



Successful Massage Therapists Don't Go It Alone

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You might have started your massage therapy career with high ideals and ambitious goals, but now feel adrift. Perhaps you feel alone in navigating client treatment situations, relationship challenges with business associates. Maybe you have ethical concerns. Or you might long to renew your career enthusiasm, have a more robust income and receive regular encouragement, insight or more information.

All those needs have one potent answer: professional supervision and mentoring.

Let's be clear here. This is not your workplace supervisor's oversight and control of your work that we are discussing. Supervisors at employment locations may contribute to practitioners' growth and development needs; however, they are primarily managers. You are accountable to them for compliance with policies, productivity, performance, scheduling and other contractual terms.

In contrast, practice supervisors and mentors are usually independent of the practitioners whom they guide; therefore, they are uninfluenced by workplace politics, employment and advancement decisions, or other business concerns. They create a support system of listening, empowering and empathizing while asking the hard questions, offering resources and advice, and encouraging looking inward.

"The mentoring that I received truly opened the door to my development, both professionally and personally," said Orange County, California, spa owner, massage therapist and clinical aromatherapist Mikki Melinda Anderson. "With my passion refueled, I went from being a



single therapist working for \$12 per hour to opening my own 2,000-square-foot wellness spa, and later a massage, clinical aromatherapy and skincare department within a local hospital. “Mentoring and practice supervision was worth the cost, a thousand times over,” Anderson added. “I return periodically for more private and group mentoring that keeps me growing. ”

Group supervision, with or without a designated leader, also offers peers’ insights and help and the learning resulting from the other practitioners’ questions. “I came to my group primarily to deepen my knowledge and comfort working with higher-risk prenatal and postpartum clients,” said Gloversville, New York, massage therapist Amy Czadzeck. “While discussing a particular client, my mentor provided a flow chart of questions to ask when a client had an unfamiliar physical challenge that was possibly outside of my expertise,” she said. “These questions not only applied to this particular client, but I’ve found them helpful and reassuring when assessing and caring for other clients. In addition,” Czadzeck added, “we explored my general ability to manage anxiety and to stay grounded in present experience, another aspect of working with complex client situations.”

When an experienced guide shares insight and information personalized to address a (usually) less experienced individual’s growth and development needs, that guide is often considered a mentor. In the context of a helping profession, sometimes this guidance is also called practice, or clinical, supervision.

Practice supervision offer practitioners assistance and support in tackling their most pressing professional questions and concerns. It typically includes discussing situations, client relationships and cases, delving into issues underlying conflicts or inadequacies, brainstorming and problem solving, developing action plans for change and productivity, and demonstrating and practicing techniques during



meetings. Although a supervisor aims the spotlight on the practitioner, ultimately this serves clients' best interests by improving care—and a balance of practitioner-client care can directly translate into vibrant, profitable and lasting careers.

“I was surprised to end my six-month mentorship with an entirely changed life perspective,” said Seattle-based massage therapist Michelle Jellinghaus. “I was expecting to refine and cultivate my business, which I did achieve, but I received an unexpected gift: I learned to sit more gently with my business, to step back, enjoy the process and allow positive growth to come with less intense effort. “I was trying too hard,” Jellinghaus added. “Now I am content with where I am, slowly building, growing and appreciating each step along the path to what can only be revealed in time.”

Supervision helps to protect clients by involving an impartial and often more experienced and knowledgeable third party. This can help reduce the risk of serious oversights and encourage practitioners to reflect more deeply on their feelings, thoughts, behaviors and treatment approaches to their clients. Of course, client confidentiality is an essential requirement when discussing client cases.

What might you bring into a practice supervision group or to a supervisor or mentor? Here are a few situations I've worked with:

- Stress responses when a person who felt unqualified to work in a chemotherapy infusion center was required to do so by her employer;
- An awareness of resistance and difficulties with going deeper and taking the time to sink and melt into clients' tension areas;
- Agreement negotiation and implementation of a hospital-based family massage therapy program;



- The fear of losing it all if the therapist stopped overworking;
- Strategies and feelings when skills and education go unrecognized in a workplace that requires signature, uniform sessions of all therapists for all clients;
- Treatment suggestions for a complex client with lumbar disc herniation who'd had negative responses to the type of massage usually provided to such clients.

