

CREATING A SAFE WORKING SPACE

Ending Sexual Harassment & Abuse in Massage

By Don McCann, MA, LMT, LMHC, CSETT

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The process of cleaning up the professional image of massage has started. Unfortunately, it didn't start from within the profession, but rather by law enforcement. Sexual abuse and inappropriate sexual behavior in massage establishments have made the headlines. Charges are being brought against specific massage therapists and corporations that run massage establishments. Sadly, these negative headlines tarnish the reputations of hundreds of thousands of massage therapists. It only takes one headline about inappropriate sexual behavior in massage establishments to affect the overall reputation of massage. However, the need to feel safe from the possibility of sexual harassment is not enough for massage to continue to grow as part of health care for the public. Clients who receive massages need to be able to share their experience without sexual innuendos or put downs from their friends and family. Looking at the reputation of the massage profession in light of the recent headlines it is understandable why many people are unwilling to share their experiences because of how it could be perceived with the current blemishes on massage reputation.

Changes are coming slowly. Massage schools are taking more seriously their responsibility in educating students about appropriate behavior in the massage room. However, many massage therapists are not aware of this information, so it is time for us to take responsibility to educate them as to what is appropriate. Those of us who write articles also have responsibility to help raise the consciousness not only for massage therapists but also for the general public. I was very gratified to read a recent article by Ben Benjamin about appropriate behavior in the massage room. Ben has been an expert witness in cases of sexual abuse that took place during massages and his article very clearly states appropriate behaviors from draping and touch throughout the entire massage¹. Thank you, Ben.

I am also an educator and will address other issues relative to this situation in this article that I feel are important for change to happen. Every massage therapist has a responsibility to actively take ownership of the reputation of massage therapy. Even though there are laws, it has been my experience that at least half the massage therapists practicing today know someone who has been inappropriate and has broken laws in a massage setting. Unfortunately, many take a "don't get involved" stance. However, for change to happen, we must be proactive:

1. Every massage therapist needs to be on the lookout and ready to confront massage therapists who even allude to inappropriate sexual behavior.
2. Massage therapists need to report inappropriate behavior by another massage therapist to the authorities. If they witness inappropriate behavior and do not report the person or the situation, they are in essence culpable for the damage that is done. According to the laws in some states they could be prosecuted for not filing a report.

This is holding the high road for the massage profession.

We have been raised in a culture where deep-seated attitudes toward sex need to be updated. We want our clients to feel safe and comfortable. When clients are in the massage establishment they are more vulnerable than normal, and our attitudes toward them need to be free of sexual focus and innuendos.

1. Set strong boundaries with clients, other therapists, office staff, and anyone else who visits your establishments.
2. Advertising needs to be clear and free of any sexual images, innuendos, or language.

¹ Benjamin, Ben, *What I've Learned from Being an Expert Witness: Sexual Abuse in the Treatment Room*, http://benbenjamin.com/pdfs/Sexual_Abuse_Complete_Article.pdf, February 2018

3. Using phrases as simple as “massage will take you to paradise” is full of sexual innuendo and opens the door for discussions that could potentially lead to inappropriate sexual behavior.
4. Conversations with clients or staff that sexualize appearance, communication or behavior not only creates an unsafe atmosphere for massage but objectifies the person about whom the comments are made. This is very dehumanizing and is one reason that sexual harassment is so prevalent. It is time we rise to higher consciousness where we do not objectify people, even though it seems harmless, because it belittles people. If we don't take part in objectifying people and challenge anyone in our massage establishment who does, this behavior will disappear, and our clients will feel safer in our establishments. This will be a challenge because this behavior has been prevalent without awareness throughout our culture and seems normal and safe, when in reality it has the opposite effect.

Flirting or making positive comments about our client's bodies when they have lost weight or are dressing very attractively again focus too much attention on sexual attraction and leads to oversexualizing the atmosphere for massage. Behavior and communication that is acceptable in a social atmosphere is not okay in massage if it focuses on bringing attention to attraction or sexuality. We don't need to use sexuality or flirtatiousness to gain approval around the massage establishment. Save it for your special relationships where you truly want a more personal relationship.

Consumer media has created standards for physical appearance, bodies, and behavior that is not conducive to good mental health or seeing the value of the person. We have been conditioned by this and being aware of using these values in our communications and behaviors will only come by observing ourselves in conversations and interactions. Awareness leads to the ability to make a choice not to continue in the same vein. This is not to make yourself wrong, but a moment of awareness gives you a chance to change an old subconscious behavior pattern. As we take sexual judgments, flirtations, and innuendos out of our massage establishments we will see our clients as real people who come to us for the benefits that massage therapy has to offer. They will feel safe, respected, and want to share their positive experiences about massage with others. If we start now, the future will be brighter and a positive reputation for massage will grow.