

# Ethical Queries From Our Readers (Part One)

In this column, we discuss how to deal with the client who wants “more.”



business partnership with a 33-year-old male therapist who trained in Europe and has 10 years of experience in physical therapy and massage. We present ourselves very professionally and medically. We advertise that we do clinical massage, wear scrubs as our uniform and take blood pressures as part of our medical history interview.

Having a new massage practice is very exciting, but frankly, I am surprised at the number of men I have to deal with who want more than professional massage. I would say that about half of the male clients I have seen lately have breached the boundaries, grabbing my hand or coming right out and asking for the “grand finale” or “hand release.” It shocks me that they would try this with my 6-foot-3-inch male business partner massaging in the booth right next to me, but they do.

We have phone calls with blatant inquiries about all sorts of sexual perversions; however, these are easy to nip in the bud. If I have a funny feeling when a caller is vague about his questions, I am sure to explain that we offer legitimate, relaxation and medical massage. Many hang up when they hear this, but as I have shown, some still come in expecting more than we offer.

I know I am a good massage therapist, and I love helping people feel better. I feel insulted that some people think that massage therapy includes sexual activity. I really thought that at my age, this would not be an issue I would have to deal with in my practice. I think about the young women I went to massage school with, and I think about how

**T**his series will present the recent ethical queries sent in by E-mail from MTJ readers. Part One addresses the age-old ethical dilemma faced by massage professionals—on-the-spot management of the client who attempts to sexualize the massage experience.

## The Query

I am writing for your advice. I am a 57-year-old woman who changed careers from court reporting because I wanted to affect people through touch. I am new to the profession, specializing in neuromuscular therapy. I am also in a new

many male clients they must be dealing with who expect sexual activity during a massage treatment. I was raised to be a people pleaser, and I really have to force myself to be assertive with these clients; I hope these younger female massage therapists have the assertion skills needed to deal with this issue effectively.

My question to you is this: Is it possible and ethical to simply tell a client who asks for sexual favors in a massage treatment that it is unacceptable, and if they comply, retain them as clients? Or is it necessary to completely stop the massage and ask them to leave the premises? In my recent experience with three male clients who were inappropriate, I tried this approach and they stayed for the remainder of the massage without making further requests, but I have no way of knowing if they will return.

My partner and I both feel that massage schools need to emphasize training in exactly how to respond in these situations. We also agree that these breaches of ethics can occur with both male and female clients.

We are determined for our practice to offer strictly professional, medical massage. We are most interested in any help you can offer us in carrying this out.

Sincerely,  
Elizabeth S. Noonan and Asmir Dzindo  
Falls Massage, LLC  
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

### My Reply

Thank you for your very important ethical question; I am sure this issue is of

interest to many massage and bodywork practitioners, and I appreciate the opportunity to address this topic by responding to you.

Sexual activity in any form or manner during a massage treatment is always inappropriate, unethical and unacceptable. The following suggestions are offered to help you effectively deal with clients who have sexual interest in massage.

### Interview Your Clients

Make the initial contact a client interview, as well as an opportunity to state ethical parameters. Don't wait until new clients arrive for the appointment to determine their intentions or declare your policies. A very effective way to set the ethical boundaries with new clients is to use the initial conversation as your opportunity to interview them about their intentions, ask why they are seeking your services and state the ethical parameters of your services.

Especially when you intuit that a client may have sexual interest, use of these questions and statements in the initial telephone or in-person conversation can be the proactive measure that will prevent your need to deal with inappropriate requests during the massage session. Even if the client has professional intentions, use of the following in a matter-of-fact, friendly tone can reassure them of your professional standards. Here are some examples:

"Are you seeking professional, medical massage services?"

"Are you aware that the massage services we offer are professional and nonsexual?"

"Do you understand we offer ethical, professional massage?"

"We do not offer sexual massage."

"We offer professional, nonsexual massage services."

### Be Prepared

The unfortunate reality is that sexual requests and expectations in the massage setting do occur, and that regardless of the continual professional efforts of legitimate massage therapists, there are places where sexual massage is offered. Accepting this does not mean condoning it or excusing it; it means you know how to deal with it if it presents in your practice.

