therapist anywhere—I cringe. Unfortunately, transference isn’t always a victimless phenomenon).

Verbal signs of transference can include questions about our qualifications (“Did you have to go to school for this?”), bossiness (“Push hard right there.”), questions about things that we’ve never claimed to be knowledgeable about (“What’s your opinion on creatine supplements?”), bragging (“My regular massage therapist works for the NFL and beats me up at my house every week for just \$20 an hour.”), and other frequently encountered verbal delights. It’s important to remember that these comments say more about our clients than they do about us.

If you have healthy, professional boundaries in place, you’ll find it a lot easier to respond to these behaviors in a manner that diffuses, or at the very least doesn’t escalate, our clients’ misdirected feelings. Sometimes a simple, short answer is appropriate, as in the case of “Yes, I did go to massage therapy school.” or “An hour for \$20? That’s great!” Other times, you may need to firm up your resolve and risk sounding “unhelpful” as in the case of “I’m not the best person to ask about creatine.”

How we react to our clients’ transference can also be dictated by any propensity we have toward *countertransference*.

countertransference: When a practitioner allows unresolved feelings and personal issues to influence his relationship with a client.

(*The Educated Heart*, McIntosh, 2005)

Countertransference is also very common, and can impact our abilities to provide amazing hospitality on a daily basis. Let’s expand on the examples above:

* A client asks “Did you have to go to school for this?” Her massage therapist quickly answers “Of course I did! What did you think?” I’m not going to pretend to know what’s going on in our imaginary massage therapist’s mind, but I think we can all agree that she got a tad snippy with her client. It does lead us to question why she reacted in this way. Did she grow up in an overly critical household? Did her parents look down on her choice to go to massage school?

Regardless of the actual reason, there’s a good chance that her client felt embarrassed for even asking the question in the first place when met with our massage therapist’s response. How do you think that bodes for our massage therapist’s reputation as a purveyor of great hospitality?

* “Push hard right here.” The bossy client makes demands as he has for the last 30 minutes. Instead of answering in a professional manner with minimal emotional involvement, our imaginary “countertransference” massage therapist does as she’s told, even after her thumb joints throb as she prods the hypertonic erectors along her client’s spine. Our well-intentioned massage therapist knew she was pushing her physical limits, but she felt intimidated by her client. Although she was relieved after he left, she dreaded his next visit. Why was she eager to please him at all costs? What toll will this take on her ability to give the rest of her clients the quality work they’ve come to expect from her?

* “What’s your opinion on creatine supplements?” It’s pretty common for massage therapists to be asked about things that are outside of our scope of practice. Our imaginary massage therapist may feel compelled to give her client an answer on a subject that she’s not qualified to give expert advice on in an attempt to be helpful, or to come off as knowing more than she actually does. Does she feel that she’s engaged in a competition with her peers to come off as the most well-informed massage therapist in the clinic? Does she require affirmation that someone considers her to be knowledgeable? Is she willing to give questionable or shoddy advice to meet these ends? Whatever her reason, the compulsion to step outside of her scope of practice can lead to shaky ethical decisions and when her clients feel that they may have been misinformed or lied to, our “knowledgeable” massage therapist commits a crime against hospitality.

* Ah yes. Our deal-too-good-to-be-true NFL deep tissue massage therapist. What if our imaginary countertransference massage therapist replied to this client with “the massage must not be very good for \$20” or “your massage therapist is working too hard for too little money”? Although thinking these thoughts is acceptable in most cases – they sound like normal thought patterns, or signs of understandable countertransference – verbalizing these thoughts to a client can be disastrous. Ethically, you’re on the cusp of speaking disparagingly about another professional to a client, which we’ve already established is an ethical no-no according to Standard I. From a hospitality standpoint, would you enjoy it if your massage therapist spoke to you in this manner?

Countertransference can influence some massage therapists to tolerate client lateness to the point where the therapist ends up feeling taken advantage of, or to make other special allowances or accommodations for select clients that may violate the massage therapist's personal guidelines. I certainly don't mean to imply that going out of our way for a client is a bad idea (in fact, great hospitality demands that we allow ourselves the freedom to spontaneously wow our clients), but if we end up feeling resentful, giddy, out of control, or super emotional when doing so, it may be wise to examine our motives.

