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Matters of Concern for Massage Therapists



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MATTERS OF CONCERN 2021 RESEARCH REPORT

INTRODUCTION

USOLMT conducted close to two years' worth of research by simply listening to massage therapists across the country. We listened on social media, in zoom meetings with over 2000 massage therapists, heard what they had to say via messenger, email, and in group discussions.

Through this research, we identified many widely and deeply felt matters of common concern. This report highlights the major issues identified and our key findings.



Massage therapists are a diverse group of people from all walks of life with differing ideas, challenges, and opinions.

That said, we all experience common challenges in our work, and it is through these collective challenges and like-minded supportive groups that we can overcome, find a sense of community and acceptance, and use our collective strength to achieve greatness.

CULTURE

Because the culture of massage therapists is so diverse in the United States, our field is a melting pot of ideas, challenges, and opinions. What is good enough for one massage therapist does not work at all for the other. It is very easy to spot our differences, but, quite difficult to pinpoint our collective concerns.

Cultural issues therapists are concerned about include language, unity versus division, decisions and feelings, sacrifice, integrity, arrogance, public perception, toxicity, beliefs, fact versus fiction, racism, discrimination, aggression, gender, rights, and privilege.

Language issues that were mentioned included such phrases as “fluff and buff”, “masseur and masseuse”.

Therapists pointed out that they wanted more collaboration and support within our community. They said that Covid-19 exposed how divided we are, but what they really want is to be on one accord. Some even went as far as to say that there is a civil war in our industry and that people were “ripping each other apart”.

They talked about cultural issues in the workplace such as feeling they are expendable, that profits take priority over people, and that it was frustrating to see massage therapists stay in jobs and situations that don't serve them well. Some mentioned that there is a need to sacrifice boundaries for money, that they felt resentment and stagnation at work. Many said they wish our massage community would choose not to work in low-paying corporate environments.

Integrity was mentioned in many conversations, referring to dishonest staff members, some employers and with respect to clients. Many therapists brought up that some believe it is okay to act as if they are correcting, curing, or changing health issues. They also said that some therapists give clients false information, ignoring the client's right to accuracy so they can give informed consent.

Arrogance came up in many ways, as therapists discussed how knowledgeable a massage therapist should be, that therapists were smug, overly competitive, gossiped too much, formed cliques in the workplace, and that breakrooms are toxic.

The public perception of massage therapy was also a repeating pattern with professionals mentioning how TV shows and movies portray massage therapy as sex work, that the term massage parlor is still in use among the public in reference to legitimate massage practice and that they still deal with perversion and sexual solicitation inside and outside the treatment room. Some said they believe that massage therapy is not recognized as a serious job.

Massage therapists brought up that the industry is 80% female, and they believe that males are not given equal opportunity in the field. They also said that sexism was a problem, especially with clients who perceive a difference between male and female providers. Some male massage therapists said they were criticized and ridiculed for

being massage therapists. We also heard that there is an unwillingness to unpack cultural appropriation in the field, and that clients and colleagues have displayed unchecked racism against massage therapists of multicultural backgrounds.

According to many therapists, early burnout needs to be tackled, therapists need to generally improve their boundaries, and they want the right to say no to deep pressure without repercussions at work so they can avoid damage to their own bodies while assisting others. They also would like to see a more gradual rise in the number of services new graduates perform so they are not overwhelmed by performing five to six services a day right out of school.

The one most deeply and widely felt seems to be lack of respect – which almost every massage therapist feels in some way. If it isn't about lack of respect in the workplace, it seems to be about lack of respect among their peers or gaining the respect and recognition of other manual therapy professions and physicians.



EDUCATION

Massage therapy education is a major point of contention among massage therapists, educators, and employers in the United States.

While there are many who would like to see all fifty states adopt the same standard of education for massage therapists, just as many disagree on what that standard of education should be. The lowest number

mentioned as we listened in on social media was 700 hours and the highest was 1500.

Therapists said they would like to see more courses in subjects such as public health, science literacy, business management, marketing, financial management, safety, and telehealth.

Some therapists went so far as to say their education felt like a scam and they were lied to by instructors regarding how much money they would make when they graduated, and some business owners said that massage therapists were unprepared for the job upon graduation.

