Conducting a Professional Client Interview and Massage Therapy Session

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Learning objectives

- List steps in the initial interview protocol.
- Describe the rationale and method for establishing client rapport.
- Describe how to discuss past massage experience with clients.
- Determine the type of session the client is seeking and appropriate questions to ask.
- Explain the rehabilitative process for clients needing pain relief.
- Describe the pain scale, palpation application, and necessity for client feedback.
- Explain what to consider in a treatment plan and session protocol.
- Explain body positioning, draping and how to create a setting conducive to client relaxation and comfort.
- Explain how to receive a massage.
- Describe what clients may expect to feel following a massage session.
- List steps to conclude a successful client session.

Greeting and interviewing clients

A successful interview and the establishment of rapport with a new client is an essential aspect for retaining clientele. It can be even more important to the client than the quality and expertise of the therapist’s work. Too many therapists discount the value of their social and professional interaction skills. Just as learning a new technique requires practice, so too does honing one’s skills in conducting a successful interview that establishes rapport and bonds clients to you.

If at all possible, before the client arrives, prepare all needed paperwork in the order you wish on a clipboard. Familiarize yourself with any notes you took when the appointment was made to use in your initial conversation. Doing this shows clients you are professional, and that they are important to you.

While it may seem like a cliché of proper behavior, it is extremely important to greet clients with a genuine smile, look directly into their eyes, shake their hands, speak in a pleasant voice, and offer them a seat. If you are working at a hectic, frenetic pace or show a lack attention in your greeting, you may seem less friendly and risk making a poor impression. Practice your greeting in the mirror and study your face and smile so you are more aware of it in actual practice.

This initial moment with a new client can be crucial for developing a good relationship and ensuring the person’s return for future sessions. It also can promote positive word-of-mouth recommendations to other potential clients.

As you greet clients, it is also prudent to observe their posture and manner of walking as they take their seat. Make a mental note of any skin conditions, postural deviations or signs of discomfort as they enter and sit down. You can inquire about this when conducting the interview to include in your overall evaluation of their condition. This awareness will allow you to notice any changes in their condition upon completion of sessions.

Tell clients before initiating the interview that you would like them to fill out the assembled paperwork on the clipboard. Go over it briefly so they understand what you need. These likely will include a client history, medical history, release forms and other such paperwork. Assure them you are available to guide them in completing the forms if they encounter any difficulty or have any questions. Ask them to let you know when they are finished.

Take this time to finish any room preparation or other unfinished work. If you are already prepared to begin, allow the space and time to fill out the paperwork but periodically check on their progress in case your assistance is needed.

While they complete their paperwork, use the time to begin formulating a treatment plan for today’s session based on your postural observations and the notes you made of their reasons for booking the appointment. Keep in mind to remain flexible about your treatment plan until assessing all verbal and written medical information acquired along with palpation examination results, range of motion tests and muscle strength testing that may be relevant to the session.

If possible, plan additional time for the appointment when scheduling new clients. Otherwise, the client may feel rushed, and the therapist will not be able to offer his or her best session. It will inevitably take longer to complete a professional interview with any new client. Extra time is needed for paperwork, questioning, evaluation, treatment planning, palpation or range of motion testing, and documentation of session results.
You may charge for this extra time; if this is an insurance-based session, then you can bill for the extra time. Otherwise, explaining that you will spend this extra time at no additional charge because of concern for the person’s welfare can be a solid marketing tool for earning repeat business.

Establishing rapport

When the client has finished the paperwork, decide whether to interview him or her in the waiting room, if you have one, or in your treatment room. Complete your interview in the waiting room only if there are no other clients present – all information given requires privacy under HIPAA regulations. If other clients are present or expected to arrive, take your client to the treatment room to continue the interview.

Tell the person you will just take a moment to look over the information. Before going over any physical complaints or medical history, focus on any personal information gleaned from the intake. This is the time to get to know a client and show an interest in him or her as a person, not just another opportunity for your financial reward. Explain that before delving into their current physical condition, you would like to get to know them a little bit. Take a moment to clarify this part of your interview procedure by reassuring the person that his or her pain complaints, if any, are important and will be addressed.

At this point, ask questions that help identify the individual on a personal level. Ask the client about his or her occupation, how long has he or she lived here, and where did the person move from? Are there children or family here? Note any hobbies listed and ask about involvement in them. Anytime you have something in common with clients, be sure to let them know of your mutual involvement – but be brief. The emphasis should always be more on the client than you.

