

The Greening of Massage Therapy



By Sharon Roemmell

Massage is widely considered a form of natural healing. Images of leaves and waterfalls are often used to convey our services and merchandise. It's also fairly normal for practitioners to utilize products that boast pure and natural ingredients and packaging. As caring creatures of the planet, nature appeals to us at an instinctual level.

But, unbeknownst to many MTs, our decisions about oils, candles, and equipment may be negatively affecting the environment. While practitioners are certainly not in the same class as industrial mega-polluters around the world, decisions we make about our practices do have an impact on the health of the planet.



And harm to the earth through toxic products or overflowing landfills is ultimately harmful to our clients, our businesses, future generations, and ourselves.

So how do we evaluate the environmental impact of our massage? Moreover, what can we do as therapists to reduce the harm? Consider the following options toward making our work sustainable and earth-friendly.

Your Green Room

Start with an evaluation of your work space. Recent research indicates we are exposed to more environmental toxins while we are inside our homes and offices than when we are outside—even when in a large city. Off-gassing of harmful volatile organic compounds (VOCs) significantly influences indoor air quality. These compounds evaporate into the air from products such as synthetic fragrances, cleaning products, paint, detergent, carpets, and new furniture. Paraffin candles emit toxic, carcinogenic fumes, as well as wall-coating soot. To improve your indoor air quality, consider the following suggestions.

Make your office green with house plants. Spider plants, Boston ferns, and aloe vera, among others, will help clear the air of toxins such as formaldehyde and benzene. Also, try green landscaping. Native plants need less water. To maintain the plants, choose nonchemical means of pest control and weed control.

Select natural materials like wool, cotton, wood, glass, metal, and sisal over plastics and synthetics for furnishings and decor.

Switch from paraffin candles with lead wicks to beeswax, soy, and palm oil candles with cotton wicks.

Reduce electromagnetic fields (EMF) exposure. While the EPA has backed away from stating that EMFs cause cancer, research strongly suggests potential health risks from exposure. Possible sources of EMFs include power lines, electrical wiring, cell phones, and electrical appliances such as heating pads, stereos, microwaves, and computers.

To reduce risk to you and your clients, use a gauss meter to measure the intensity of the magnetic fields in your space. Then, check out some of the devices that claim protection from EMFs. Follow in the footsteps of Pam Stauber from The Body Well, in Salem, Oregon, by decreasing the number of electrical devices in your office. Her clients stay toasty with a water bottle rather than an electric heating pad.

Apply low-VOC paint when decorating. Cut back on energy consumption. This has become more popular due to rising utility bills. Choosing to turn off appliances, lights, and computers when not in use makes a great choice for your pocketbook and benefits the environment. Your local utility company will often perform a free evaluation to help you determine ways to reduce your energy use. Some utility companies offer incentives



for upgrading to energy efficient options. Find a free evaluation, product recommendations, and other relevant information at the U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website: www.homeenergysaver.lbl.gov.

Solutions to reducing energy consumption can range from low-tech and low-cost (like adding insulation) to high-tech and high-cost (like adding solar panels or Energy Star appliances). These higher-cost alternatives will often result in significant cost savings over time.

Buy Green

As therapists, we have many choices when it comes to the products we buy. The Federal Trade Commission, in cooperation with the EPA and the Office of Consumer Affairs, has developed guidelines for manufacturers and others who make environmental claims about their products. Claims should not be misleading or overstated. Find these guidelines, as well as additional related information, at www.ftc.gov and www.epa.gov.

Purchase from manufacturers and suppliers who have pro-environment policies. My favorite companies print on recycled paper with soybean inks, stock organic and environmentally sustainable products with minimal or recycled packaging, offer online catalogs, and encourage recycling or reusing of their containers and packaging.

Buy from local suppliers in order to reduce the amount of fossil fuel used in shipping.

Choose massage and office supplies and services such as:

- Natural fiber, preferably organic, linens. Avoid synthetic or chemically treated sheets, towels, and blankets. You probably will not discover labels proclaiming, "Our synthetic sheets are colored with chemical dyes and then coated with formaldehyde resin." Look instead for words like undyed, natural dyes, nontoxic, eco-friendly, chemically free, and hypoallergenic.
- Unrefined, organic massage oils and organic essential oils. Avoid all solvent-extracted oils including grape seed and aromatic absolute oils, like jasmine and some rose oils. Petroleum-based products, such as fragrance, baby, and mineral oils, are also on the undesirable list.
- Recycled paper products including office paper, toilet paper, and paper towels; rechargeable batteries; and staple-free staplers.

Lighten the Load

By contacting the following services, you can substantially reduce the amount of junk mail you receive. Your mail carrier—and the environment—will thank you.

- Direct Marketing Associations Mail Preference Service, Box 9008, Farmingdale, NY 11735-9008. Ask them to include you in their delete file, which is sent to subscribing organizations several times each year.
- To stop receiving preapproved credit card offers, call 888-567-8688, which will remove your name from all three credit organization lists. Also, write to your personal bank and credit card company and ask that they remove you from their solicitations list.
- Advo Incorporated Delivery Services, 1001 W. Walnut St. Compton, CA 90220-5191. Ask to be removed from direct marketing lists they sell, rent, or give to other businesses. If mail is addressed to *current resident*, tell them you are the only current resident.
- Val-Pak Coupons Direct Marketing, Box 13428, St. Petersburg, FL 33733. They're responsible for those large packets of coupons that clog your mailbox.

