

Becoming a Massage Therapist

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The field of massage therapy is a growing occupational choice, and for good reason. Massage therapy is interesting, sociable, and well paid. People who are looking for a career that combines personal interaction with the opportunity to promote health should consider massage therapy. These professionals practice the art and science of relieving pain, reducing stress, and healing injuries. But before jumping into this challenging profession, future massage therapists should learn what is involved in the practice, the science, and the business of massage. If you examine how massage therapists work, it can help you determine if this is the right career for you. This paper will explain the art and science of massage, and explain how to become a member of this specialty - one of the fastest growing professions in America.

First of all, you have to understand how massage therapists practice their science, their techniques, and their work. Massage therapy has a big range of applications. Massage therapists help their clients in the areas of, stress, health, pain, injury, and relaxation. The clients of a massage therapist can include injury victims, performers, old people, athletes, and even white collar professionals. Massage therapists do their work in many settings, such as therapeutic clinics, doctors' offices, holistic health clinics, health clubs and fitness centers, spas, nursing homes, hospitals, cruise ships, sports team facilities, and private offices. Some massage therapists have their own portable equipment and perform their work at the office or home of their client (Taylor).

The demand for massage therapists has become very high in recent years, owing to a significant public trend in the use of massage as a prime health care option. Therapists may work as self-employed practitioners in a private or group office setting, as salaried employees, or as independent contractors. Earnings vary widely depending on the type of practice and location, as well as on the skill and experience of the therapist. Practitioners with their own facility usually earn the most but they also carry the burden of having to build and maintain a steady and reliable clientele base. Those working for an hourly wage tend to earn less, but they do not have overhead expenses (Taylor).

The fundamentals of massage therapy include Swedish massage, deep tissue massage, and trigger point therapy. Some of the more common forms of massage therapy in practical application include the following. There is relaxation massage: this is typically performed in a spa setting. This type of therapy includes stress management and relaxation treatments. There is sports massage: This form of therapy is practiced in many settings, and involves working with athletes to enhance their performance as well as helping them to recover from injuries. There is medical/clinical massage: This type of massage treats people who suffer from pain and injuries, and is usually practiced in a doctor's office, chiropractor's office, hospital, or medical clinic. Finally, there is corporate onsite massage. This is offered to employees of several major corporations. This type of therapy can run from a 15-minute seated to a full-table massage and typically involves travel for the therapist to an onsite location (Capellini 88).

I spoke to Duncan Schaeffer, owner of *The Comfort Zone*, a massage therapy business in Elk Grove, California. This expert explained the varieties of services he offers. "People have a need for a variety of techniques and pressures when receiving massage, depending on what their needs are at that visit. A client may want deep tissue massage in some areas and lighter pressure

in others. I work to learn if they have any areas of tension or pain, and if there have been any changes in their physical condition.”

I asked him for an explanation of the physical benefits of massage. His answers were enlightening:

“The science and practice of massage therapy has many benefits. Massage may boost immunity and help people with a range of conditions from premenstrual syndrome to high blood pressure. It also seems to help soothe pain from arthritis, burns and even surgery.”

I went on to ask him about the scientific basis of massage therapy:

He answered that “Most of what I know comes from studying with David Pounds and James Clay, two of the top scientists in this field. You should read their book on *Clinical Massage Therapy*. They say that massage creates chemical changes that reduce pain and stress throughout the body. One way it does this is by reducing a brain chemical called “substance P” that is related to pain. In one scientific study I recently read, patients with a form of muscle pain called fibromyalgia showed less substance P in their blood streams, and they reported reduced pain after a month of twice-weekly massages (Pounds 361).

I then asked Mr. Schaeffer about how massage therapy is supposed to improve a person’s immune system:

Schaeffer said, “Massage may boost immunity. A couple of studies I’ve seen by Crane have measured the stress hormone called cortisol in patients before and after massage sessions, and the scientists found decreases in the stress hormone (Crane).

I checked Crane’s research to learn more about what Mr. Schaeffer told me about cortisol. According to Crane’s research, “Cortisol is a hormone. It is produced when people are stressed, killing cells important for immunity. When experts massage patients, it reduces their stress levels

and the cortisol in their bodies. It may help subjects avoid getting a cold or another illness while under stress (Crane).

What about high blood pressure, I asked. I told him that I read that massage can control blood pressure. “It’s true,” Schaeffer replied. “Massage reduces hypertension. A great deal of research has come to say that this is so. This may be because it stimulates pressure receptors that prompt action from the vagus nerve, one of the nerves that emerges from the brain. The vagus nerve regulates blood pressure, as well as other functions.”