Allow clients to express themselves, but be aware of the time allotted for the session and bring closure by simply saying that you’ll look forward to talking about it more later. Taking time for this type of interaction usually reduces any initial apprehension or fear and allows clients to feel more at ease and relaxed, thereby enhancing the quality of the session. It also establishes a greater chance of needed client feedback during the treatment. Creating a supportive environment in this way, your ability to build a loyal client base is optimized.

Clients who have received massage

Once you have established rapport, the interview focus shifts to clients’ medical history and current condition. It is appropriate to know whether clients have ever received a massage therapy session in the past. If so, ask the following questions:

- How often have they received massage?
- When was the last time they received a massage?
- Have they experienced different types of massage from various therapists?
- What was the reason for getting the massage? Relaxation or pain relief?
- How it was performed? Flowing strokes, pressure, kneading, etc.?
- What body positioning was used to begin and end the session?
- Was the session effective either by relaxing them or relieving pain? If not, why?
- If pain was relieved, by how much? Is the same pain issue still evident today?
- Have they ever been hurt by massage? If so, in what way?
- Has anyone ever explained how to receive a massage?

The answers given determine the background experience of your client and what explanations or clarifications may be necessary. If a client’s experiences were completely positive with all appropriate educational explanations previously made, then you can assure the person the past treatment was handled professionally and appropriately. However, it is not unusual to find that even clients who have been receiving massage for many years have not been asked these or other informative questions, nor have they received pertinent explanations. Massage therapists who learn to be well versed in asking about a client’s previous massage experiences and who rationally explain their treatment protocol are likely to create a very favorable client impression.

Your attention to the client’s answers allows you to determine whether previous treatment methods were effective. This information clarifies whether your methods are similar or different from past therapists to determine what needs to be explained as well as what to expect from your session. If any of these questions were not previously addressed, at this point you have the opportunity to explain the importance of this information to plan a session aimed specifically at the person’s needs. Further explain that this attention to detail ensures he or she will receive the highest professional service you believe all your clients deserve. Most clients will be keenly aware of the compassion shown in your high regard for their welfare. This can earn you deserved respect and credibility for your knowledge and professionalism.

Experienced massage clients new to the area

It is likely that a new client will come to you who has recently moved to the area, has received regular massage therapy in the past or whose previous therapist has moved away or is no longer in practice. These people have come to you seeking a new therapist, but many times they are still emotionally attached to their last therapist and have engrained their past therapist’s routine methods in their mind and body. That is an important reason why you must ask about past treatment methods because they will be used to them, which can make any new treatment protocol less to their liking.

It should be understood this is a natural response to something new and different. To offset this mentality and transfer a client’s loyalty to you requires re-educating the client to help him or
her accept a new treatment application. If the client has had multiple therapists previously, ask the person to describe the differences in the sessions of each therapist. Explain the format you use in your treatments and describe any similarities to those the person has experienced with other therapists. Ask the person to be open to experiencing a new method, and after the session is over, give you feedback on it.

It is common for these new “experienced” clients to compare your massage treatments to their past therapist, and it may take them time to get used to your routine. If you speak about this issue with them before their session, it may help to create a mindset that acknowledges there will be differences to what they have been accustomed to in their massage sessions. Bringing awareness to a new experience will generally open people’s minds and bodies to a positive response. Avoiding the issue, on the other hand, can encourage a negative response because you may not match the expectations they had with their previous therapist.

To further bolster their acceptance and patience in getting used to your treatment, ask them to experience a few sessions with you and then see if they like your methods. Most clients will adjust to your methods over a few sessions, and frequently even prefer them to past methods. Some will even find your application preferable to any they’ve ever experienced.

After this trial period, if they have not developed a preference for your methods, you may offer to adjust your treatment protocol. Find what pleases them, as long as any changes to your routine will still allow you to perform the session with a positive therapeutic outcome.

### Determining the type of session

The interview focus now shifts to the client’s medical history and current condition. When the appointment was made, it should have been established whether they were seeking a stress release relaxation massage or a pain relief therapeutic massage. Even those who were looking for a relaxation session should always be asked whether there has been a change in their condition where pain relief may now be their choice.

When clients are receiving their very first massage, take a few moments to go over the benefits of massage and provide brochures or information about massage to read later. Regardless of their reasons for getting a massage, you must give attention to their medical history for any contraindications, medications to treat a condition, or current pain complaints.

If there are no medical reasons to preclude giving a requested relaxation massage, then the therapist should prepare to begin the session with an appropriate explanation of how to receive a massage, draping, body positioning, client feedback, a description of your massage application, and what to expect to feel after the massage. If the client does have pain complaints, possible contraindications, or is being treated with medications, then further specific questioning is necessary.

