

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a grey tank top, is performing a massage on a client. The client is lying on their side on a white massage table, with their eyes closed and a relaxed expression. The background is a bright, airy room with large windows and white curtains. The overall mood is calm and professional.

Massage and **Bodywork** as a **career**



So You're Considering a Career in Massage and Bodywork?

The touch therapies profession is growing steadily in the United States. This is a result of wider public recognition and career change trends. Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP) estimates that approximately 240,000 individuals practice massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies as a full- or part-time vocation in the United States.

A significant change in the demographics of U.S. practitioners has emerged the past few years, due primarily to the financial viability of a career in massage. In the past, individuals who chose massage, bodywork, or somatic therapies as a career were often considered to be choosing an alternative vocation. Now, the trade is experiencing a more professional image. Though many young people continue to enter the field right out of high school or college, mothers returning to the workforce and educated individuals choosing a different mid-life career path now form a majority of students at massage training schools.

A clear majority of practitioners provide personal care services focusing on stress reduction, relaxation, and preventive wellness techniques. We estimate 10–15 percent of practitioners exclusively provide health care-oriented services, generally working in clinical settings in conjunction with medical doctors, chiropractors, or other providers. While massage treatments still are not considered covered services under most health care plans, a growing number of progressive health maintenance organizations understand that massage therapy can be cost effective for a number of patients and are beginning to cover such services, further supporting bodywork as a viable option for consumers.

The practice of massage offers diverse choices in work environment and number of hours devoted to the profession. While most practitioners work in their own offices or at home, an increasing number work in other professional settings.

The public's interest in preventive health care and stress reduction has also resulted in an immense expansion of the spa industry. Joining the ranks of luxury destination spas are resort spas and an increasing number of day spas. Spas typically offer an array of skin and bodywork treatments, often coupled with nutritional and exercise advice.

Related to the explosive growth of spas is a trend toward massage therapists also becoming qualified as skin care professionals. Acquiring that additional training may make them more attractive to spa owners because of the scheduling flexibility that individuals with diverse skills provide. Interspersing skin care work with massage can also help reduce repetitive motion injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, that manifest from doing the same type of work over and over. Thus, doing both massage and skin care therapies can contribute to a longer career.

American hospitals are beginning to recognize the value of massage, as evidenced by the formation of organizations such as the Nursing Touch and Massage Therapy Association and the Hospital-Based Massage Network. Alternative therapies are becoming an increasingly common component of hospice care and psychological treatment, as well. For example, the American Association of Humanistic Psychologists has developed a Somatics Division.

The bottom line: The profession is growing, prospering and gaining well-deserved respect.



About Massage Therapy and Bodywork

The practice of therapeutic massage in the United States dates back at least to the 1890s, when massages were routinely available at YMCAs and YWCAs. Practitioners have offered massage services ever since, but the profession has grown explosively in the past two decades.

The collective field of massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies is defined as the application of various techniques to the muscular structure and soft tissues of the human body. Application of massage, bodywork, and somatic techniques may include, but is not limited to, stroking, kneading, tapping, compression, vibration, rocking, friction, pressure, and those techniques based on manipulation or the application of pressure to the muscular structure or soft tissues of the human body. This may also include non-forceful passive or active movement, the application of techniques intended to affect the energetic systems of the body, and movement re-education. The use of oils, lotions, or powders may also be included.

Massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies specifically exclude diagnosis, prescription, manipulation, or adjustments of the human skeletal structure, or any other service, procedure, or therapy that requires a license to practice orthopedics, physical therapy, podiatry, chiropractic, osteopathy, psychotherapy, acupuncture, or any other profession or branch of medicine.

While a number of full-time practitioners earn \$40,000–\$60,000 per year, many individuals in the profession choose to pursue massage as a part-time vocation. As a result, the hours per week devoted to massage averages fewer than 40, and median income from the practice of massage therapy is under \$20,000. More than 1,500 massage therapy schools graduate 73,000-plus trained students each year. One of every eight American adults received at least one massage in 2004.

Massage therapy is regulated in 36 states plus the District of Columbia. For current information about state regulations, please visit the careers section (Become a Massage Therapist) on www.massagetherapy.com.



Benefits of Massage

Massage is an accepted part of many physical rehabilitation programs and has proven beneficial to several chronic conditions such as low back pain, arthritis, and bursitis. Massage helps relieve the stress and tension of everyday living.

Massage provides relief to people from all walks of life, including the weekend or competitive athlete, the home gardener, and the overstressed executive struggling to keep pace in today's economy. Secretaries, laborers, waitresses—anyone can feel a need for massage at some point in time. The older population, as well, will benefit from massage, as it can enhance flexibility and circulation.

