



Work Flow: Protect Your MTs

Here are 7 simple steps to ensure healthier, more productive massage therapists at your day spa.

By Shari Auth, LMT, La.C

Over my years of teaching continuing education workshops to massage therapists (MTs), I've identified a pattern. On day one of each workshop, I suggest we go around the room so participants can introduce themselves and tell the class where they work, how long they've been working and why they chose to take the workshop. And without exception, this is what I learn: The majority of my students, most of whom work in spas, are challenged with body pain. Typical areas of complaint are the wrists, hands (especially the thumbs), back and shoulders. These massage therapists fear for their livelihoods because of their work-related physical strain.

And so I focus on training those MTs on how to preserve their bodies to enable them to work for as long as they can, and without injury. We talk about how to position their bodies while giving massage to avoid unnecessary strain on the back and shoulders. I train them on how to preserve their hands—which are so easily and often injured by performing massage—by using their forearms more.

MTs are an invaluable resource at spas. Clients may love your quiet room and shower facilities, but that's not why they return or refer their friends. The crux of the spa experience often rests on the massage therapist, and MTs who are healthy and happy give better massages. Conversely, MTs who are experiencing back pain give less to clients. And this ultimately hurts spa businesses.

To help you keep your MTs—and your business—in healthy condition, I've taken the grievances I've heard from therapists throughout the years and compiled these seven tips to help you support your MTs so they can better support you and your clients.

1 Provide enough treatment room space.

It's easy to think that a therapist needs only enough room to walk around and stand next to the massage table. However, standing is not an ergonomic stance in which to perform massage. Visualize yourself standing and rounding forward to massage someone—does your back hurt yet? Imagine performing six 55-minute massages in that position.

*** Healthy advice:** An ergonomic massage stance is dynamic. Massage therapists need enough room in a treatment space to do a yoga standing posture alongside the table, and enough room between themselves and the table to allow them to lean forward with a straight back rather than rounding forward. A minimum guideline is two feet of space around the perimeter of the table, allowing extra room by the head for the face cradle. Three feet or more is even better.

2 Make sure tables are adjustable.

Proper height of a massage table is crucial to an MT's comfort and ability to perform massage without strain. Tables need to be adjustable to account for the height of the massage therapist, the size of the client and the type of massage being performed.

*** Healthy advice:** Be sure the table can go low enough (around 20" high) to accommodate the needs of shorter therapists and tall enough (around 30" high) to accommodate the needs of taller massage therapists.

3 Limit hours and clients.

Obviously, MTs aren't machines. To remain effective, they must be able to limit their work time and number of consecutive clients. These parameters will vary among practitioners, so ask your MTs what they can handle.

*** Healthy advice:** In general, therapists

shouldn't see more than three clients in a row, and need 10 minutes in between to hydrate, use the bathroom and have a snack if necessary.

4 Encourage staff give-and-take.

As an employer, do all you can to encourage your spa practitioners to trade treatments with each other. This will help them stay healthy, avoid burnout, learn about different services offered at the spa, and increase their repertoire by exposing them to fellow practitioners' massage techniques.

*** Healthy advice:** If possible, allow therapists to use the treatment rooms during off-hours. With permission, print out a master list of staff email addresses so therapists can contact each other to set up trades. Post a sign in the break room or send an email letting your staff know you encourage trading services for better health and increased knowledge.



* RECOGNIZING MT BURNOUT

Think one of your massage therapists may be burning out? Here are the typical signs, according to Auth:

- Starts sessions late or ends early.
- Frequently looks tired.
- Seems unenthusiastic.
- Is uninterested in taking additional hours.
- Resists performing deep-tissue massage.
- Exhibits unhealthy weight gain or loss.

5 Help therapists stay in shape. Massage is a very physical practice; productivity and career longevity depend on good physical conditioning.

*** Healthy advice:** If your spa has a gym or group classes, offer access to these amenities at a discount or free to your MTs. If not, partner with a local gym or yoga/Pilates studio to offer a mutual discount to each others' employees. Post a "break time" stretch routine in the break room with simple wrist, shoulder and back stretches.

6 Have MTs use sustainable massage techniques. The more options at a massage therapist's disposal, the better. MTs who know how to use their forearms, feet or a massage tool (such as a stone or ball) in addition to their hands, have a longevity advantage. Such tools preserve the massage therapist's fragile hands, and are a particular asset when performing deep-tissue massage. Because the forearms are more durable than the hands,

and the surface area of contact is broader, they enable MTs to lean their body weight into the tissue instead of using muscular force.

*** Healthy advice:** Train MTs thoroughly on the use of forearms and massage tools to relieve stress on hands, especially when performing deep-tissue work. An MT who is trained in giving an effortless deep-tissue massage is an asset to any spa.

7 Have MTs use sustainable body mechanics. It's easy to find a massage therapist who complains of chronic lower-back pain. But with good body mechanics, this therapist can feel good even after a full day of massaging. At the beginning of my workshops I teach simple qi gong exercises for better body mechanics. Qi gong is an ancient movement system from China that couples movement with breath. It teaches practitioners to think of the body as grounded in the lower body like a tree trunk, while the upper body is soft and

fluid like tree branches. Legs are grounded and strong, knees slightly bent, back straight, chest open, shoulders relaxed and the core engaged. Practicing massage with good mechanics is a therapeutic workout that makes the practitioner feel better, not worse.

*** Healthy advice:** Encourage MTs to participate in dance, yoga, Pilates and/or martial arts, which teach conscious movement and can help therapists develop better body mechanics.

Using the above tips, MTs can do great work with less burnout or injury. For your day spa, that translates to less turnover, more productivity, happier clients and a healthier bottom line.

Shari Auth is a licensed massage therapist, acupuncturist, CE teacher, NCBTMB-approved provider for Florida and New York States and founder of the Auth Method (authmethod.com).