- "Green" massage tables. Search for companies providing tables made from sustainable woods and less toxic vinyl and foam.
- Energy efficient light bulbs and appliances.
- Cruelty-free and natural cleaning and cosmetic products.
- "Green" powered utilities. In my area, the local electric company allows me to pay a slightly higher fee for green-powered fuel. My long distance phone provider contributes to environmental causes. Locally, you can surf the Web via a solar-powered Internet provider.

Less is More

How can we reduce the number of disposables used in our businesses without sacrificing the services we offer? Sometimes these items seem essential to provide a hygienic and efficient service. But what did the spas of old do before paper underwear was invented?

Cut back on the use of disposable items, including paper towels, face cradle covers, sheets, spa clothing,

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and sandals. Recently, when I made an appointment for a body wrap, the facility requested I bring a second pair of underwear—more comfortable for me, happier planet, and reduced costs for the spa.

Purchase from suppliers who use recycled or biodegradable packing materials. Then locate a business that will reuse your packing peanuts and bubble wrap.

Reduce packing material by buying in bulk. If purchasing a large quantity of an item is not feasible, consider a joint order with other practitioners or businesses.

Providing clients with a plastic bottle of water has become a convenient way to remind clients to drink water after massage. However, plastic bottles negatively affect the environment in a number of ways. Nonrenewable and toxic compounds are used in the manufacturing process. If the bottles are not disposed of properly, they can end up in our water systems where harmful substances are leached into the water. Alternatively, plastics release toxic fumes when incinerated.

Glass and non-epoxy-lined stainless steel provide today's favored options. Encouraging your clients to carry their own bottles provides them with incentive to continue guzzling water long after any thoughts of trigger points evaporate. To remove contaminants from the water that will fill those bottles, install a filtration system or use a filtration pitcher or faucet mount variety.

Rebecca Arends of Excelsior Massage Therapy, Ann Arbor, Michigan, suggests removing your name from

credit card and other mailing lists. She only shreds documents with sensitive information. Other items proceed directly to recycling, saving electricity.

Recycle And Reuse

Recycling decreases water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, conserves resources, supplies raw materials with less environmental impact than virgin materials, slows the filling of landfill space, and reduces the amount of combusted waste.

Furnish your office from thrift and consignment stores, garage sales, and your family attic to bring in personality to your facility (and no Styrofoam!). My office mate just added a funky pink rocker to her room. It transmits style and personality to her space and it was free from a friend who was ready to discard it. Donate your

usable discards to thrift stores and receive a tax write-off in the process.

Move beyond traditional office recycling bins for paper and plastic. Grant linens a second life. Arends' old sheets become paint drop cloths and rags. Homeless shelters, thrift stores, and massage students welcome donations of lightly used sheets. Towels and blankets can find a new home at animal shelters.

Gather with fellow therapists to exchange supplies, like the bolster that sits in the closet or the CD that you cannot bear to hear again.

Many towns offer curbside recycling for paper and plastics. Other items such as computers, latex paint, batteries, hazardous chemicals, and Styrofoam may be recycled in some areas. Return computer printer cartridges to the manufacturer or check out a business that refills the cartridges.

Find sources for used books and CDs when you are in the market to buy and sell or donate those you aren't using.

Clean Green

Read the labels of common cleaning products. They are a soup of potentially hazardous chemicals. Besides, they stink. Fortunately, safer and better-smelling options are available.

Health food stores and distributors of "green" products have a number of options. Preparing your own



cleaning products can be simple and inexpensive. Books such as Annie Berthold-Bond's *Clean and Green* (Ceres Press, 1994) offer recipes using products such as baking soda, vinegar, and essential oils.

Dispose of toxic products properly. Contact your local department of solid waste to determine how and where to dispose of cleaning products, solvents, and paints.

Eliminate use of antibacterial cleaning products. Based on triclosan, a pesticide the EPA labels as a risk to humans and the environment, these products offer a host of problems. Similar to dioxin, PCBs, and Agent Orange, accumulation of this substance in fatty tissues at levels considered toxic is one of the potential hazards.

The antibacterial agents randomly kill microscopic organisms, both the beneficial and harmful ones.



Additionally, antibiotic products have been implicated as part of the cause of the emergence of “super bugs,” bacteria resistant to antibiotics. Washing hands thoroughly with soap and hot water for at least ten to fifteen seconds works equally as well at killing harmful bacteria without the negative repercussions.

Antibacterial, antifungal, and antiviral essential oils, such as lemon and tea tree, are effective for cleaning and do not cause the same problems as the synthetic antibacterial products. And they smell better, too. When using essential oils, make sure they are not synthetic and that their shelf life has not expired. Follow the proper safety precautions and contraindications, like diluting the oils before contact with skin.

Wash only full loads of laundry to save energy and use biodegradable and natural detergents. Dispense with fabric softeners and dryer sheets as they contain a host of chemicals such as chloroform, pentane, and benzyl alcohol. If a laundry service washes your linens, get creative. Arends convinced her service to deliver the clean linens in cloth bags rather than the plastic they were using.

Every choice we make has an environmental impact. Licensing boards dictate some choices, such as use of disposable cups. Sometimes a perfect choice does not exist (e.g., Do we fill our clients' water bottles with chemically laden tap water or with water from a filtration system with disposable filters?). Other times an environmentally positive action may feel cost prohibitive (e.g., organic cotton sheets can cost three to five times as much as standard sheets). But anything we do to lessen our negative impact is moving in a positive and more sustainable direction. As the bumper sticker reads, “Not contributing to the problem is part of the solution.”

Most of us will not build an environmentally friendly straw bale office, as one bodyworker in Washington did. However, by educating ourselves about options and choosing consciously, we can provide a healthier environment for ourselves and our clients, now and in the future. **SBH**

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