The services of a bodywork professional may be covered by health insurance when prescribed by a chiropractor or osteopath. Therapies provided as part of a prescribed treatment by a physician or registered physical therapist are often covered.

There are more than 250 massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies, and many practitioners utilize multiple techniques. Below is a brief listing of some of the more popular techniques. Visit the glossary on massagetherapy.com for a complete listing of modalities and their definitions.

- Swedish massage is the most common form of massage and mainly relaxes the muscles, easing aches and pains.
- Sports massage consists of specific components designed to reduce injuries, alleviate inflammation, and provide warm-up for amateur and professional athletes before, during, after, and within their training regimens.
- Shiatsu is a Japanese acupressure massage that restores energy to the body.
- Craniosacral therapy is a gentle, noninvasive technique to assist the natural movement of fluid within the craniosacral system, addressing health issues such as chronic pain, eye difficulties, scoliosis, motor-coordination impairments, learning disabilities, and other dysfunctions of the central nervous system.
- Deep tissue massage works on the sub-layer of musculature and fascia to address conditions such as chronic muscular pain, injury rehabilitation, and inflammation-related pain caused by arthritis and tendonitis.
- Prenatal/pregnancy massage engages specific techniques to reduce pregnancy discomforts and concerns and enhance the physiological and emotional well-being of both mother and fetus.
- Reflexology is manipulation of the feet, hands, and/or ears to stimulate corresponding areas in the body, promoting healing.

Employment Opportunities

Opportunities abound in the massage field. A majority of practitioners today have their own practice—perhaps based in an office, in their home, involving visits to client homes, or a chair massage practice on-site at local business or store settings. A rapidly growing segment of practitioners are employed by others—often at a spa, athletic club, medical clinic, chiropractor’s office, or even on a cruise ship. More and more beauty salons are capitalizing on the day spa boom by adding massage therapists to their staffs.

Private practice offers numerous advantages. It starts with being in charge, in control of your professional life. You have maximum flexibility in deciding how much you want to work and in scheduling your time. You put your personal stamp on your practice. You keep 100 percent of your income after expenses.

On the down side, you have no safety net; you only make a living if you attract and retain clients. Most massage therapists in business for themselves find securing business a real challenge during the first year of practice. You are in charge of getting it done—marketing, bookings/scheduling, bank deposits, accounting, taxes, ordering and receiving supplies, etc. Going it alone can also be difficult for someone used to working with others. Overall, you are taking on more risks and responsibilities.

A massage therapist working for someone else usually sacrifices some potential income and freedom for a feeling of security and an opportunity to learn new techniques as well as how another massage therapy business is organized. Spas charge fully as much for a massage, but the therapist may only receive 40–70 percent of the payment; the rest goes for rent, heat, linens, scheduling, advertising, etc., and spa owner profit. On the plus side, you can concentrate on your massage work and let someone else worry about other aspects of building and operating a business. When you are done for the day, you can turn it off; you don't have to go home wondering how you will get clients to show up tomorrow or how to get the plumbing fixed.

Many therapists are able to work in an establishment while also building an independent practice. Even after the first year, many massage therapists work part-time at developing a private practice and part-time at a salaried or contract job in a club/gym, spa, hotel, salon, chiropractor's office, doctor's office, hospital, or clinic.

Regardless of the path you select, make sure to take care of yourself. Giving a massage can be strenuous work. A good massage school curriculum will train you in correct body mechanics, which will minimize your chance of injury. But only you can guard against over-scheduling or burnout. Know your limits. Take vacations. Set aside a portion of your income for health insurance and retirement plan contributions.

How much can you earn performing massage? Hourly rates for massage and bodywork sessions range from \$25 to \$75, depending on setting, region of the country, and the experience of the therapist. The national average is \$60 for one hour. Annual incomes vary just as much, reflecting mostly how many hours a therapist gives to sessions. According to an ABMP member survey, the average income for therapists seeing more than eleven clients per week is \$32,300; many new practitioners earn less, while veterans in private practice may net \$40,000–\$60,000 or more. It depends on your goals, your skills, and your initiative.

Choosing the Training Program That's Right For You

Choosing a school is a substantial undertaking; you have more than 1,500 schools to choose from in the United States alone. They come in many sizes and hues, offer programs from 100 to more than 2,000 hours in length, and deliver these programs at varying quality levels. Most are privately owned, though a growing number of community colleges are adding massage training programs. Here are some suggestions to assist prospective students in selecting a program of instruction in massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies.