Mr. Schaeffer’s statements about blood pressure were supported by research I found on my own. According to a 2005 study at the University of South Florida, hypertension patients who received 10 massages of 10 minutes each over three weeks showed significant improvements in blood pressure compared to a control group who simply rested in the same environment without any massage (Crane).

I asked Schaeffer what the best form of massage is:

“There’s little evidence to support one kind of massage over another, so people shouldn’t worry about whether your therapist is schooled in Shiatsu, Swedish or some other technique. Check out Capellini’s book on this subject,” Schaeffer said. “Capellini claims that the key to good massage is using a pressure firm enough to make a temporary indentation in the skin. If you try massage with a partner, use massage oil, which you can find in a health-food store or pharmacist, but test a little on your skin first to make sure you are not allergic (Capellini 105).

Mr. Schaeffer’s descriptions of massage therapy were helpful, so I set out to discover how to become a professional massage therapist. It seems to come down to the question of what steps a person should follow to become a massage therapist. Here is what I found. First, become familiar with the profession. Spend some time thinking about the most interesting aspects of the

profession and which specialty in massage therapy to concentrate on. Then visit massage therapists and receive some massages personally. Look online for information about different types of massage or check the local library for massage books. Contact local therapists or schools and ask questions. Research the particular licensing requirements of your city and state, because licensing requirements vary from state to state and city to city. Currently 33 states and the District of Columbia regulate massage therapy in some fashion. In states without statewide regulation of massage, municipalities tend to have requirements for a business license (Capellini 213).

It is very important to become familiar with the regulatory requirements in cities and states where a prospective therapist may wish to practice. Presently, most states require a minimum of 500 or more hours of massage training (Taylor).

Find and complete a suitable training program. There are plenty of massage schools out there. Look for a program that leads to certification and, most importantly, one which satisfies your jurisdiction's licensing requirements. If interested in a certain specialty, try to find a school that caters to that specialty. Massage schools can be somewhat expensive; however, most offer some kind of financial assistance including federal student loans. Most massage schools require a high school diploma and many also require a personal interview. Oftentimes massage schools will arrange internships with a local massage practice, so that the student can gain a valuable amount of practical on-the-job experience. Depending on the specific program of study, the school will award either a certification in a certain specialty or a degree (Capellini 148).

It is important to enroll in a training program that is accredited. One such agency is the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA). At the present time, there are approximately 70 training programs and institutions accredited by COMTA. Not all places

require certification, but becoming board certified can open a lot of doors in the industry (Capellini 151).

The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB) administers an exam-based national certification program. Those who pass become eligible to use the title "Nationally Certified in Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork" and may use the initials NCTMB. Most states that regulate massage therapists have adopted this exam as a state exam. In order to take the exam, certain eligibility requirements must be met, including graduation from a training program. It is becoming increasingly common for graduating students to take the national certification exam shortly after completing school (Capellini).

The profession of massage therapy is changing. In the past, almost all massage therapists worked for themselves. Today, however, there are a growing number of jobs working for massage therapy companies. In order to find employment as a massage therapist one should look for massage schools, local papers, online employment sites, medical clinics, health clubs, spas, and corporations. People who want to start their own business can find many resources for new business owners through the Small Business Administration (Capellini 153).

How can a person stand out as a massage therapist? The best way is to take massage education to a higher level. An Associate Degree of Occupational Studies (AOS) in Massage Therapy will provide knowledge of the advanced concepts and techniques used in medical massage, energy healing, cranio-sacral therapy, and more. An Associate Degree program will take approximately six to nine months of additional study and will qualify graduates for employment in all areas of massage, both clinical and medical (Taylor).

In addition to an advanced degree, there are other ways to grow as a healthcare practitioner. Taking classes in new techniques, reading books about different types of bodywork,

and getting massage from other practitioners are excellent ways to enhance professional growth. Volunteer massage services to others. It is a great way to start building a clientele and also to get more experience. Volunteer clients can include friends and family or even community organizations in the area (Taylor).

Anyone interested in this career should seriously think about joining a professional organization. It can provide a big boost to a career. One such organization is the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA), whose membership offers benefits, programs, and services to massage therapy professionals and students (Taylor).

These are some of the basics involved in becoming a successful massage therapist. The profession requires an aptitude for working with people, but can result in a very satisfying and rewarding career. An early familiarity with the profession, knowledge of the education/licensing requirements, and the right training are the key elements of success. If a person continually improves his or her education, practice, and credential building, that person will not only maintain that success but will enhance it.

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