



Massage Today

September, 2004, Vol. 04, Issue 09

Safety While Working Alone

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During massage school, never once did it occur to me that I was preparing for a career that would leave me isolated for the majority of my workday. After all, my technique classes were full of other students chatting and learning.

Even the student clinic was brightly lit and somewhat noisy.

It wasn't until about a month into my career, when I was waiting for an unknown male client to arrive for a six o'clock appointment, that it dawned on me that I was going to be alone in the office - and in a room for an hour - with someone I did not know. Not only was this client a stranger, he was a stranger who was about to be completely "in the buff," covered only with a sheet. "If I'm going to be vulnerable, I should at least have a plan for my safety," I thought, while awaiting his arrival.

We've all been in this situation. Even male therapists experience the occasional female client who makes a suggestive or inappropriate comment that leaves the therapist wondering what kind of services the client is seeking in addition to professional massage. As massage therapists, it is essential to create a safe environment and plan your exit in advance so you will know what to do if your safety is ever at risk.

Screening Clients on the Telephone. Safety begins when the client calls for an appointment. A caller should not hesitate to give you a last name and telephone number. If the caller refuses, I would question the reason why and, in turn, refuse to grant the caller an appointment. Likewise, if a client refuses this information on the health intake form, I would refuse the appointment.

If the caller asks if you accept "tips," nine times out of 10, you are being asked if you will include sex in your treatment for extra money. My response would be, "Gratuities are accepted for exceptional professional services; however, sex is never a part of our service."

When the Client Arrives. Just prior to the arrival of your client, close any doors to other rooms so the client will not know if other people are present in your office or home. Keep several lights on outside the treatment room, as well.

During the Appointment. Make sure someone knows where you are, with whom, and when your appointment will be finished. If you have a cell phone, bring it into the treatment room with you and keep it within reach, or place it in your pocket. Of course, you will turn the ringer off, but keep the telephone turned on. If the client makes an inappropriate comment or gesture during the appointment, it is best to end the appointment and leave the room.

Whether you collect the fees for the appointment is not important; what is more important is your safety. I have known many therapists who tolerated an inappropriate client because they needed the money. It is never worth the money to risk your safety. If you let a client act inappropriately, the client will think the behavior is acceptable and continue.

On-Site Appointments. Your safety is most at risk if you are going to a client's home or hotel room because you will be unfamiliar with the location. Make it a point to survey the location inside and out, taking note of all exits when you arrive. This will prepare you for a quick exit should it become necessary.

After you arrive and greet the client, use your cell phone to call someone (or your answering machine) while in the client's presence. State where you are, including the address and/or room number, who you are with, and that you will call back when the appointment is finished. This will deter anyone with preconceived ideas from taking action. Keep your cell phone in your pocket or apron as a backup.

In my career of 10 years, I am thankful to say I have had only two mishaps with clients who acted inappropriately, although I've warded off many potential problem clients on the telephone. The first client was a nudist and thought I should adhere to his belief system. The second squirmed for 10 minutes on the table before flipping over without my prompting. Instead of accusing the clients of acting inappropriately, I simply told them that I was uncomfortable and left the room.

If you have a safety plan in place, you will be less vulnerable. Unfortunately, sometimes we come across those in our profession that abuse or misunderstand what massage is all about. Plan for your safety and enjoy your career.

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