### Contraindications and medications

When contraindications are indicated but do not preclude a massage for clients, explain the rationale for avoiding contraindicated areas of their body and how you will work around those areas for their safety and security. If the contraindication is one that requires the therapist to adjust pressure, such as with a diabetic whose condition is under control through medication, it is imperative that the therapist knows how to conduct a safe therapeutic session. In this example, a prescription from a doctor authorizing massage therapy is absolutely necessary.

Some other client medical conditions under control through medication that could allow massage to be safely administered are high blood pressure, heart problems or cancer. But any of them would require a prescription authorizing massage from a doctor along with proper adjustments in pressure applications or the length of the session.

Because massage has the potential to alter the effects of medication, it is imperative to know how to make adjustments to your treatment based on a client’s condition, and you must be able to articulate the reasoning for any treatment adjustments to the client.

It is the responsibility of a therapist to learn proper treatment protocol for any pathological condition presented by a client. This knowledge can be obtained through continuing education classes that focus on pathology in relation to massage therapy as well as a few written publications. There are several books available on this subject specific to massage therapy that a prudent massage therapist should keep in his or her library. Internet searches can identify these publications. Before treating any client taking medications, checking these sources can quickly inform the therapist on how to proceed or whether the session should be terminated.

### Pain complaints

Assessment of a client’s pain complaints requires obtaining a history and current pain status by asking appropriate questions along with palpation examination, postural analysis, range of motion testing, and muscle strength/weakness tests. Ask the client to tell you about his or her pain issue if the person seeks a therapeutic pain relief session. Appropriate questions to provide the therapist the knowledge to devise a treatment plan include:

- Does you know what caused the pain to occur?
- How long has the pain been going on?
- Is the pain acute or chronic? Explain the difference to the client.
- Is the pain constant or intermittent?
- Does the pain increase when you do a particular activity or movement?
- Has the pain spread to other body areas over time?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, can you rate the intensity of the pain?
- Describe the pain: Is it aching, burning and so on?
Explaining the rehabilitation process for pain relief treatment

While any improvement or elimination of soft tissue dysfunction or pain will vary with each client, there are guidelines for rehabilitation that can help clients create realistic expectations of pain relief from massage therapy treatment. Understanding the rehabilitation process will help them have patience in obtaining positive results and should reduce any doubts about the merits of massage therapy for their condition. Clients sometimes do experience an immediate reduction or elimination of pain, but chronic or acute soft tissue conditions more often than not require repeated cumulative treatment, with steady pain reduction as treatment progresses. This is especially true of chronic pain complaints.

Most clients understand that longstanding, enduring pain will not magically disappear with a single one-hour massage session, but clients who don’t need to have a more realistic expectation of results. While immediate, complete cessation of pain is always a goal, if that was always the result, you would have people lined up outside your door.

The reality is that rehabilitation of soft tissue dysfunction is dependent on the severity of the condition, how frequently treatment is obtained, each individual’s physical response, whether the client is engaging in activities that exacerbate the condition, making changes in work or personal habits, postural corrections, therapist skill level, or permanent physical disabilities that exist for a client.

Explain that client awareness and participation in their recovery by performing helpful stretches or strengthening of affected areas between massage therapy sessions may also affect the outcome. It may also speed the recovery process and should be encouraged. Educating your clients about these characteristics for soft tissue rehabilitation may help them provide you with helpful feedback and garner their confidence by recognizing your professional knowledge as a health care provider.

When your clients have a more informed awareness of the many things that can determine their rehabilitation, you can offer the following guidelines on how the rehabilitation process might work.

If massage therapy is effective treatment for clients’ pain, they should notice a reduction of pain levels usually within the first five sessions, although this is not set in stone. You will have more chance for success with your clients if they will commit to receiving this many sessions. Generally, for massage therapy to have effective pain relief results, clients need to be encouraged to receive session work two to three times a week. Clients should be made aware that if they can only receive a treatment once a week, then chances for complete pain recovery will be limited, their pain symptoms may only be temporarily relieved, or the rehabilitation process may take much longer.

After five sessions, if there is no improvement whatsoever, discuss whether further treatment is warranted. It would not be unethical to continue treatment because improvement may take longer with some clients, but this is a decision clients must make. Other options for their care may be to refer them to another massage therapist with particular skills you do not possess or to a different type of health care provider.

Many clients will experience relief with their first session. Most will notice less and less pain with regular session work. It is important to identify a client’s pain scale level before and following each session to gauge improvement. Clients should understand and monitor their pain levels after treatments so they may provide you with necessary feedback at their next session to determine their progress and future treatments plans. Be sure to tell your clients that if it is possible they will see even greater improvement two hours, six hours, or 24 hours after treatment and should report it at the next treatment.

