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2022 ISSUE BRIEF CONTINUING EDUCATION

ISSUE: WHO GUIDES & REGULATES CONTINUING EDUCATION?

Most massage therapists would say the NCBTMB when asked, but there appears to be a recent tug-of-war over which association guides continuing education in our field. Is it the NCBTMB or the FSMTB? This tug-of-war seems to have happened before with the Board Certification Exam and the MBLEx. Both organizations are approving CE providers and courses today. Additionally, some state boards approve courses for continuing education credit autonomously.

Both associations and state boards play a role in what can and cannot be approved as continuing education. These rules have gotten tighter in recent years, and we have also seen that one organization may deny a course due to its subject or content while the other organization will approve the course.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Some states suspended continuing education requirements during the pandemic while others did not, in the same patchwork style that we see across the country regarding Covid-19 regulations, guidelines, and mandates. In states that suspended continuing education requirements, the businesses of CE providers suffered, while in other states they continued to thrive. Some educators continued to travel during the pandemic to teach courses, while others chose to stay close to home.

There are still several states that do not require any continuing education for massage therapists. One of the answers USOLMT sought out in 2021 was, if most massage therapists in states where continuing education is not required, still seek out additional education. Arizona could be used as an example to show what could happen if Continuing Education is not required. CE Providers in Arizona experienced a marked reduction in students during the pandemic when requirements were suspended. USOLMT still questions what happens under normal circumstances (when there is not a public health emergency) when continuing education is not required.

On a positive note, Covid-19 caused educators to necessarily embrace current technology. Many began teaching live and recorded courses online during the pandemic. Unfortunately, there were other quality educators that retired early, limiting the course options available to massage therapists.

As a result of suspension and reduction of state requirements, many massage therapists chose not to take courses. Based on what we have seen in Arizona during the pandemic, we can conclude that some massage therapists will choose to continue to educate themselves to improve their craft, however, many more will not, and only take continuing education to meet state requirements. Some of these therapists may not be able to afford high-quality education, instead seeking out lower cost, convenient



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courses that are easily available to them, which don't require taking time off work, rearranging their schedules, or saving money to attend.

THE COST OF PRACTICE

Some massage therapists express issues with the cost of continuing education. For some massage therapists, especially those employed in the industry, the courses they may really want to take may be unaffordable, and saving their money may not be an option, as some of the lowest paid among us live paycheck to paycheck. In these situations, the employer may offer free continuing education as part of the employee's benefits and compensation package.

Quality continuing education can run a massage therapist \$500.00 - \$1000.00 or more each year. Some massage therapists expressed concern about price gauging in CE classes, because in many cases you cannot just decide not to take courses. When courses are required, you pay whatever price is posted, if you need the course.

REQUIREMENTS

There is no nationwide standard requirement for continuing education. Hourly requirements range from zero to 24 across the nation. States decide how many of those hours can be taken online versus hands on, and those hours differ from state to state.

Continuing education hours are required for AMTA members, at 48 hours every 4 years. They offer a few free CEs on occasion, but members must pay for most of the CE classes AMTA offers on their website.

ABMP does not have any requirements for their members to take CE classes, even though they offer a wealth of free CE classes to their members and occasionally offer Free CE, even if you aren't a member.

Massage therapists express concern about "the race to 24", that starts over every two years. These therapists mentioned making sure you can get time off work to obtain the hours you are required. Many therapists wait until the last minute, risking late license renewals, and sometimes end up paying additional renewal fees. In the worst-case scenario, massage therapists may have to pause their practice or get suspended from their job due to late renewal.

COURSE OPTIONS

In some states, especially the midwestern states, there are not as many options available to massage therapists for continuing education as there are in more urban areas. Because of this, many therapists in these areas must travel to find courses that meet their needs. This places an additional and costly burden on massage therapists in these areas to meet state requirements.



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LIFELONG LEARNING

While USOLMT feels that continuing education is necessary and important, through our research we've spoken to therapists who have truly mastered the art of massage therapy. Some of these practitioners, having over 20 years of experience in the industry, serving as educators, and CE providers themselves, have expressed dismay with the ongoing, unlimited CE requirement. These experienced massage therapists and educators have taken repetitive courses just to meet requirements for continued licensing due to lack of course options. What happens when they've taken all the courses? The short answer is, they just take more of the same courses.

If CE providers are not innovating and coming up with new modalities to teach and fresh ideas, eventually, education becomes repetitive, leading to massage therapists going through the motions because the education is required.

DOES IT BOOST INCOME?

The short answer is no. It does not. This causes push back from massage therapists who must spend their hard-earned dollars to meet state requirements. Often employers are only looking for proof of education in the modalities they offer on their service menu, rather than at the whole picture of what the therapist has learned during their career. Pay scales are based on business needs rather than the hours a massage therapist has put into their education.