The first step in selecting a training program is to ascertain the reason you are seeking training. Determining your purpose will assist you in evaluating the cost, value, length, and content of the specific courses you are considering.

Do you want to learn basic relaxation massage so you can give massages to your spouse, family, or friends, but you have no interest in becoming a professional? If so, you may want to stop after a one- or two-day introductory workshop. If you enjoy the experience, you may want to enroll in a basic course of instruction, approximately 100–150 hours in length. You may benefit from a longer course of instruction if you wish to specialize in a particular technique or to practice as a professional. The majority of states that now license massage therapists require completion of at least 500 hours of training at an approved school.

To locate a school in your area, visit the careers section (Become a Massage Therapist) at www.massagetherapy.com. There you will find the most comprehensive listing of schools in the United States.

School curricula and objectives vary, partly a reflection of different owner missions and partly a response to an incredibly diverse range of standards for massage practitioners. Some schools offer quick programs in basic Swedish or seated massage. At the other extreme, some institutions take only graduate students and offer advanced academic degrees. Many are in the middle, offering 500- to 650-hour programs that include core training in anatomy and physiology, lots of focus on massage theory and practice, introductory exposure to an array of modalities, and some work on business, ethical, and professional aspects of being in practice.

After completing your general information search (and assuming you have honed in on the type of bodywork you wish to learn), it's time to select a list of candidate schools and interact with them. Selecting a massage school involves a number of factors. Geographic location, cost, and program time requirements provide practical parameters. Obviously, the vision and philosophy of the school is a critical consideration.

Call each school of interest to you and request they send a school catalog and any other promotional material. Review the materials from each school closely, comparing the advantages and disadvantages. Is the school recognized by the state in which it operates? Is the tuition clearly outlined? Are any additional expenses required? Are the instructors and their respective credentials listed?

Make yourself familiar with the legislative requirements in your state. The licensing boards of states with statewide licensing requirements are listed in the careers section (Become a Massage Therapist) on www.massagetherapy.com. If you live in an unregulated state, contact the city clerk's office and request a copy of a local ordinance covering massage therapy, if such an ordinance exists. This step will ensure that you will be qualified to practice once you graduate from school. If regulations apply, there will probably be specific educational requirements to meet in order to practice. In choosing a course of instruction, be sure the school and the course content meet existing regulatory requirements, if applicable. It is also important to consider whether you plan on relocating after your training. Do your homework about regulation before you start, not when you're about to graduate.

Once you have narrowed down the list of schools you are interested in attending, visit each school. Schedule an appointment to view the facility and inquire about any unanswered questions. Ideally, schedule your appointment while classes are in session. Here are some school visit tips:

- Ask if you may speak with current students about the school.
- Observe student, instructor, and staff body language.
- Ask multiple people to articulate the school's philosophy and goals. Does the description sound genuine? Are their descriptions roughly similar? Do the schools' purposes match with your objectives?

- Ask to come back and spend 4–5 hours at the school sitting in on classes and hanging around the lunchroom or break areas. Use the time to talk to instructors and students, to gain a feel for whether they seem interested in responding to your questions, and to sense whether everyone is enthusiastic about the learning process. Does the school's climate feel comfortable?
- Ask for names and telephone numbers of several graduates of the school, some still in their initial 18 months of practice and others who are already veterans. Call them and ask how well the school prepared them both in terms of massage knowledge and in being ready to tackle the challenges of creating and sustaining a business. You can even invest a few dollars to experience massage techniques utilized by a particular school's graduates.

Massage schools are very different from each other. You want to make sure the school you attend meets your personal expectations and values. Training in massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies is conducted in both casual and formal atmospheres. The physical facility, instructor qualifications, and teaching philosophies can vary tremendously from one institution to another. The importance of these aspects is a matter of subjective personal opinion and should be weighed somewhat against your intended goal.

Physical Facility

Schools vary in size and atmosphere. The importance of a personal visit cannot be stressed enough. Find the school that fits your personal needs and expectations. Are you looking for an institutional setting or a casual setting? Or something in the middle?

Faculty Qualifications

You will want to find out about the qualifications and experience of the instructors. The majority of the time you will find this information included in the school's catalog. Your personal goals will influence the level of importance you place on the qualifications of the instructors.

Teaching Philosophy

Teaching philosophies can range from metaphysical and esoteric to clinical and paramedical. Finding out about a school's teaching philosophies and its instructors is an important step in choosing the training program appropriate for you. Since personal study styles vary with the individual, it is also important to determine if the programs are formally structured or self-directed. Some schools require students to conduct all of their hands-on practice sessions at the school, oftentimes in a student clinic, while other institutions expect the student to complete their required practice hours off-site. Some schools offer night and weekend classes, while others only offer day classes; scheduling may be a critical factor in your selection process.

