

INVESTING IN YOURSELF

An estimated 50,000 fresh-fingered massage therapists will enter the profession this year, energetic and eager to ease the pain of the world. Yet this cadre of enthusiastic new therapists will barely replace the estimated 45,000 veteran practitioners who will leave the profession this year.

They'll leave for a variety of reasons: burnout, injury, and financial disillusionment are a few. This much is clear—if the profession is to slow the high turnover rate, massage therapists must start taking better care of themselves. That means paying attention not just to the obvious physical demands of the work, but also to the psychological, emotional, and spiritual demands as well. Time and money invested in appropriate self-care can greatly extend a career that otherwise might be needlessly shortened. Take time to nurture your own well-being and you'll be investing in your greatest asset.

1. STAY PRESENT

When you're receiving a massage, it's normal to critique the other therapist. As a professional, you are attuned to proper technique. But as long as you're in this *head* mode, you're not fully relaxing into *body* mode.

“Try getting other therapies that you're not familiar with, or take a movement class or a Pilates class—anything that gets you back into your body and allows you to avoid that critical mind,” says Barb Frye, an author, massage educator, and therapist for almost 20 years, who now teaches the Feldenkrais Method at Pluspunkt Center near Zurich, Switzerland.

For Carole Osborne, a holistic health practitioner in San Diego, tai chi has proven invaluable. Its emphasis on proper balance and alignment translates into ergonomically correct posture when giving a massage, she says. And its emphasis on intentionality and focus are equally important in meeting clients' needs.

“Tai chi has a centuries-old record for the kinds of things you need to be a long-lasting, healthy, and satisfied massage therapist: strength, stamina, the ability to quiet your mind enough to stay more present with what's happening with your

client rather than being distracted by your own thoughts,” Osborne says.

2. STAY STRONG WITH INEXPENSIVE GEAR

Hand exercisers, putty, and hand strengtheners can help keep hands and wrists strong and free from pain. Flexbars and reflex balls can strengthen forearms or can be rubbed on tired feet. Resistance bands are cheap, easily portable, and can be pulled out and put to use whenever you've got a few spare minutes.

“Exercise balls are a great multipurpose tool to stay balanced and strong,” says Joey Hall, a spokeswoman for Orthopedic Physical Therapy Products, a Minneapolis-based company specializing in physical therapy products for professionals. The point is, fitness equipment doesn't have to cost a lot of money.

3. DON'T OVER-SCHEDULE CLIENTS

Frye's rule of balance is for every hour spent doing massage, a therapist should allot one hour to some form of self-care. “It doesn't have to be sitting in a Zen state,” she says. “Maybe it's hiking or going to a movie. Maybe it's an hour with the kids or walking



the dog. But whatever it is, if you stay with that rule of thumb, then you can stay healthy within yourself.”

And leave some time between clients—at least 15 minutes, says Lauriann Greene, author of *Save Your Hands*, a guide to injury prevention and ergonomics for manual therapists. “You need enough time to stretch, breathe, take a drink of water, relax,” she says. “If you have just enough time to change the sheets and get your next client in, that’s not healthy for you long-term.”

4. DON'T STOP EDUCATING YOURSELF

Your life as a student ought not end just because you’ve graduated from massage school. School feels exhilarating because you’re being constantly encouraged. Such encouragement is rare in the workaday world, however.

“You name it, you get it in school,” Frye says. “But the minute you get out of that environment, that really falls away. Soon after that initial honeymoon period, people get pretty isolated. That’s when the whole phenomenon of burnout kicks in.”

So, join professional organizations. Go to meetings with fellow therapists. Attend conferences. Take continuing education classes. Learn new techniques. Talk to the up-and-comers in the profession. Form a network and draw on it to keep expanding and refreshing your skills.

5. THINK “POSTURE”

Lots of massage therapists develop back and neck pain because so much of their day is spent bending forward. That’s a tough posture in which to maintain good body alignment, but it’s hard to avoid while working.

Therefore, pay special attention to your posture when you’re *not* giving a massage. “Watch your alignment when you’re in other high-risk situations—at your computer or in your car,” says Dennis Zacharkow, a physical therapist in Rochester, Minnesota, and owner of YogaBack company, which sells posture supports. “When you’re not working on a client, try to elongate your posture as much as possible, maybe with a few minutes of exercise and a few stretches,” he says.

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“Take care of your body and your hands in everything you do,” Green advises. “Pro athletes are careful about what they do outside their sport. They don’t spend the weekend hammering nails. So whether you’re at home, engaged in a hobby, or doing other work, make sure what you’re doing is ergonomically sound.”

6. USE AN ELECTRIC LIFT TABLE

Yes, they’re costly—maybe three times the cost of a good table with a manual lift—“but it’s the best investment a therapist can make,” Frye says. “And it pays itself off because it saves your body when you have the luxury of being able to lift and lower the client. Nine times out of 10, therapists will know that their client is too high, but they won’t have the client get off the table so they can lower it because they don’t want to disturb the client.”

7. MAKE YOUR WORKSPACE COMFORTABLE FOR YOU

Dim lighting may be restful, but if it’s so dim you can’t easily see what you’re doing, that’s not healthy. Solution? Turn up the lighting and offer the client an eye mask.

Ditto on the furniture arrangement. Therapists need to be able to move freely around the room. Have a supportive stool available. If you’ve got a hard floor of concrete or stone, get a mat to cushion your steps. “There are gel mats, called anti-fatigue mats that have edges that are flush with the floor so there isn’t a tripping hazard,” Green says.

8. SEEK TREATMENT AT THE FIRST SIGN OF INJURY

A 2006 Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP) member survey found that 77 percent of respondents had experienced pain or other musculoskeletal symptoms related to massage work. That makes for an achy profession.

“But that doesn’t mean that the symptoms have to lead to injury,” Green says. “If you recognize the symptoms early in the process and seek effective treatment quickly, chances are on your side that those symptoms will resolve and you can get back to work. The problem occurs when people let things go.”

9. EAT, DRINK—LIKE AN ATHLETE


If you’re giving massage 5–8 hours a day, then you *are* an athlete. A good athlete needs to eat the right foods, balancing proteins and carbs, and drink lots of water.

“Between massages, snack on protein,” Frye urges. “Have a bowl of fruit handy instead of snacking on M&Ms and Snickers. And don’t forget the water. Nine out of 10 massage therapists work while dehydrated. They’ll go through three or four massages sipping on one bottle of water. And that’s not healthy.”

10. FIND YOUR PASSION

Maybe your passion is working with a special needs population. Maybe it’s working on athletes. Maybe it’s a certain modality that resonates with you. “Find whatever you really have juice for, and specialize in that,” says Osborne, who discovered prenatal massage 28 years ago and is still intrigued by the work.

Finding the passion can help you turn a job into a calling. “Then, this becomes not just how you earn a living, but how you’re living your purpose,” she says. **m&b**

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