What can we do if we determine that we're experiencing countertransference? It depends on the situation. As I've found to be true with many personal emotional issues in life – anxiety disorders come to mind – educating myself about the subject is usually an excellent first step. Understanding that others have experienced similar situations helps to remind me that I am not alone and that what I'm going through is actually quite normal. Sometimes just being aware of the countertransference is enough of a wake-up call to eradicate the confusion, but it's also OK to seek outside help from a mentor or mental health professional if it seems like a good fit for your individual situation. As long as client confidentiality is protected, we're doing what needs to be done to keep ourselves and our clients safe, happy, and healthy, and that's a win for both ethics *and* hospitality.

In other news, Standard V requires that we respect our clients' rights to make choices regarding their therapeutic sessions, up to and including refusal of a portion of or the entire session. This is also a hospitality no-brainer: if a client says that he just wants his back massaged today, we should not argue with him, insist that he should also have the rest of his body massaged and proceed to perform it, or pressure him to approve a treatment plan that he's clearly not interested in pursuing. Countless massage clients have lamented tales like these to me over the years and they rarely, if ever, return to see that massage therapist again. My guess is that for every client who appreciates the sales pressure, there are at least 10 times as many who find it completely unsettling.

Another important ethical guideline set forth in Standard V is that massage practitioners should not perform their duties while under the influence of alcohol, illegal substances, or drugs (an exception is made for medications that do not affect our abilities to perform our jobs). On the flip side, this standard also clearly states that we, as massage professionals, have the right to refuse and/or terminate any service with any abusive client or anyone under the influence of drugs (again, that impair the client's ability to conduct themselves in a responsible manner), alcohol, or illegal substances.

Although the term "abusive" is occasionally open to interpretation, it obviously includes any situation that results in causing the massage therapist to feel unsafe. This could be the threat of physical violence, performing a massage in unsafe surroundings, abusive behavior initiated by others present in the massage setting, erratic behavior, aggressiveness (sexual or otherwise), threats of a non-physical nature (false accusations, for example), etc. The earnings from that one

message won't mean squat when you're dealing with board complaints, police reports, or much worse. Just as we need to respect our clients' boundaries, our boundaries need to be respected by ourselves and by our clients. Again, please put safety first – including your own!

PREVENTION OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT Standard VI

Standard VI of the NCBTMB Standards of Practice requires that massage practitioners refrain from behaving in a manner that sexualizes, or appears to sexualize, the therapeutic relationship between the massage client and massage practitioner. We discussed the “sexual” aspects of Standards IV and V in the previous chapters; the fact that the NCBTMB tops off their Standards of Practice with a section entirely devoted to this subject emphasizes the importance that maintaining professional boundaries plays in preventing sexual misconduct.

The vast majority of massage professionals have no problem making the distinction between “table” and “bed.” I don’t want to waste your time spelling out the obvious – that we shouldn’t be violating our clients –but let’s take this standard one step further: how does the “prevention of sexual misconduct” mesh with our goal of providing excellent hospitality?

advertising: For starters, clear, honest, professional advertising sets the tone for massage therapist and client interaction. Suggestive advertising will probably attract suggestive clients. Even advertising devoid of overtly sexual messages can be confusing to some when thematic elements are of a more “playful” nature.

Here’s a personal example: When I was first starting out as a freshly licensed massage therapist, I was really into animal print. My living room was full of leopard print pillows, and I had zebra stripe *everything*. I had Vistaprint print up some cool business cards with my massage info on them, complete with – you guessed it – leopard print, running along the bottom edge of each card. A guy I had recently met became extra flirtatious after he found out what I did and I gave him my card, even though it clearly stated that all massage services were of, you know, the legal variety. He later made mention of the “leopard print” and I had a revelation: we may have pure intentions, but it pays to consider how others may view our advertising materials.

behavior: Taking the time to get ready for work in the morning is a good thing. Proper grooming, well-fitting clothing, confident posture, and tasteful makeup and accessories (if desired) are important aspects of a massage therapist’s professional image. Let me be clear: feeling good about ourselves is the first, best step we can take toward providing outstanding hospitality. It’s when things spill over into Desperationville that we have a problem. Behavior that screams “Look at me!” is usually a sign that this has occurred and that it may be time for our massage therapist to sit down and enjoy a tall glass of introspection. Sure, some clients may appreciate attention in this (or any) form, but it’s also important to remember that sexualized behavior unleashed on an unsuspecting client can make for an awkward vibe, a confusing ball of transference/countertransference, misunderstandings about what therapeutic massage is all about, trust and violation issues, or the worst-case scenario for our beloved massage therapist: nasty, career-ending accusations of a sexual nature.