Here are some tips to help you be prepared:

Review the MTJ article "Desexualizing The Massage Experience" which appeared in the Summer 2000 issue. This article provides extensive background and information for massage and bodywork practitioners who want to understand the physiological and social connections between sexuality and massage, as well as how to deal with them. Remember that knowledge is power and that to be informed is to be prepared. To obtain this archived article, visit [[www.amta-massage.org](http://www.amta-massage.org)]. Then type in "Desexualizing The Massage Experience" in the search box in the upper-right corner. This will pull the article up.

Have a professional support system. Meet with colleagues; get a mentor; seek peer or professional supervision. Many client and business situations, such as the one presented by Elizabeth and Asmir, can have a personal and professional impact on you. Having folks to talk to who know the issues of our profession can both help you circumvent, as well as recover, from situations that can be ethically traumatizing.

Role-play how you could handle different situations that may occur. Ask a

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colleague or significant other to play devil's advocate, presenting you with the questions or requests of the inappropriate client so that you can actually speak the words you would use to deal effectively with the situation if it occurs. By rehearsing the actual scenarios and acting out effective behavioral responses, you create empowering default responses within yourself that you will be able to rely on in challenging situations with clients.

Provide an informed consent talk-through of the events of the massage before the client gets on the table. Informed consent is an essential aspect of an ethically safe massage, and it can be a routine way for you to insinuate the limits of what will occur during the actual massage treatment with new clients. Take the new client into the massage room after the intake interview and run through what will happen. An example of my talk-through with new clients sounds like this: "When I leave the room, you will get undressed to your level of comfort. You can use those hooks to hang your clothes. Lie on the table face up and cover yourself with the sheet and blanket up to your chest. You will be safely draped at all times during the massage. I will begin by sitting at the head of the table. The sequence of the massage is as follows: head and face, neck, upper torso, right upper limb, right lower limb, left lower limb, then left upper limb. I will then help you

turn over onto your abdomen, ensuring that you will remain covered at all times. Then I will work your back, and end with the back of your lower extremities. The massage will then be complete and I will inform you that I am leaving the room, and you can get dressed and meet me in the waiting area. Do you have any questions?"

Consider having new clients keep their underpants on during the massage if you have any concerns about their ethical appropriateness. To avoid making the request for this, make it part of the informed consent talk-through. You could simply say, "When I leave the room, undress, but leave your underpants on. Then get on the table face up. You may use those hooks to hang your clothes on, etc."

Request payment before the massage treatment. Many massage therapists do this routinely with all clients, saying that it is easier to make financial transactions before a massage than in the relaxed state after a massage. But it is a particularly good practice with new clients if you feel unsure about their ethical appropriateness. This way, there will be no issue of whether or not you will be paid for your time or work done if you need to terminate the massage and ask the client to leave.

### Deal With Inappropriate Requests Clearly and Firmly

In the event that proactive measures are insufficient and a client waits until the massage session to make a sexual request known, be clear and firm in your approach. Do not engage in discussion or controversy about the issue after you make your definitive statements. Be clear that it is not an issue that is up for negotiation. Avoid punitive, judgmental or condescending statements. While the expression of a client's sexual expectations can feel shocking and insulting to you in the moment, make every effort to respond rather than react. Each situation must be dealt with individually, and while there are no cookbook recipes on how to deal with the sexual requests of

clients, resolute statements such as these can help put an immediate halt to the situation. Combine these statements in the way that is most appropriate for the particular circumstances:

"No, that is not an option. I am willing to continue this massage treatment only if you can respect my professionalism and stop such requests."

"No, that is an inappropriate request. I do not provide those services. I will continue only if you can refocus and act in a professional manner."

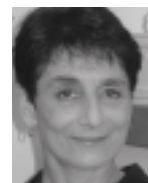
"No, and I am unwilling to continue this massage. Please get dressed and meet me in the waiting area."

"No, that is an unacceptable request. The massage is over; please get dressed and meet me outside the room."

"Your request for sexual massage is unacceptable for my practice, and I will not rebook an appointment for you."

### Some Final Thoughts

Dealing with the sexual requests of clients is common and never easy. There are many ways to try to avert these uncomfortable situations, yet they aren't always preventable, despite our most diligent efforts. For ethical self-care, be as prepared and proactive as possible. Then, be clear, direct and final if you must dismiss a client who persists with sexual requests. ❏



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Coming In Part Two Of Ethical Queries From Our Readers: How Massage Therapists Treat Each Other In Business.