



Overcoming Obstacles to Long-Term Success

an online resource
created to accompany

Pre- and Perinatal Massage Therapy:

*A Comprehensive Guide to Prenatal, Labor
and Postpartum Practice*
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Chapter 8, page 283





Overcoming Obstacles to Long-Term Success

Can you imagine what it might feel like for you to massage a young expectant woman who you first encountered in a client's belly 25 years ago? Do you aspire to have regularly renewed wonder at the powerful magic of birth? Then you want to have many decades of pre- and perinatal massage therapy in your career. Now is the time to look to preventing burnout, managing your own self-care, and finding sources for professional supervision, mentoring, and continued education and development. These career-lengthening strategies carry over from other aspects of your massage therapy practice, but some maternity-related issues merit some comment. This is especially true for male therapists, so we've included on man's story at the end of this document.

Preventing Burnout

Most therapists find working with childbearing clients immensely satisfying. Generally, you are engaged with a pregnant person and her family at one of the most welcomed, exciting phases of her adult life. 66% of perinatal therapists responding to a recent survey said that they found most satisfaction in empowering their clients by helping them to become more aware of, connected to and trusting of their bodies. Another 25% felt that providing nurturing and helping clients to feel more comfortable, more relaxed, and less pain was most compelling. Another 6% felt that contributing to the development of the mother's relationship with her baby, family, and the family of humanity was most rewarding.

Despite these rewards, you can get burned out if you charge too little for your prenatal sessions or if you attempt to do so many sessions that you don't take adequate time for yourself. When too rushed for sufficient intake or underequipped for prenatal positioning needs, you can become excessively concerned about the safety and effectiveness of

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your work. Some spa and resort settings are particularly notorious for this type of burnout. Be sure to repeatedly study and apply the body mechanics section of Chapter 3. Sidelying positioning is a comfortable working position for you when you organize your table, your client, and your own body for its peculiarities. Have the right equipment. Get help at first signs of wear and tear niggling at your joints and soft tissues.

Probably the period of the childbearing year most likely to exhaust you is providing massage therapy during labor and birthing. To minimize the physical, emotional, financial and practice negative impacts of labors' length and intensity, you need active strategies. Look back to the labor chapter and the online resources with Chapter 5 and 8 to see some of the suggestions for managing your time, other clients, fees, and the need to process the feelings that may overwhelm you. Pay particular attention to your body use during labor. You must meet the long hours of repeating the same few techniques with impeccable body mechanics, particularly to protect joint integrity and while lifting and bending.

Attending to each of the ethical issues discussed in Chapter 8 and in these online resources will also help you to avoid burnout.

Supervision

The multi-leveled dimensions of perinatal massage therapy almost demands that practitioners look beyond themselves to create a support system for professional development. Childbearing is a confluence of physiological, functional, emotional, relational, and spiritual transitions that you become a part of when you touch an expectant person. Supervision with a more experienced colleague, a mental health professional, or with peers can give you a safe place to process ethical issues, promote your self-care, and provide you with nurturance and empathy.

Identify a more experienced maternity massage therapist who also knows how to facilitate individual and small group meetings.

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Psychological sensitivity helps too, or at least seek someone who you feel can promote your self-awareness and positive action. You can meet monthly or quarterly individually or with 2 to 4 other therapists who also specialize or hope to concentrate their practice on perinatal care. As you each present your questions, feelings and issues that evolve from your practice, a good supervisor will help you to sort through these challenges, mine the wisdom, develop strategies for meeting these situations, and follow-up with you at subsequent meetings. (Some of the experienced maternity massage therapists whose stories are in Chapter 8 and within this chapter's resources provide such supervision and mentoring.)

A similarly sized group of your peers can provide similar helpful viewpoints and focused listening and support. The camaraderie and shared wisdom of regularly supporting each others' development and professional health is invaluable. Some peer supervision groups also bring in a supervisor periodically to address specific concerns beyond the experience of the peers.

(Also see the separate document in this chapter entitled "Successful Massage Therapists Don't Go It Alone" for more about practice supervision and mentoring.)

Professional Development

Massage therapists who keep learning can refresh and enrich themselves and prevent burnout from repetition, boredom, and the isolation of working one-on-one with clients. Many perinatal massage therapists especially appreciate the way that this work demands physical and technical expertise, a compassionate, receptive heart, and an observant, well-informed mind. All three of these aspects of your work need nourishment if you are to grow professionally.

Expanding scope and depth of your knowledge is easy to pursue in maternity massage therapy. Childbirth education classes, web

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resources and blogs, books and other publications are constantly bringing the newest developments, fads, and concerns of childbearing people to the public. Whatever your current level of training in massage therapy for the childbearing year, different perspectives or more extensive courses are available for you to attend. If you have only read or completed home study courses in this topic, consider attending a continuing education seminar that features hands-on demonstration and practice. If the courses you took focused on one or two modalities as modified for perinatal needs, study with an instructor skilled in other modalities. (Also see the separate document in Chapter 2 online resources “Maternity Massage Training Possibilities” for some suggestions of courses that we are familiar with.)