Techniques

Specific techniques, such as Rolfing, Hellerwork, Trager Approach, etc., are generally trademark protected; the use of their respective practitioner titles are restricted to individuals certified in those techniques. Training is available only through programs that are approved by their respective organizations.

Many schools offer training in various techniques, with courses ranging from beginning to advanced levels of instruction, as well as continuing education. Seminars on specific techniques, business practices, and other relevant subjects are often conducted at schools or are taught independently at other facilities.

What is Accreditation?

The term “accredit” is defined as endorsement or official approval. The accreditation process is a voluntary step an institution may take to receive this additional endorsement from an independent accrediting body.

The primary motivation for schools to seek accredited status is to assure prospective students that their programs, if accredited, have met quality and competency standards. The schools must go through an extensive review, self-study, and evaluation process.

The agencies listed below accredit massage, bodywork, and somatic therapy programs. You may want to contact each to obtain a listing of the schools or programs that have been granted accreditation.

Approximately 27 percent of the 1,500-plus massage and bodywork schools have been accredited. Attending an accredited school is not a guarantee of future success; it indicates that the school has voluntarily participated in a self-analysis and evaluation by an outside agency. Some students may use this distinction to differentiate among schools; however, as mentioned, a large majority of programs have chosen not to be accredited.

Accreditation Resources

National & Regional Accrediting Agencies

Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES)

7777 Leesburg Pike, Suite 314 N.

Falls Church, VA 22043

Tel: 703-917-9503

E-mail: info@abhес.org

Website: www.abhес.org

Accrediting Council for Continuing Education & Training (ACCET)

1722 N Street NW

Washington DC 20036

Tel: 202-955-1113

Fax: 202-955-1118

E-mail: info@accet.org

Website: www.accet.org

Accrediting Commission for Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCST)

2101 Wilson Boulevard, #302

Arlington, VA 22201

Tel: 703-247-4212

Fax: 703-247-4533

Website: www.accst.org

Accrediting Council for Independent College and Schools (ACICS)

750 First Street, NE, #980
Washington, DC 20002-4241
Tel: 202-336-6780
Fax: 202-842-2593
E-mail: info@acics.org
Website: www.acics.org

Council on Occupational Education (COE)

41 Perimeter Center East, NE, #640
Atlanta, GA 30346
Tel: 770-396-3898 or 800-917-2081
Fax: 770-396-3790
Website: www.council.org

Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA)

1007 Church Street, Suite 302
Evanston, IL 60201
Tel: 847-869-5039
Fax: 847-869-6739
E-mail: info@comta.org
Website: www.comta.org

Distance Education & Training Council (DETC)

1601 18th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
Tel: 202-234-5100
Fax: 202-223-1386
E-mail: detc@detc.org
Website: www.detc.org

North Central Association of Colleges & Schools (NCACS)

30 N. LaSalle, Suite 2400
Chicago, IL 60602-2504
Tel: 800-621-7440 or 312-263-0456
Fax: 312-263-7462
E-mail: info@hlcommission.org
Website: www.ncacihe.org



Resources for Financial Aid

Financial aid is available in many forms. Many organizations offer assistance for those of particular ethnic groups, displaced homemakers, the economically disadvantaged, and other characteristics. A trip to your local library can put information in your hands regarding scholarships, grants, and loans. Don't hesitate to ask library personnel for assistance. In addition, further financial aid information is posted in the career section (Become a Massage Therapist) on www.massagetherapy.com.



Association Membership

A Matter of Choice

Why Join a Professional Association?

So what's next after you choose a school? As a massage and bodywork student, it is important you get yourself started on the right foot by establishing a professional affiliation with an association that best meets your service expectations and shares your philosophy regarding the profession itself.

Once you're in school, we encourage you to request a membership brochure and application from the primary organizations serving the profession. We at ABMP will be happy to provide you with information about our Student Membership program.

To contact us, simply:

Call: 800-458-2267

Fax: 800-667-8260

Visit us on the web: www.abmp.com

Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP) is a professional membership organization founded to provide practitioners with services and information to help them succeed in their practice. ABMP is devoted to promoting ethical practices, protecting the rights of practitioners, and educating the public about the benefits of massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies.

The information in this booklet is provided for public interest by
ASSOCIATED BODYWORK & MESSAGE PROFESSIONALS

1271 Sugarbush Drive, Evergreen, CO 80439-9766

Telephone: 800-458-2267 • Fax: 800-667-8260

E-mail: expectmore@abmp.com

• Website: www.massagetherapy.com & www.abmp.com

© 2006 Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals