

Code of Ethics and the Massage Therapist

By Ingrid Pagura

A Code of Ethics assists massage therapists to navigate the tricky waters of interacting with clients and providing them with a service. As the client/therapist relationship becomes more complex with increased legal responsibilities, it is important to have a solid base to refer back to.

A Code of Ethics also provides the basis for a Code of Practice, which is a reference for the day to day running of your practices. Together these Codes provide therapists with a document to refer to in times of need.

A Code of Ethics will cover issues such as client/therapist relationships, boundary issues, gaining informed consent prior to treatment, duty of care and issues relating to a client's confidentiality and privacy. All these issues should be paramount to a therapist for maintaining a professional and ethical practice.

Maintaining professional relationships

The relationship between a client and therapist treads a fine line with the balance of power tipped in favour of the therapist. This is because the therapist is clothed while the client is usually lying on a massage table covered only by a towel. This can leave a therapist in a vulnerable position should a client feel the therapist might have been inappropriate. Relationships crossing the professional line to the personal are discouraged for this reason.

A Code of Ethics provides guidelines to assist a therapist in dealing with these difficult situations by giving advice on how to approach relationships with clients, maintaining a professional but friendly manner and dealing with clients who act inappropriately. Without a Code of Ethics to fall back on therapists would have to work this out on their own and hope that they get it right. This may be fine for more experienced massage therapists but difficult for those starting out.

Legal responsibilities

Increasing litigation means therapists need to be aware of their legal responsibilities in relation to their clients. This is a complex area. which most codes of ethics will provide guidelines. Issues such as screening clients, reviewing contraindicated techniques, issues relating to insurance and warning clients of risks are generally covered. More and more therapists need to ensure they have followed standard practice in case their treatment of a client is called into question.

This is because clients have rights and a therapist must not breach any of these. Therapists should never practice outside their area of expertise, give advice they are not trained to give, or fail to gain the consent of their clients prior to treatment. Therapists also need to be aware that certain elements of the treatment are confidential and that legislation has also imposed the right for clients to access their records. A Code of Ethics can help deal with these issues.

Professional associations

Industry associations write codes of ethics after a lot of consultation and effort. These codes reflect members' years of practice experience and, unfortunately sometimes, bad experiences they have surmounted. Membership of a professional association greatly assists therapists to understand the murkier areas of practice. Not only will therapists have a Code to guide them on how to approach certain issues but they will also have all those years of experience to call upon.

The therapist has a responsibility too. As part of membership of an association it is their responsibility to keep up to date with what is required of them. It is generally also their responsibility to ensure that their employees also adhere to the Code of Ethics. This is done by making the Code available, reading journal articles and attending continuing education courses. Failure in either of these responsibilities could lead to sanctions, so it is important for a therapist to keep up to date and review their Code of Ethics rather than just leaving it in their desk drawer.

A Code of Ethics helps clients and potential clients feel secure by knowing their therapist is ethical, professional and part of an association that values these things. A Code of Ethics is vital for ensuring the right message about massage therapy, or any other modality, is given to the general public. Having a Code of Ethics goes a long way in educating the public about the validity of massage therapy as a valuable therapeutic modality rather than what most people used to associated with the word 'massage'. Without a Code of Ethics it is impossible for any profession to let the public know they are serious about being professional and transparent in their interaction with the general public. This is even more important in a hands-on industry that in the past has not been taken seriously.

Students of massage therapy need to be taught about ethics and professionalism because it is important they are aware of these issues early on. Starting off as a therapist can be daunting. Having principles to guide them through difficult situations can ensure that they are not left to flounder, or worse, do something illegal or unethical due to lack of knowledge. Including the study of ethical and legal responsibilities is the mark of a good massage therapy course, and shows that the particular college values these principles as well. I hope that I have instilled this in my students!

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