The terms “diploma mill” and “school to franchise pipeline” were mentioned many times by therapists when discussing massage schools. Kickbacks to massage schools from franchises were mentioned to us several times over the course of the last two years by entry-level instructors. This is not meant to infer that all massage schools are diploma mills, pipelines into franchises, or receive kickbacks.

Other issues of concern regarding massage school includes what is being taught such as outdated information, pseudoscience, and superstition. Therapists bringing up these points said that those teachings made massage therapy potentially unsafe and less effective for clients.

WAGES

It isn't a secret in our field that the wages for employed massage therapists have remained stagnant for the last ten years and that the majority of employers did not consider raising wages until the labor crisis hit a tipping point in 2021. There has been an ongoing shortage of massage therapists to fill jobs for many years, but it became more of a concern this year than it ever has.



We saw therapists become more honest with employers this year, especially on social media, where anyone watching could feel the tension rising between employees and employers. It got so bad that many massage employers were trashing massage therapists online, and massage employees were not hesitating to fight back.

So many massage therapists said that they want to be paid for all the hours they work including soap notes, laundry, and cleaning. They don't want their commission to be affected by being lower based on the business's sales, coupons, groupings or promotions, and many mentioned they would like to be paid a salary rather than commission or hourly. They said they were overworked and underpaid and that employers wanted them to be grateful. They believe their labor and their time has value and they want to be compensated for both. Several therapists said that they would like to see a minimum wage established for fair pay in any corporate setting and that minimum should be higher than the average.



CONSUMER & PUBLIC EDUCATION

We gathered that most massage therapists believe that the public needs to be better educated on massage therapy, modalities, styles, evidence-based v/s non-evidence-based modalities, and proper terminology.

In the treatment room, massage therapists would like to have more consultative time with clients to do posture and gait

assessments and more time after to review their findings and offer corrective stretches or other advice.

Therapists mentioned that some clients are rude, have unrealistic expectations of therapists, sexually harass them, discriminate against male therapists, diminish their work, as if it isn't labor-intensive and doesn't require education, come in to receive massage when they are sick, lie to them about their medical conditions, and sometimes abuse them in the treatment room.

A lot of massage therapists said they wish clients viewed massage therapy as healthcare rather than a luxury.

UNIONIZING

In 2020, when we started asking questions about unionizing massage therapy, there seemed to be more therapists that were disagreeable to the notion than those who agreed or were interested in unionizing massage therapy. The number of therapists interested in unionizing seems to have doubled in 2021.



There were many reasons why therapists said they wanted a union. They said they want an organization that sticks up for them, that would give them more national representation, could push things forward for them politically, and have a powerful lobby to advocate for them.

Therapists said that they would like to unify for representation as a whole profession and would like to see all massage jobs adjust pay scales and improve benefits. Many therapists believe that a union could do that for them in addition to giving them more protections at work.

There were arguments against unionizing as well. One that stuck out was that some therapists were pushing for a union while also complaining about the costs of licensure, insurance, and other practice fees and that unions are not free. This is true, but, the better question seems to be, is it worth it?

We asked if it was possible. It is, but it is a long process that requires time and commitment, risk, and is not easy, especially considering high turnover at most jobs, division in our field, and a consensus among self-employed therapists who feel that they are unaffected by workplace issues.



HUMAN TRAFFICKING, PROSTITUTION, SEXUAL SOLICITATION, HARASSMENT

Massage therapists have a huge problem with human trafficking and prostitution, and a growing problem with sexual solicitation and harassment.

There were a lot of therapists who said that they believe that sex work should be legalized in the United States so that

businesses who practice prostitution could be properly identified for what they are, and legitimate massage therapy would not be questioned or pay the price for these businesses with establishment license fees.

Therapists mentioned sexual innuendo in the treatment room, such as some clients technically following the rules but still making them feel uncomfortable to encounters with sexual predators.

They also discussed with us how they felt about therapists who abuse clients in a sexual way, contrary to everything the practice of massage therapy stands for, and their disappointment in clients for not reporting them.

Overall, it's clear that massage therapists hate the sexualization of the massage industry and all the things that go along with that connotation.