If you need more experience to develop yourself professionally, consider increasing your prenatal clientele by offering reduced or free services through some social or community service agency or institution. Read books and blogs and look at videos that focus on the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of childbearing. Explore pre- and perinatal psychology. These activities will help develop your sensitivity to the variety and depth of women’s experiences when they are expecting.

Stay current with obstetrical and midwifery practices and the newest developments in understanding and standards of care. Attend conferences, join networking groups, visit web sites, and contact maternity healthcare providers in your community. (See the online resources with Chapter 7 “Resources for Clients with High Risks or Complications” and “Resources for Clients Coping with Pregnancy Loss or Infant Death” for other perinatal healthcare organizations you might want to contact.)

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A Male Therapist's Experience Specializing in Perinatal Massage Therapy

I am repeatedly asked about how or why I am working in a woman's world, a place where men often fear to tread, the dreaded realm of the pregnant person, where, at the very mention of placenta, men have been known to turn white and rapidly exit the room. The reality is that I never hesitated for one second; after all, we are all responsible for and part of our human family. For me it is simply one human being helping another human being, whether it's a farmer, ballet dancer, football player, grandfather or pregnant person; they are all treated with one crystal clear intention, to improve the quality of their life.

Pregnancy is a joint venture; it is not a gender them and us. We both share in the pleasure of creating the pregnancy; we share in the joy of the children; and we share in the responsibility of bringing them to adulthood. What could be more natural for me, as a man, than wanting to use my massage skills to relieve the pain, discomfort and anxiety of a pregnant person? There can be nothing more satisfying for any therapist than to reduce the pain of a mom-to-be, to help and enhance the whole experience of pregnancy and childbirth.

The real question is not whether this is a woman's world but where can a mom-to-be go for pain relief. For many years in the UK, all massage therapy schools stated clearly: avoid pregnant clients; pregnancy is a contra-indication, so don't touch. Knowing the discomfort and pain my wife and my daughter had gone through during their various pregnancies, I thought that it's crazy that we avoid pregnancy as most of the problems are obviously soft tissue problems. I just needed to get a solid education in how to safely and effectively do this. The question as to whether this was a woman's world never entered my head.

I have often been told that women will not come to a male therapist for a massage, especially a pregnant woman. This could not be further from

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the truth. I have many hundreds of female clients, all of whom judge by the level and quality of the care they are given and the effectiveness of their massage. All come through verbal recommendation from other women. More than 50% of my client base has come through pregnancy, whether it is the pregnant client herself or other members of her family and friends. I have been frequently told by many female clients who have been treated by both men and women therapists, that they prefer the feeling of positive strength and the solid reassurance of the male therapist.

Some women have asked how, as a man, I could ever possibly hope to be a good maternity therapist. I simply ask, does a heart surgeon have to have a heart attack to be a good heart surgeon? Does a woman have to have gone through pregnancy to be a good midwife? No, it is all about expertise and understanding the physiology and psychology of pregnancy, and most of all having the correct attitude of mind.

As a therapist, I have no issues regarding any client; I treat everyone with the same respect. In addition, I must be very much aware that some clients may have issues, fears and concerns about coming for massage, in particular for a woman's first visit to a male therapist. I try to ensure that I create a warm atmosphere, and I explain openly the protocol of my treatment room and the treatment to follow. I ensure that there is absolutely no ambiguity regarding levels of undress, draping, privacy and on which areas I will be working. I also explain that should there be any part of the treatment which they are uncomfortable with or find too intrusive that they inform me immediately, and I will instantly modify the treatment. Draping, using towels and sheets, has almost become an art form which I have practiced and adapted to ensure the utmost feeling of security for the client while gaining maximum access to the muscle groups requiring treatment. One therapist/client told me that I was the least sexually threatening male she had ever met; I'm still not sure how I should take the comment.

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As a father, I would have loved to have been more help during the actual birth of my children. I now teach the dads-to-be some basic and safe massage techniques to use during labour. They say they feel much happier and less intimidated regarding the labour as they now have something positive to do. Couples have said it was invaluable and the moms loved the fact their partners were able to be an active part of the birthing process. They also loved the regular practice sessions during the weeks before, and the partners felt more a part of the pregnancy, part of the same world. I also found that having a session with the couple produced a much more positive attitude by the partner over concerns about massage during pregnancy and, in a few instances, the issue of her coming to a male therapist. Most partners now also come for a regular massage.

In all the years I have been a therapist, I have only been inappropriately approached by female clients or subject to suggestive remarks during the period between marriages. There were several offers from the subtle to the extremely direct, to all of which I replied, “sorry but my insurance doesn’t cover that.” Although said and taken in a humorous way, no client ever repeated the incident. I have never lost a client because of this, and I have never felt threatened by this, nor has it ever created an unpleasant atmosphere between me and a client.

One problem area that I and other male therapists have had is the possible effects on our own wife or partner. Some partners can feel deeply threatened despite having children and a loving, secure marriage. Others can also enjoy the excitement and anticipation of the moms-to-be and are a tremendous support, sharing in the pride and being a part of the great work that we all do.

Retired male perinatal massage therapist

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