Ideally, during the course of treatment, a person’s pain will continue to subside, sometimes to the point where he or she feels no pain at the end of the treatment. While the pain likely will return later, ask the person to monitor how long he or she remains pain-free between sessions before the pain returns. As the rehabilitation process continues, people should go longer and longer before the pain returns following sessions. Another sign of improvement is that even when pain does return, it is at lesser levels.

The goal is that eventually, improvement will continue until a client experiences no pain during, after or between treatments. At this point, a suggestion for maintaining clients’ pain-free status is to have them continue to come in for treatment for two additional weeks. If they continue to remain pain-free, it is likely they no
Pain scales and client feedback

Whether the type of massage you perform is for relaxation and stress release or for pain reduction, every client must have an understanding of pain scales in relation to his or her existing pain complaints and your palpation pressure.

The client seeking a relaxation massage who has no pain complaints quite often will recognize tender or painful areas as you perform your session. Discussing this possibility before the relaxation massage will ensure the client does not think you are creating the tenderness or pain with your palpation. Skillful application using progressive deepening of palpation pressure rather than starting your session with immediate deep pressure will ensure you do not cause or create pain for your client.

Knowing how to describe what pain scale level the client feels when any such area is located helps the therapist assess the severity of any dysfunction and determine proper palpation pressure. Making clients aware of and able to identify possible sensitive areas that are not consciously evident to them helps them provide accurate feedback to guide their session and to trust your palpation methods.

Explain that such a situation is actually beneficial because it helps find any problem areas and allows you to give focused treatment attention to them either during the session or in a future appointment. Further explain that recognizing and treating these areas now may eliminate or prevent any soft tissue problems from developing later. However, let clients decide before the session whether they want to address any sensitive areas found during the session. Some clients may not want pain relief techniques used, preferring to issue as little feedback as possible to maximize the relaxation component of their massage session. Any soft tissue conditions evaluated during a treatment can be discussed after the massage and a determination made whether the client wants attention given to them in future sessions.

If a client does want you to spend extra time with any given area during a relaxation massage, discuss the need to extend the massage session. This will require acceptance and approval to charge a higher rate for a longer session. You may also offer to stay within the initially approved appointment time by working less time on other parts of the body or removing some body areas from treatment completely. If the client wishes to do that, let the person determine what adjustments he or she prefers to accomplish the session.

A widely accepted pain scale ranks it from zero to 10, with 8 as the first sensation of actual pain. Explain to clients that 9 is extreme pain and 10 is excruciating pain. Tell them to just say the appropriate number anytime during the session when they feel pain and that you will immediately adjust your pressure to a level where pain is not evident and then try to find a comfortable level of palpation pressure.

Instruct clients to provide verbal feedback when they feel the first sensation of pain as you reapply your technique of choice gently and slowly deepen your pressure. Tell them when they rate the pain as No. 8, you will ease your pressure slightly until they no longer feel pain from palpation. Tell them your goal is to only use palpation pressure they can tolerate comfortably, which would be from a 5 to a 7 on the pain scale. To describe the appropriate feeling, tell clients the area may feel sensitive as it is palpated but it will feel like a “good” hurt, not a painful hurt.

Explain that the pain scale is also used to describe palpation pressure and that your goal is to palpate to between a 5-7 on the pain scale to achieve effective changes in any soft tissue condition. Be sure to ask them to let you know if your pressure drops below a 5 on the scale because too little pressure may not noticeably reduce the pain.

It is a good rule of thumb to remind returning clients about the pain scale and need for feedback before beginning each subsequent session until you are satisfied they will provide you with accurate and appropriate feedback.

Palpation application

Many clients erroneously believe that unless a massage is deep enough to cause pain, they aren’t getting a “good” massage. This false belief might stem from previous therapists who improperly applied deep pressure too quickly, were incorrectly trained, or never learned how to communicate sound massage therapy practices to their clients. The result has been far too many members of the public expecting pain as a measure of whether they are receiving a “good” deep tissue massage.

Take the time to re-educate these clients by explaining that deep tissue massage can be accomplished without pain. If your client expects or insists on pressure that causes pain during your sessions, it may be time to re-examine your technique or your ability to communicate how you perform your sessions. It may also require a clearer explanation of how to receive pain-free deep tissue massage. Aggressive palpation in a hurried manner as matter of practice may frequently hurt new clients who don’t provide feedback on their pain – and who instead choose not to
It is not uncommon for a client to say, “You can go deeper than that” as you begin to massage any particular area of the body. This usually occurs before you have completed a body area where you are systematically applying pressure from light to medium to deep. Such a statement indicates the need to explain your palpation methods before beginning the session. Inform the client that with each new body area, you will initially apply light pressure to assess the condition of the tissue and progressively increase your pressure deeper and deeper as the tissue allows.

