

Are You Safe?

Massage therapists are always concerned with the comfort of their clients. But as this month's column illustrates, it is equally important for them to make their own safety a top priority.



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Providing a safe massage experience requires that you do everything possible to ensure that your client will be physically, medically, emotionally and psychologically safe. But are you safe? What measures are you taking to ensure your physical safety?

This writing presents the summarization of a real-life situation where the physical safety of a massage therapist was compromised, and the results were devastating. May it serve to help you recognize the risky aspects of your own work situation, and lead you to take steps that make your physical safety a primary consideration.

Background

I recently received a phone call from an attorney in the Midwest who requested a consultation with me for a case. He was representing a female massage therapist, who I refer to as Jane Doe, who was physically and sexually assaulted by a male client during a treatment session while working at a chiropractic office. The client was quite appropriate during his first two visits with Jane, but on the third visit, the assault occurred.

Found to have previous sexual assault charges with a consistent modus operandi,

the client was arrested, sentenced and is currently incarcerated. The case was resolved, and was not the impetus or the reason for the consult call to me.

Having successfully prosecuted the criminal client, the attorney was now representing Jane in a case of neglect against the chiropractor, who we will call "Dr. Smith." Dr. Smith employed Jane to massage his patients in his office after he left for the day. The treatment rooms were available as massage therapy space for Jane only after Dr. Smith's workday was over. When Jane was with massage clients, all chiropractic and office staff were gone for the day, and she was alone in the office with the folks who Dr. Smith had referred to her.

Several months before the assault occurred, Jane had approached Dr. Smith to discuss her feelings of discomfort, explaining that she had safety concerns because of her isolated situation. She requested that her hours be changed so that others were in the office with her. Dr. Smith denied her request because of space constraints, assuring Jane that all of his patients who became her clients were behaviorally appropriate and ethically safe. Jane, believing she had done all she could to deal with the situation,

agreed to continue to work in the office after hours.

The dispute of neglect is not our concern or focus here, although I expect that this story will elicit opinions and commentary. The poignant issue raised here is the physical safety of the massage therapist, and how it is a concern for all of us who are behind closed doors, alone with our clients.

The Isolative Nature Of Massage

Ethics training for massage therapists typically addresses the isolative aspects of working with clients as they pertain to the clients' significant emotional and physical vulnerability. Protecting clients from any form of unprofessional behavior or misconduct is clearly a primary ethical matter that must be upheld at all times. While the focus must not shift from protecting the client to protecting the therapist in an "us-against-them" mentality, complete safety for both the client and the therapist must be simultaneously regarded and ensured.

A career in massage and bodywork offers the potential for professional independence and autonomy, which can both be attractive vocational features. Yet, while it offers freedom and self-regulation, it also can be very isolating because it may offer little or no opportunity to have contact with coworkers.

Many massage and bodywork professionals work in home-based offices, rent space in office buildings or co-share rented space with colleagues. In all of

these situations, therapists are likely to be alone with clients for many hours of the workday. Even when office space is communal, most of the workday is spent behind closed doors, alone with clients.

Isolation intensifies for the massage therapists who travel to clients' homes to do outcall or residential massage, as do the safety issues inherent in such secluded settings. Essentially, the more remote and private the setting is, the greater the risk becomes for the massage therapist's physical safety.

Risk Assessment And Suggestions For Solutions

To help you assess the personal safety risks inherent in your work setting, respond to the following questions:

- Is your workspace in your home or on your residential property?
- Do you perform outcall massage to clients' homes or to hotel rooms?
- Do hours of your workday pass by where you see no one but your clients?
- Are you ever alone in an office building, salon or other setting when you work with clients?
- Have thoughts or feelings of concern for your physical safety come up when you are with a client?
- Has a significant other expressed his or her concern for your safety in regard to your work setting or your working with your clients?

If you answer "yes" to any of these assessment questions, you may find the

safety suggestions listed here to be helpful in minimizing your risk:

- Keep a cell phone within reach at all times so you can call someone, or 911, if needed.
- Let someone you trust know ahead of time about the place and time frame of the isolative situation you will be working in. Ask him or her to intervene if he or she has not heard from you by the time you say you will be done.
- Schedule clients whom you do not know well only when there is a trusted adult within earshot.
- If it appears to a new client that the two of you are alone in your work setting, even though someone else is within earshot, subtly let the presence of that other person be known to the client.
- Take someone with you when you do outcall massage if the client is not well known to you.
- Trust your intuition and instincts. Do not dismiss feelings of vulnerability, even if they are not validated by others.

Summary

Your safety is as much a priority as is the safety of your clients; you deserve to feel safe in your workspace. Regardless of your work setting, the logical question that must be asked is, "Am I safe in this situation?" If the answer to this question is in any way hesitant or unclear, take actions that allow you to arrive at a place of feeling completely safe and secure when you are with clients. 📖



Dianne Polseno, former chair of the National Ethics Subcommittee, is a practicing massage therapist, practical nurse, academic

director and teacher at the Bancroft School of Massage Therapy. She is the author and publisher of *Comprehensive Review Manual For Massage Therapists*. She can be reached at: 1 Raymond St., North Smithfield, Rhode Island 02896-8215, or at: dipol@aol.com.

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