

## DRESS FOR YOUR SUCCESS

Back in the day, massage therapists didn't need to spend much time worrying over what to wear to work. There were scrubs. There were sweats and T-shirts. Or there were khakis and polo shirts. And those who worked for spas just wore whatever polyester uniform they were issued.

But as the profession has burgeoned, so has the spa fashion industry. Today, entire lines of fashionable uniforms in flattering styles and high-end fabrics—available to individual therapists as well as to spas that buy in bulk—are spiffing up massage therapists' appearances.

Following are some things to consider, both when stocking your professional wardrobe and when just getting dressed in the morning.



### 1. PROJECT A PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE

"The way you dress and how you create your environment is a reflection of the level of respect you have for your client," says Melinda Rand-Kenefic, a massage therapist, psychologist, and the owner of Celebro Natural Living, a boutique in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "Any person in the healing arts should want the client to feel honored and respected. So how you dress is not about you, it's not about wearing that funky tie-dye you love. It's about being compliant with your client."

If you have tattoos, cover them up. And cover up that bare midriff and cleavage while you're at it. "Another big faux pas is hipster pants—showing the midsection," says Noel Asmar, chief executive officer for Spa Uniforms Inc., a boutique uniform company based in Vancouver, British Columbia. "These styles should be kept out of the professional area. It can make a client very uncomfortable and most likely question the professionalism of the practitioner or facility," he says.

"You just don't want to show too much skin in any area," advises Amy Brooks, cofounder of Fianna Spa Fashions and a onetime esthetician and makeup artist in Denver. "Too much skin portrays something you don't want to portray. You don't want to give the wrong impression."

### 2. COMFORT DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN BAGGY

"Always look for comfort," says Dorothy Szeto, designer and cofounder of Tao Freedom of the Body, a New York-based company that specializes in comfortable, functional clothing. "But don't just buy oversized

clothes—especially if you're a larger woman. I say to large women that you don't have to be afraid just because something is formfitting. Buy things that flow across the body."

For women, perfect pants tend to be harder to find than perfect tops. Rand-Kenefic has designed a unisex line called Super-Comfy Pants that are a relaxed fit, with a deep crotch and deep pockets. "The point is, you need to have an unconstrained fit so the pant can do any of the movements we need to do," she says. "From a massage therapist's point of view, that means being able to move unconstrained without having the crotch get in the way or the waist feeling too tight."

Asmar, of Spa Uniforms, recommends a tailored uniform with plenty of stretch so the garments won't drape over clients during treatment.

In short, just remember: sweat pants aren't the only option.

### 3. DIFFERENT COLORS PROJECT DIFFERENT MESSAGES

Black is the most popular color for MT work attire, experts say. It looks professional, and it carries the additional benefit of hiding stains better than light colors. White is also a classic option. But both colors have their drawbacks.

"Any soothing color—soft blue or soft green—is more relaxing for the senses," Brooks says. And white, in particular, may evoke a kind of clinical feel that you may want to avoid if you are not working at a clinic or your massages are meant for relaxation more than rehabilitation.

Rand-Kenefic says neutral colors are the best choice, since one never knows what associations any given client might have with a particular color. "My feeling is, the least distracting you can be for the client, the better."



But at least one longtime massage therapist scoffs at the notion that he should tone down his wardrobe. Gerry Munson, a Denver-based therapist who specializes in therapeutic massage on people who are in pain, sticks to Hawaiian shirts—the brighter and bolder the better.

“Not only do I wear a Hawaiian shirt, I wear shorts and sandals,” he says. “It adds an element of fun to the massage. It takes people away from their reality and helps them relax more. It brings a smile to everybody’s face. They know they can let their hair down when they come in.”

#### 4. NO MATERIAL IS PERFECT...

The debate between synthetic versus natural fabrics will not be solved here. Both sides marshal impressive arguments for why one is better than the other.

Those in the all-natural camp cite the fabrics’ breathability, color-fastness, longevity, and ease of washing. And hygiene. “Synthetic garments tend to hold in odors much more than natural garments,” Brooks warns. “You sweat in it, it holds in the odors, and at some point you have to get rid of it. And then that garment will sit in a landfill for who knows how many years, because it won’t biodegrade.”

Those in the synthetic camp point out their fabrics’ ability to wick moisture away from the body better than cotton does. And besides, we’re not just talking polyester. There are new high-end fabrics that are longer lasting, easier to care for, cooler, and better looking than anything found in nature. And they, too, cite hygiene. “If you go into the sports world, anybody who sweats a lot never wears cotton,” Szeto says. “It breathes, but it holds onto the odor of the body.”

Even organics have their problems. Unless those fabrics are chemically treated, they won’t last long. And chemical treatments knock the luster off the all-organic notion.

#### 5. ...BUT

Fabrics are getting better and more amazing all the time. Tao Freedom recently launched a line that mixes Meryl skinlife, a synthetic fiber that prevents bacteria growth and odor, with aloe vera. “It’s the most amazing fabric,” Szeto says. “You put it on and you never want to take it off.” The aloe is embedded in the fiber, so it won’t ever wash out.

Szeto expects to bring out a new line by year’s end that embeds an antiaging substance into fabric. Think of it as a wearable spa.

#### 6. SHOES WILL KEEP YOU GROUNDED

That’s true literally, as well as figuratively. “As therapists, we can’t have our thoughts drifting,” says Rachel Funk, a massage practitioner in Wisconsin and a merchandiser for ShoeMall. “We need to keep our minds on our clients and our feet on the ground. Footwear really is the key to keeping us grounded.”





If you're going to be on your feet all day, good athletic shoes are a good choice. Find something with arch support that's wide enough so your toes aren't squeezed.

One particularly popular shoe among massage therapists is the Earth brand with "negative heel technology." The sole is shaped to raise the toes slightly higher than the heel. "It gets you up an additional 3 degrees," Funk says. "When you first put it on, you almost feel like you're falling backward. But it's good for your posture, because you stand up straighter."

Still popular among massage therapists are Crocs, the comfy, colorful clogs that took the shoe world by storm a few years ago. Still, the company nearly tanked in 2008 and may never again achieve the superstardom of five years ago. "We're searching for the next Crocs," Funk says.

One other footwear option: nothing. "I know a lot of massage therapists who don't wear shoes," Brooks says. "Being barefoot keeps their energy where it needs to be." If you wear slip-ons or clogs to greet clients, they never need to know if you discreetly slip them off for the massage.

## 7. JEWELRY SHOULD BE SEEN BUT NOT HEARD—OR FELT

Hard-liners insist that nearly all jewelry—and certainly all rings or bracelets—should come off before a massage. But for some massage therapists, keeping jewelry on can be important. "A few massage therapists I know wear energy crystals, turquoise, and tourmaline," Brooks says. "They're very



religious about what gem they're wearing that day to help them perform whatever they need to perform or to help them block energy."

Whatever you choose to wear, just make sure it doesn't scratch a client, or clink or clank, or jingle-jangle-jingle. And if you do bend the rules and wear a ring while giving a massage, don't take it off to wash your hands. "They've come out with studies that show that germs that hang out on jewelry are abundant," Brooks says. "So when you wash your hands, wash your ring, too. Anything that touches the human body needs to be washed as thoroughly as you wash your hands after a massage."

## 8. GENTLE LAUNDERING CAN EXTEND A GARMENT'S LIFE

Dryers are harsh on clothes, and they're energy hogs to boot. If you've got a place to hang clothes to line dry, you'll save on energy costs and your garment will last longer.

Washing in cold water is also easier on clothes, though cold water isn't as effective as hot in getting some stains out. "If you've got an oil stain, use a stain remover before you wash it," Brooks advises. "And don't let the garment sit in the laundry for days and then expect the oil stain to come out. Oil stains can't sit. So wash in cold water for longevity, but if you have stubborn oil stain, wash in warm, and dry on low, or hang it up to protect the fiber."

## 9. PUT YOUR CLOTHES TO WORK MARKETING YOUR BUSINESS

Angie Patrick, director of business development and corporate sales for Scrip/Massage Warehouse, recently had some baseball caps made up to say "Massage Therapist." The results astounded her.

"I would be standing in line at a coffee shop and people would come up to me and say, 'Wow, are you a massage therapist? Where do you practice?'" she says. T-shirts or jackets emblazoned with your company name also work. "It's just a matter of buying something that can get the conversation started," Patrick says. "T-shirts are wonderful for that, or a carrying a briefcase or backpack with your logo. You can be wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a ball cap, but if you're clean, people will ask you questions. Everybody wants a massage. Logo yourself, especially if you're a private practitioner. Wear something that denotes you as a massage therapist."

You can also put your clients to work marketing your practice for you. "If people buy a package of multiple massages, reward them with a T-shirt that's promoting your business," suggests Todd Diskin, owner of EmbroidMe in Lenexa, Kansas. "If they buy three months' worth of massages, give them a T-shirt and a water bottle. Or give away towels with your logo," he says.

"Uniforms are often a detail that is overlooked in a business," says Asmar. "Today, the power of a uniform is essential. It instantly identifies a team member, it promotes the company, and any time a staff member leaves the premises, it's free advertising."

## 10. BE TAX SAVVY

What's the difference between dressing for work in a "uniform" or just wearing comfy clothes that you could wear anywhere? Come tax time, you'll find out. "Uniforms" are deductible. "Clothing" is not. **m&b**

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