LICENSING & CLASSIFICATION

Therapist brought up concerns about licensing standards across the country, many saying that they would like to see a uniform standard across all fifty states that would allow them to move from state to state without having to be licensed in every state.

They mentioned that the fees and pass rates for the entry-level exams were too high and too low respectively and that license renewal fees were too high. Some said they wanted a tiered licensing system, while others were more concerned about redundant fingerprinting and background checks.



Still, others were most concerned about establishment licensing, the language and purpose associated with establishment licensing and the costs involved.

When it comes to classification, therapists said they were concerned about the language used to classify them such as “personal service” providers, “allied health providers”, “alternative care providers” and “healthcare providers”. Many would prefer the term healthcare provider. They are also concerned about the term “massage parlor” still being used in connection with legitimate massage practice or massage establishments.



BENEFITS

There was a lot of talk about lack of benefits in the massage employment setting. Therapists who mentioned lack of benefits said they want sick pay, vacation pay, paid time off, health care coverage, personal injury coverage, massage therapy benefits to soothe their own bodies, paid maternity leave, paid family, and medical leave, dental, vision and life

insurance. None mentioned retirement benefits, though this is the most common benefit offered by employers in the field.

INSURANCE

Covid-19 sparked many debates and conversations about liability insurance coverage and other coverage massage therapists realized they might need in the event of an emergency such as a global pandemic, resulting in the inability to work.

Many said they would like to have business interruption insurance in case they were shut down again or unable to work. They said they wanted their liability insurance to provide coverage for the transmission of infectious disease, including Covid-19.

SAFETY

Most safety concerns that were brought up were in relation to the pandemic such as understanding their risk factors, protecting themselves from transmission, and having proper PPE available to them on the job. They also mentioned they would like to see a uniform standard in cleaning, hygiene, and sterilization procedures.

The other big safety concern we saw was from sexual solicitation. Many therapists are appalled at the uptick in sexual solicitation in the industry since 2020, receiving multiple calls each day asking for extras and happy endings, and having to deal with this inside the treatment room on occasion.

ASSOCIATIONS

The pandemic caused many therapists to be disappointed in their massage associations for multiple reasons. Some were upset about insurance coverage or lack of clarity on what their insurance does and does not cover, while others said they were concerned about the lack of transparency of their associations.

A lot of therapists said that the associations were useless during the pandemic and that they were paying dues for nothing. They complained that they were too late in publishing information related to the pandemic, and that they didn't understand what the associations roles are.

Therapists said there are too many associations making inconsistent rules and regulations and that they want one source for all massage-related information. They also said they wanted their associations to provide funds for lost wages, but, when they were shut down, it was difficult to even pause their payments. We are not saying that all therapists feel this way, but, that many do.

INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR WORK

Massage therapists are concerned about independent contract work in the United States. There is a small movement in the field that is looking to stop the misclassification of contractors and to hold business owners who hire therapists as contractors but treat them as W-2 employees accountable through penalties and enforcement. They want to see clear guidance at the massage student level on what independent contractor work means and the responsibilities of an independent contractor versus an employee.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

The consensus in continuing education is that massage therapists would like it to count for something if they are required to pay for it. As it stands today, continuing education is largely ignored by employers, unless it directly relates to services performed and does not boost the wages of the employed massage therapist in any way.

LOBBYING POWER

Increased lobbying power could move our field forward faster. A few things therapists said they wanted lobbied for are to have massage therapy covered by medical insurance in all fifty states, classification code changes to eliminate the term massage parlor, and local code changes to eliminate being classified as adult entertainment businesses.

INPUT ON POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Employees we heard from said they want more input on the policies and procedures that affect their jobs. They also would like to see stronger policies in place that protect

them from clients who won't abide by workplace policies and stronger policies and procedures when serious incidents of a sexual nature occur at work that protect them.

CONCLUSION

This is not an exhaustive list of the issues facing massage therapists in the United States today, nor is it meant to be an explanation or justification of any issue.

The purpose of this report is to bring to light the issues that massage therapists care enough about to engage in open discussion both on social media and in person.

We believe that it's a beautiful thing for a community to finally discover what it cares about and that the future can be brighter for massage therapists once they understand the issues they are dealing with, are able to consider the implications of various solutions, and know how to solve problems.