At its core, Standard VI aims to convey that an NCBTMB-certified massage therapy professional of any gender who engages in sexualized behavior with a client does damage to his or her reputation, damages the reputation of the NCBTMB, and can hurt the reputation of massage therapy as a whole.

Standard VI spells out some guidelines for therapists who find themselves in unique situations that may require ethical counsel:

- * Let's say our imaginary massage therapist meets a client who comes in for a massage on New Year's Eve. Our massage therapist and her client hit it off and realize over the course of the next several sessions that they have a lot in common and share a mutual attraction to each other. They'd like to see each other outside of the therapeutic relationship, but our therapist is uneasy about the ethical implications of dating a client. She consults Standard VI and agrees that it would be best if they stopped seeing each other in a professional context for six months before dating.
- * Another imaginary massage therapist has been married since 2009 and became NCBTMB-certified in 2011. According to Standard VI, it's OK for him to massage his spouse, because they had a sexual relationship that predates his application for NCBTMB certification.

Sexually inappropriate and creepy *clients* have their place in Standard VI as well: If the client initiates any sexual behavior, it's on the massage professional to assert themselves and clarify the purpose of the session. If the client continues the verbal harassment, table grinding, genital touching, or similarly obnoxious behavior, the massage therapist should terminate or refuse the session.

Standard VI further specifies that sexual relationships with clients, students, employees, supervisors, or trainees are prohibited. Once again, steering clear of dual relationships and drama is a good idea.

The remaining rules found in Standard VI involve the massage of specific anatomical areas. Bear in mind that state massage therapy boards and local jurisdictions may have their own laws regarding massage and these body parts. Local laws take priority over the NCBTMB Standards of Practice (when the laws are more conservative than the Standards). These body part-specific standards state:

- * Do not touch the genitals.
- * Therapeutic treatment of the nasal cavity, ear canal, oropharynx, anal canal, and breast should only be performed with voluntary written client consent, within the plan of care. It should go without saying that proper training regarding massage in these areas is imperative if a massage therapist chooses to offer these forms of treatment.

As is true with so many of the NCBTMB's Standards, cross-referencing abounds with Scope of Practice, truth in advertising, protecting client confidentiality, avoiding sexual situations with clients, and avoiding unnecessary complications and drama topping the list of the most pervasive themes.

For a life of pleasant relationships and positive outcomes, treat everyone the way that you'd like to be treated, and always err on the side of ethical behavior. We massage therapists work hard and need our rest, and it's a lot easier to sleep at night when we play the game of life (and hospitality!) with ethics on our side.

IN CLOSING

I'd like to thank each and every one of you for braving the vast landscape of massage ethics with me. If you take even one small, new perspective with you into the world and it makes your life a little bit easier in some way, writing this course has been worthwhile.

The subjects of ethics and hospitality are interwoven beyond the world of massage therapy. Here are some books on both subjects that I've found to be really inspirational. Maybe you will too.

Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business

Danny Meyer

Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose

Tony Hsieh

Lying

Sam Harris

The Educated Heart: Professional Boundaries for Massage Therapists, Bodyworkers, and Movement Teachers

Nina McIntosh

The Ethics of Touch

Ben E. Benjamin, Ph.D. and Cherie Sohlen-Moe

Ethics for Massage Therapists

Terrie Yardley-Nohr

For more information about the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork,

please visit NCBTMB.org.

If you've opted to submit your quiz for CE credit, you'll find it following this page. Please follow the directions regarding payment and submission, and contact me at helpinghands@ConfidentMassage.com with any questions. I'm constantly adding new material at ConfidentMassage.com, so please check back often for the newest CE courses and massage therapy resources.

Here's to continued health and hospitality!

Andrea Lipomi, LMT

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