Explain that you will not work any deeper than can the client comfortably tolerate and that you will apply your deepest pressure last on each area treated. Let the person know that if you encounter any dysfunctional conditions, such as tight muscle fibers, or they tell you they have pain, you won’t increase pressure until the tissue softens and releases. Tell the client if softening and release does occur, you will then continue to increase your pressure deeper and deeper accordingly. If the soft tissue does not release or pain is not eased, explain that the dysfunction may require repetitive session treatments to eliminate before you can safely go deeper without causing injury to the tissue or exacerbating the problem. Ask the client to be mindful of any improvement or worsening of the muscles involved between now and the person’s next scheduled session and to tell you about it.

After following the protocol of progressively deeper palpation pressure, you will be able to provide deep tissue massage with no discomfort to the client and allow you to comfortably sink down all the way to the bone of a given area. If a client suggests you still can go deeper, press against the bone to show the person you can go no further. He or she usually will be amazed and surprised because this accomplishment came without any pain. This provides an opportunity to reinforce your earlier explanations that it is possible to receive the deepest of pressure without feeling pain when proper palpation methods are applied.

Re-educating clients who improperly endured pain from previous therapists heightens your credibility as a knowledgeable, skilled massage therapist.

**Treatment plan and session protocol**

Once clients have an understanding of the characteristics of a massage therapy session and you understand their reasons for seeking a session, it is time to discuss your proposed treatment plan for their approval. Determining your plan is based on your interview, clients’ medical history, any stated pain complaints, pre-massage palpation, and any range of motion tests or muscle strength/weakness testing when appropriate.

Your plan is also dictated by what your clients are seeking in their session. They may have pain complaints but wish to have a stress release/relaxation massage rather than a pain relief-focused session. After assessment of all the information you have, choose the techniques within your knowledge base that may bring you the best results. Determine whether to focus on certain body areas or provide a full body session. Ask clients whether there are any areas of their body they prefer not to have treated and remain mindful of avoiding these areas during the session.

Advise them of your evaluations, how you wish to proceed, and ask for their approval. If they wish for focused pain-relief treatment but also want a full body massage, it may be necessary to explain it is not possible to do both unless the session is extended for a longer time period (if available in your schedule).

Another factor in formulating a treatment plan is to retain the flexibility to make changes and adaptations during your session when palpation findings provide more information on soft tissue conditions and as you receive feedback from the client.

Upon client approval of your treatment plan, explain where you will begin on the person’s body, where you will subsequently transition to, and where you will finish the session. Ideally, your session protocol will be performed by moving from one body area to another in a sequential, systematic order, providing continuity and flow throughout the session. Whether relaxation or pain relief is the goal, explaining the details of how you will proceed can ease any potential anxiety or fear, especially with new clients. If applicable, explain when you may ask client to turn over, how you want the person to turn over, and that you will adjust the face cradle, support bolsters and draping.

**Body positioning**

If your interviews take place in the waiting room of your establishment, once it’s finished, take clients to the treatment room. Whether you normally begin your sessions with clients in the supine or prone position, your explanation of your approved treatment plan format will have established the position you prefer. However, a client’s past massage experiences may have begun with an opposite starting position. As a gesture of concern for this client’s preferences, you may offer to begin in the position most comfortable to the person.

Being flexible in your approach may mean reversing the order of your proposed plan of treatment. In such cases, explain your new protocol and again ask for the client’s approval. If you feel the session would have greater effectiveness by not following a client’s preference, discuss your rationale after the session and ask whether the client would be willing to try your proposed method in the next session. If the client agrees, then after that next session, ask how the person feels to determine how future sessions will be performed.

There are differing points of view among therapists on which position to begin a session, and both have merits. But the ultimate decision should rest upon the client’s comfort.

**Supine position**

If the session is to begin in the supine position, place your hand on the table to show clients exactly where to position their head. Be sure to emphasize that the head should be completely on the table.
rather than extending over the edge. Next, illustrate the position of the legs centered over the bolster. Let clients know you will adjust the bolster if necessary. Explain that the bolster support can alleviate any lumbar back discomfort, and emphasize you will check on their comfort level with the bolster and add additional support if necessary to achieve comfort in the supine position.

When clients have neck pain complaints, offer a pillow support under the head and check to whether they are more comfortable with or without the support. Ask people who prefer pillow support whether they can comfortably tolerate not having it while you perform any cervical treatment techniques and note that you will replace the pillow when you complete that area. If removal is uncomfortable, be flexible and treat the neck while on the pillow.

If the treatment plan dictates changing body positioning, tell clients that just before having them turn over, you will remove the support and replace it in an appropriate position after they’ve turned over. Explain that you will set up the face cradle before having them turn over as well and how it may be adjusted.

Lastly, when it comes time to transition their body position, describe how you will lift the draping just enough for them to roll over away from your side of the table. Show them how you will perform this so that their body will be unseen during the process, which will emphasize that your respect the client’s privacy. This same method should be described when clients transition from the prone position.

### Arm positioning

Client should be instructed to have their arms at their sides on the table in the supine position. This is not always possible, depending on the size of the client or width of the table. If a client’s hands only slightly dangle off the table and do not impede your ability to perform your treatment comfortably and without incurring contact with your body, you may proceed in this position. If this is not the case or the arms or hands extend substantially off the table, it will be prudent to use the draping to wrap around the hands and tuck gently under the body to secure them on the table.

In the prone position, it is essential to tell clients the best suitable position for their arms. First, explain it is not desirable to place their arms forward with their hands resting on the face cradle or dangling off the front of the table. Explain that in this position, their upper back muscles, especially the trapezius, will be in a contracted position that will not allow you to use your techniques as efficiently to relax them. Ask them to place their arms at their sides on the table as a position of preference or dangling off either side of the table. You can always use the tuck draping of the hands next to their body if needed. Acknowledge that ultimately, though, whatever position is most comfortable for them is OK, even if it means resting their hands on the face cradle.

### Draping

Your description of draping can be done before or after you explain body positioning. Most clients prefer draping that covers their entire body. While sheets are the most common material for draping, full body towels are at times preferred because they provide a more secure feeling of coverage and additional warmth for the client. Be sure to have blankets available for client comfort as well. For clients who feel overheated with full body draping, you can tuck the draping between the legs exposing the legs as long as genital areas are covered as well as the breast area for females. Adjusting the room temperature to a cooler setting is also an option.

Be explicit when you point to and tell clients to cover themselves with the draping upon getting on the table. Let them know you have additional sheets, towels and blankets if needed for their comfort. Finally, tell them you will only uncover each body part being treated and recover them when finished as you move around their body while always respecting their privacy. If you tuck the draping under their legs when working there, explain how you will do that. If you will be using techniques that require range of motion movements of the legs or pelvic area, explain the diaper draping method you will use to accomplish that. Inform clients of any special draping methods, such as in a side lying position or appropriate draping methods for the breast area on females if treatment in this area is indicated and approved by the client because of pectoral musculature dysfunction or pain.
Creating a setting conducive to client relaxation and comfort

Ensuring client satisfaction requires attention to people’s comfort needs before initiating a session. Explain that you want to provide a setting that will make their experience a pleasant one. Ask them their preferences for the lighting, room temperature, amount of draping covers and whether they would like music and if so, choices on music and volume. Provide a place to hang their clothes and to put their jewelry, and have a robe handy if they need to use the restroom during the session.

Tell them your choice of lubricant, but have other lubricant supplies available if they prefer another. With female clients, make sure that using lubricant on the neck, which could possibly get into scalp hair, meets with their approval. If not, be prepared to use techniques that do not require lubricant or gliding strokes in this area.

Explain how to receive a massage

Conducting a professional interview includes ensuring that clients know how to receive a massage. Any new client, regardless of whether this is their first, can benefit from guidelines on how to receive a massage. Your instructions can answer any unasked questions in their minds and calm any fears. You may be surprised by how many clients with massage experience have never had this explained by previous therapists. When clients follow your instructions, you will find it easier to complete a successful session.

Begin your explanation by asking them to remove all jewelry possible. If they wear contact lenses, suggest removing them if possible, or not wearing them when coming to their next appointment. Explain that being in the face cradle could cause lenses to be pressed against the eye and potentially scratch them. Because some people will not feel free to remove their contacts, ask them whether there is any discomfort when you place them in the face cradle and determine whether to use it. If applicable, use a pillow on the table and have clients turn their heads from side to side during treatment.

Next address the removal of clothing. Tell clients that most clients receive massage completely unclothed, although they will be draped at all times. Avoid using terms like naked or nude because they may conjure thoughts of sexuality. Explain that it is also OK to keep underwear on if they prefer. Explain that the rationale for receiving massage unclothed is tied to the physiological benefits of massage. Tight-fitting clothing or elastic bands put pressure on blood vessels, impeding blood flow. Because one of the main benefits of massage is enhancing blood flow, thereby ensuring that cells better receive nutrients and oxygen and more effective removal of toxins, eliminating any clothing restrictions provides a greater chance for healthy tissue functioning. Assure clients that whatever level of clothing removal that is comfortable for them is certainly acceptable.

