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Communication & Ethics

COMPONENTS OF A THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

The following components are always present and form the foundation of the Massage Therapist - Client therapeutic relationship: power, trust, respect and personal closeness.

Power

- In a therapeutic relationship, there is an imbalance of power favouring the Massage therapist.
- The imbalance is a result of the massage therapist's authority in the health care system, their unique knowledge, and the client's dependence on the service provided by the Massage therapist.
- A Massage therapist can influence other health care providers and payers, has access to privileged information, and has the ability to influence decisions made by the client's caregivers and/or significant others.
- Clients may not want to compromise the relationship by challenging the knowledge and expertise of the Massage therapist.
- Usually client's trust that the Massage therapist will use his or her skill and influence in their best interest, while sometimes feeling vulnerable in a relationship that creates a dependence on the Massage therapist.
- As a consequence, there is a higher onus on the Massage therapist to be cognizant of this inherent vulnerability and the resulting power imbalance, and to create an environment in which the patient feels safe and undeterred from asking questions.

Trust

- Clients trust that their Massage therapist possesses the requisite knowledge, abilities and skills to provide them with quality care.
- Massage therapists have a responsibility not to harm or exploit and to create a safe environment.
- Trust necessitates fulfilling the contract and acting in the client's best interest.
- Trust is important and once breached, it is very difficult to re-establish.

Respect

- Massage therapists have a responsibility to understand and respect individuals regardless of differences that may include but are not limited to gender, sexual orientation, and cultural, spiritual, physical, social, environmental, moral, ethical, economical, educational, political and ethnic background.
- Massage therapists should act in a way that is respectful of the clients' knowledge and expertise about themselves.

Personal Closeness

This component does not refer to sexual intimacy. Personal closeness is inherent in a therapeutic relationship and may include but is not limited to:

- physical closeness
- disclosure of personal information
- being in varying degrees of undress; and
- witness to emotional behaviours.

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Although these practices are acceptable when carried out appropriately, they do carry with them a greater degree of personal closeness than normally exists in other relationships, and may further deepen a client's feelings of vulnerability.

ESTABLISHING A THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP AND MANAGING BOUNDARIES

Regardless of the setting and length of the interaction, it is expected that the Massage therapist will act professionally in the management of the boundaries of the relationship.

This involves:

- introducing him or herself to the client by name and professional title and describing his or her role in the care of the client;
- addressing client by their preferred name or title unless inappropriate;
- listening to the client or caregiver in an open and non judgmental manner without dismissing their feelings;
- adopting a client-centered approach in establishing treatment goals and a plan of care;
- being vigilant for comments, attitudes or behaviours of clients that appear inappropriate in a therapeutic relationship;
- providing sufficient information to promote the client's free choices and obtaining informed consent before proceeding with treatment;
- advocating on behalf of clients to help them find the best possible solution for themselves, given their personal values, beliefs, and decision-making processes; and
- discussing the boundaries of confidentiality with the client including the Massage therapist's legal responsibilities.

To be successful at establishing and maintaining therapeutic relationships, Massage therapists need to adopt effective strategies to manage the limits or boundaries of therapeutic relationships. These strategies include but are not limited to the following practices.

Implement Reflective Practice

- Massage therapists must continuously reflect on their own interactions with clients and on their own personal needs, wishes, feelings, fears, strengths and weaknesses that can interfere with understanding the client and providing each client with quality care.
- Massage therapists' past experiences as well as age, values, gender, cultural and religious beliefs have an impact on interactions with patients.
- Through reflection, massage therapists can gain an understanding of how these attributes can affect their relationship with clients and that the Massage therapist's attitudes and actions may be perceived differently than intended.
- Massage therapists are obligated to act in the best interests of the patient.
- At times it may be necessary for massage therapists to seek help from other resources in order to reflect on their own practice.

Follow a Plan of Care

- It is important for the massage therapist to develop and follow a plan of care with the client and when applicable, with the family and other members of the health care team.
- The massage therapist is required to obtain informed consent from the patient or substitute decision-maker for personal care prior to implementing the care plan.

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- A care plan will provide guidance in establishing the boundaries of a therapeutic relationship and define the treatment best suited to meet the client's short- and long-term goals.