While entry-level education is 500 hours on average across the county, a practitioner who has been licensed for 10 years may have substantially more hours, spent thousands more dollars on their education than a recent graduate, have considerably more hands-on experience, have most-likely had many on-the-job trainings and have taken additional coursework that did not award CE credits.

If it takes 10,000 hours of hands-on experience to truly master the art of massage therapy (a common belief in our field), in a busy practice, this can be accomplished within 5-6 years. Unfortunately, most massage therapists exit the career by this time. Perhaps this early exit could be staved off with some fundamental changes.

Massage therapists want their continuing education to count for something more than simply additional tools in their toolbox. Some therapists mentioned that it would be nice if continuing education counted towards a degree in physical therapy or towards an advanced degree in massage therapy. No matter how many hours of CEs therapists take, it generally does not amount to higher wages or advancement on the job. In independent practice, however, massage therapists that have advanced continuing education tend to be able to command higher fees for their services.



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SUGGESTIONS TO MOVE THE INDUSTRY FORWARD ON THIS ISSUE

- Publish and provide a CE directory for all massage therapists actively licensed in each state, and distribute this information annually.
- Online directories provided by associations would be more helpful if courses could be searched by topic or discipline.
- Publish and provide a one-stop-shop listing of all online-accessible continuing education for massage therapists
- Educators could work together to create a comprehensive program that builds a pathway for massage therapists who wish to study different philosophies or methodologies, such as spa and wellness or clinical and hospital-based massage therapy, offering a series of courses that would help them reach their career goals.
- Information on hands on versus online requirements nationwide should be published and accessible to all massage therapists for reference.
- Each state should consider statewide accessibility to continuing education when setting requirements.
- States could consider a limit on required hours based on years of experience and status in the industry.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THERAPISTS

- If you work for an employer and receive free CEUs as a benefit, don't just stick to your employer's online classes – go outside of your job and find CEUs that you are interested in.
- Budget \$500.00 - \$1,000.00 for your Continuing Education each year. Saving \$10-\$20 per week will get you there.
- Create a binder with page protectors for copies of your continuing education certificates. Take it with you to your job interviews if you are seeking employment and leave it in your check-in area for your clients to review if you own your own business. Keep your original copies in a safe place.
- If you have specialized knowledge or a true certification, be sure to negotiate your job offer after showing your certificates.
- Understand that you are not certified in a modality unless it is a true certification course distributed by NCBTMB or some other certifying body.
- You hold a certificate in your CEU classes, but this does not mean you are certified. Use proper terminology when describing your continuing education.



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On CE Providers

- Continuing Education Providers have a responsibility and a duty to stay current with research on the subjects they are teaching.
- Some CE providers travel to you. Other CE providers, you might have to travel for.
- Continuing education providers would help advance the industry by using their skills, not only to teach massage therapists, but to educate the public. Give public presentations & do speaking engagements.

On Employment

- Most employers do not ask how many total hours of continuing education you have, and they generally will not ask for your certificates unless they require them in relation to the services the business offers.
- If you have continuing education in the services the business offers, you should ask for higher pay.
- Advanced skills demand advanced pay scales.

Find CE Providers Near You

- NCBTMB – Search for a CE Provider Near You
- FSMTMB – Search for a CE Provider Near You
- Local Colleges – Check out what CEs are provided at your state’s massage schools
- Create a catalogue of CE providers in the state

Online CE’s

- May be provided by AMTA, ABMP, or another insurance company
- Check Other Massage CE Sites like CE Institute, CE Broker, or do a google search for online massage CEs.
- Check your state regulations to find out how many of your required hours can be taken online versus how many hours are required in-person.

USOLMT’S ROLE

USOLMT would like to make a collaborative effort to provide high-quality continuing education on the USOLMT CE Academy and to work with providers who may offer our members discounts to their courses.

In exchange, USOLMT is offering free advertising in our quarterly magazine for our partner providers, creating a CE directory of each provider teaching on our platform to be distributed to our members, and live sessions with these providers in our group, on our private social network, and on our podcast.



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USOLMT advocates for high-quality education and will continue to recommend quality providers and courses to our members. The advantage of taking CE classes is, of course, getting better at your craft, but also to stave off boredom in your work by adding new techniques to your toolbox.

We would like to collaborate with providers to offer options for therapists who wish to pursue certain pathways in massage therapy, providing series of courses that take the therapist in a certain direction and help them meet their goals.

USOLMT's activities as an organization may include supporting legislation that standardizes continuing education requirements in the United States, providing quality online education options and discounts for our members, providing information on state requirements, and promoting providers that meet quality standards.