Once clients are on the table, instruct them to let go of their body tension, let their body be limp like a noodle or a ragdoll and to let you do all the lifting and moving of their head, arms and legs without their help. Suggest taking a few deep breaths and exhaling fully. Tell them to think of a pleasant thought or place, to drift into the relaxing music, to use any meditation practices they may have, to think of this time as their sanctuary away from all responsibilities and cares of the world.

Let them know that is OK to fall asleep and that you will gently wake them when necessary. If during the session they feel a need to cry or laugh, assure them it is alright because massage can sometimes release emotions, and they will be safe and supported by your caring presence.

Suggest that using the restroom before getting on the table is a good idea because massage can sometimes stimulate the need to go. Ask them to tell you if a restroom need arises during the session instead of trying to wait until the session is finished. Explain that you will leave the room and they can use a robe or wrap the draping around them and can notify you when they have returned to the table by calling out to you.

Remind them to give you feedback if they have pain during the session.

Tell clients you will whisper in their ear when the session is completed and remind them how to safely get off the table before you leave the room. If at all possible, tell them it is okay to remain on the table for a few minutes after completing the session to soak in the feeling of relaxation, and then to get up slowly. Describe and even demonstrate how to get off the table by asking them to roll on their side, bring their knees up to a 90-degree position, letting their feet dangle off the table. Then they should use their hands and arms to push them to a seated position; explain that this method puts the least strain on their back muscles. Instruct them to sit at the edge of the table for a few moments, gather themselves, and then gently ease off the table. Stress the need to ease off the table gently because clients who quickly push off the table could actually pull a back muscle in the process.

If your client is short or frail and your table is set high, provide a fold out step or step stool for getting on and off the table safely. If at all possible, tell them it is okay to keep underwear on if they prefer another. With female clients, provide a pillow on the table and have clients turn their heads from side to side during treatment.

Choose wall and curtain colors in shades that are soothing and relaxing. Have water, tissues, breath mints or cough drops available for yourself or the client. Be sure their cell phones as well as yours are turned off. Your attention to all these details will enhance a setting of relaxation that your client is sure to appreciate.
Finally, let clients know you will be waiting for them in your office or will come back when they are dressed and ready after the session is completed. Ask whether they have any questions. Tell them you will now leave the room so they may get off the table and dress. Let them know you will knock for permission to re-enter the room. Once the session is completed and you have left the room, give clients at least five minutes before checking on them to make sure they are okay and are preparing to leave the room or for permission to re-enter.

Describe what the client may expect to feel following a massage

It is just as significant for clients to know what to expect to feel after a massage as it is to know how to receive one. While reactions may vary from person to person, knowing some of the possibilities will help your clients more clearly identify what they are feeling. This awareness allows you to maintain accurate documentation regarding the outcome of the session. Those receiving relaxation or pain relief massage may respond similarly or have completely different results. Take time to explain possible outcomes regardless of whether it is a client receiving his or her very first massage or a new but experienced client, no matter what their reasons for getting a session.

As a general rule, following a relaxation massage, explain that people tend to feel a floating or dream-like sensation. Clients often relate feeling a mind- and body high, relaxed, a feeling of wellness, or even feeling a little foggy but in a good way. Tell them these feelings generally last about 10 minutes to an hour following a session. Understand that these feelings are the reason many people love getting massage. Explain that massage triggers a physiological response in the body by releasing endorphins from the brain to create an elevated sense of mood, triggering these positive feelings.

Clients receiving pain relief treatment may also have these same feelings but may be focused more on what their pain levels are following a session compared with how they were before the session. Explain that it is common for clients to notice a reduction or elimination of pain, but not always. Results depend on many factors, such as the cause of the pain, the degree of injury or dysfunction, toxicity levels in the tissue, whether this is their first session or they have been receiving regular treatment, their body’s particular response to treatment and more.

Advise clients to be aware of how their pain feels before the session so they may better notice any changes after completion. Inform them they may feel no change, minor differences or dramatic changes in their pain levels. Until the session is completed, there is no way to know. Additionally, alert the client that such changes can be felt anywhere from one to 48 hours following a session. However, you can tell them that many effects of a session are generally felt within 24 hours after their treatment. Let them know you will inquire about their response during your post-session meeting.

It is pertinent to tell pain relief-seeking clients that they may have an intensified level of pain up to 24 hours after the session. If this occurs, tell them not to be alarmed because sometimes pain is not a bad indicator of session results. Explain that tissue dysfunctions can build up toxins that upon being released can take one or two days for the body to eliminate. This sudden release of toxins may have the effect of causing feelings of increased pain following the first few sessions until they are eliminated. Explain that even though the person may feel temporary additional discomfort, this is actually a positive result because the body is being cleansed of pain-causing toxins. Clearing of toxins is quite often accomplished in just a few sessions, and post-session pain levels usually subside or no longer exist.

Tell clients that people who do feel increased pain a day after their session frequently report that the second day after treatment, they feel a dramatic improvement and often say they feel much better than before they received their massage.

And assure clients that if they still feel intensified pain two days following the session, then you may need to change the amount of palpation pressure you use on them or your techniques. Let them know you will make adjustments in the next scheduled session until you find the level of palpation that doesn’t increase pain.

Admit that determining what constitutes an effective session sometimes requires a few sessions, depending on their response to treatment. Providing awareness of the possible results of a session increases credibility, instills trust in your evaluations, and better ensures your client will continue to return. If a client does incur increased levels of pain after a session, instead of deciding not to chance another session, most will remember you informed them of these possibilities. Client education in these matters helps develop patience and understanding for the rehabilitative components of massage therapy.

Steps to conclude a successful client interview and massage therapy session

Once clients are dressed and ready to leave, conclude the session with a post-massage interview by taking these steps:

- Offer them a glass of water.
- Inform them of the need to ask questions about their session.
- Ask them to relate what they are feeling now. Avoid questions that predispose an outcome, such as “Do you or are you feeling better now?” Clients may answer affirmatively to that question even when they don’t want to avoid hurting your feelings. Ask for honest feedback so your assessment documentation is accurate; tell them you are not seeking compliments but need to determine whether future sessions should be similar to this one or whether you need to make adjustments to improve the outcome.
- Did they notice any areas of discomfort during the massage? If so, ask them where and to describe what they felt.
- If they experienced sensitivity or discomfort during a relaxation session, ask them whether they would like to focus treatment on those areas in their next session.
- Ask if they feel the same, worse or better after a pain relief session. If the response is better or less pain, ask them what
the pain scale level is now compared to before treatment. If they answer “the same,” then remind them repetitive sessions are needed to determine whether massage will be effective. If the answer is “worse,” ask them what their current pain scale level is and discuss the need to adjust palpation pressure or techniques in the next session.

- Process payment for the session.
- Book their next appointment.
- Remind them to be aware of any changes they experience in the next 48 hours and that you’ll want to know about them at the next scheduled session.
- Thank them and walk them to the door.
- Write documentation notes regarding the session.
- Prepare the treatment room for your next client.

Depending on each therapist’s work environment, conducting a professional client interview and massage therapy session as described may not be possible. Working in a doctor’s office, spa, salon or cruise ship may limit the time allotted by the employer to accomplish the suggested format. However, discussing the need for client safety and welfare with your employer by using this interview/treatment method may result in changes to the protocol. Private client interviews and those seen at massage establishments can certainly be conducted following the guidelines presented. Attention to every detail assures client needs are considered and affords the therapist the potential for a successful session outcome while establishing a professional client/therapist relationship.

### CONDUCTING A PROFESSIONAL CLIENT INTERVIEW AND MASSAGE THERAPY SESSION

#### Final Examination Questions

Select the best answer for each question and complete your test online at [Massage.EliteCME.com](http://Massage.EliteCME.com).

1. What is the first step in the interview process after greeting the client?
   a. Preparing your treatment room.
   b. Having the client fill out all needed paperwork.
   c. Making mental notes of the client’s posture, manner of walking, skin condition and so on.
   d. Offering a glass of water.

2. Which of the following conditions would require being under control through medication and necessitate a doctor’s prescription authorizing massage?
   a. Strained quadriceps muscle.
   b. Tendinitis.
   c. Diabetes.
   d. Acne.

3. For effective rehabilitation of a pain complaint, how many times a week should a client receive massage treatment?
   a. 7.
   b. 1.
   c. 4 to 5.
   d. 2 to 3.

4. In a post-massage interview to conclude your session, which of the following is an appropriate question?
   a. Do you feel better now?
   b. Are you feeling good?
   c. What do you feel now?
   d. Did I do a good job?

5. What is a positive outcome for explaining how to receive a massage?
   a. Knowing whether the client feels hungry or thirsty after a massage.
   b. Better client feedback after massage, allowing for more accurate documentation.
   c. Help in determining a treatment plan.
   d. A guarantee that a client will book another session.