Understand the Limits of the Therapeutic Relationship

- In a therapeutic relationship, the interests of the client always come first.
- The power imbalance inherent in the relationship, the client's vulnerability, and the trust put in the Massage therapist place the obligation to manage the relationship appropriately squarely on the Massage therapist.
- Massage therapists who abuse the power in the relationship for their personal advantage are behaving inappropriately.

Communicate the Expectations for and Limits of Confidentiality

- The massage therapist has an obligation to explain to the client and obtain their agreement to the limits of confidentiality, the type of and amount of information collected, and how it will be used and, where appropriate, the need to share information with other members of the health care team.
- Similarly, massage therapists need to understand their professional obligations regarding the release or withholding of health information, particularly when third party payers and employers are involved.

Be Sensitive to the Context in which the Care is Provided

- More and more, care is being provided outside of traditional health care facilities such as hospitals, long-term care facilities and rehabilitation centers.
- Massage therapists who are working in the community, either in a private practice, in industry, or in clients' homes must always clarify their role within the context in which they are practicing.
- The client's home may feel like an informal environment, and the boundary between professional and personal relationships may become less clear.
- For example, it may be tempting to do more for the client than is warranted by the care plan, such as sharing a meal, answering the telephone and conveying messages of a personal nature or transporting the client to personal appointments.
- In some situations, the massage therapist's activities may be perceived as being outside their professional role.
- When considering performing activities that are outside the professional role, massage therapists should ask the following questions:
 - Am I doing something for the client that the client needs to do in order to be independent?
 - Can other resources be used to meet this need?
 - Will the client expect that all massage therapists will perform these activities?
 - Will performing these activities cause difficulties when other massage therapists will not or cannot do the same?

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- o Will the activities cause confusion for the client about the massage therapist's role?
- o Who benefits the most from performing these tasks?
- Massage therapists who are concerned that they may be involved in a situation that crosses the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship may wish to speak with colleagues, their employer or CMTO.
- When a boundary has been crossed, the massage therapist has an obligation to remedy the situation to the extent possible.
- If a decision is made to terminate the therapeutic relationship, measures must be taken to ensure the client is not harmed by an interruption in treatment and that the massage therapist has fulfilled the professional obligations related to discontinuing treatment.

Concluding the Therapeutic Relationship

- From the time of the initial contact with a client, a massage therapist should establish with the client, and when applicable, family and other members of the health care team a projected period of time that the therapeutic relationship will last.
- This estimate is based on the massage therapist's analysis of a variety of factors that may influence the client's outcomes and course of treatment.
- Describing the relationship as finite from the very beginning helps to establish the expectation that discharge from treatment is the end point of the therapeutic relationship.
- Close to the time when the relationship will be concluded, the massage therapist needs to discuss plans for meeting the client's needs after discharge from treatment.

WARNING SIGNS WITHIN A THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

There are a number of signs that indicate that the massage therapist may be crossing the boundaries in the therapeutic relationship.

Examples of these are:

- spending time with a client beyond what is needed to meet the therapeutic needs;
- preferential selection of clients who are incorporated into your case load (e.g., a client is provided with an early or special appointment time from your schedule because you think the client is attractive or friendly);
- responding to "personal" overtures by the client;
- disclosing personal problems to a client;
- dressing differently when seeing a particular client;
- frequently thinking about a client outside of the context of the therapeutic relationship;
- being guarded or defensive when someone comments on or questions your interactions with a client;
- being hesitant (except for reasons of confidentiality) or embarrassed to discuss with your colleagues or family your activities with the client;
- spending time outside of the therapeutic relationship with a client;
- ignoring organizational policy or patterns when working with a specific client (e.g., scheduling the client during lunch hour or outside of normal hours of business);
- providing the client with a home phone number unless it is required in the context of a therapeutic relationship; and
- maintaining a client on treatment longer than is required.

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If one or more of these signs are present, and a massage therapist believes boundaries are being crossed, as a self-regulating health professional, the massage therapist has an obligation to adopt measures that will ensure the boundaries are adjusted to ensure the integrity of the therapeutic relationship.