“I find having a mentor is extremely valuable, no matter how many years I've been in practice ... it "keeps me honest, meaning maintaining scope of practice, helping when emotions and thoughts seem muddled as I figure out if this is their stuff or mine, and generally keeping it real,” said massage therapist Marjeanne Estes, who works at Cushman Wellness Center-Sharp Memorial Hospital in San Diego, California.

“I had an excellent foundation education, but in 18 years there's been much that I wasn't taught, and times when I felt lost, overwhelmed and isolated—except that I have usually had a supervision group or mentors to connect with,” she added. “Whether it is a peer or more experienced professional, they have enriched, educated, supported, encouraged and held up the mirror for me in nonjudgmental ways that made a qualitative and quantitative difference.”

Several years ago, I informally surveyed massage and bodywork practitioners who have enjoyed 25-plus years of practice. Of the 26 respondents, almost 29 percent of them chose the support of other colleagues, mentors and instructors as one of the four most important cornerstones of their career longevity and 65 percent starred self-care strategies. While many people think of exercise, rest, nutrition and other physical attention as self-care, supervision provides equally important inner nurturing.

One-on-one or group supervision mitigates the inherent isolation of our



work. It helps us to define, fine tune and redefine our values and career mission as well as practicalities like our ideal target market and our business relationships. It assists our maintaining work-play balance—all of which prevents and reduces the likelihood of burnout so prevalent for caregiving professionals like us.

Check out the results of a 2017 qualitative study¹ of what experienced practitioners believe contributes to success as a massage therapist. In it, four main themes emerged from interviews with 10 massage therapists with a median of 17.5 years of practice. These contributing factors were the ability to:

- Establish effective therapeutic relationships;
- Develop massage therapy business acumen;
- Seek valuable learning environments and opportunities; and
- Cultivate strong social ties and networks.

For me, the mentoring that I've received supercharged all of these. I have had several practice supervisors and mentors assist me through my 48-year career. As I was writing this article, my long-time peer supervisor helped me to untangle my “almost-my-daughter” feelings from my therapist responsibilities while working postpartum with a young woman I've known well since age 2. During the inevitable ups, downs, challenges, anxieties and achievements, they helped my client relations become more nuanced and richer. My net profit swelled when I was mentored in business planning, systems and personnel management.

“My supervision was as part of a very intimate circle of four beautiful, strong and tenacious women, with two more experienced therapists supervising and mentoring us,” said San Diego, California, craniosacral therapist Chris Okuma. “In this circle, we were invited to share and



dialogue ... personal, business and client issues. It became a rare opportunity to be witnessed ... to be seen ... to listen and be listened to, all with exquisite presence and compassion. This allowed me to explore and deepen on many levels; expand and enhance technique, enhance my utilization of the therapeutic healing opportunities held within the relational field, and deepen my somatic practice,” Okuma continued. “It continues to have a positive impact on and bless who I am as a practitioner, a teacher, a student and an experiencing being.”

How much longer do you envision your massage career lasting? Many longtime successful massage therapists agree that practice supervision/mentoring is an integral element for realizing your vision. Mentoring can strengthen your foundations for taking the next steps in your work. Don't hesitate. Get practice supervision now.

“A mentor, when chosen wisely, reflects back to us what we know; shines light on questions we have while seeing what we do not yet see,” said Gloria Sobol, a massage therapist based in San Diego, California. “My mentors have helped to bring out the best in me that is already there.”

Footnote

1. Kennedy, A, Munk, N, “Experienced Practitioners’ Beliefs Utilized to Create a Successful Massage Therapist Conceptual Model: A Qualitative Investigation,” *International Journal of Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork*. 2017; Volume 10(2).

The article above was written by Carole Osborne, BCTMB. It was published in *Massage Magazine* in 2017 and online in 2020. A few revisions and updates were made for this document to accompany *Pre- and Perinatal Massage Therapy*, Third Edition.



Other Supervision/Mentoring Resources

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<https://www.massagemag.com/find-mentor-improve-massage-practice-43878/>

www.bodytherapyeducation.com/mentoring/

Cherie Sohnen-Moe

<https://www.massagemag.com/5-ways-connect-colleagues-greater-results-39068/>

Gael Wood

<https://www.massagemag.com/goals-massage-career-88012/>

Aiyana Fraley, LMT

<https://www.massagemag.com/these-organizations-will-match-mentors-and-mentees-for-free-124318/>

American Massage Therapy Association

<https://www.amtamassage.org/find-mentor/>

(All links accessed January 25, 2021)