



Standard of Practice: Maintaining Boundaries and Preventing Sexual Abuse

Date: January 1, 2024

Amended:

Client outcomes

The client is treated with respect and dignity, knowing that Registered Massage Therapist (RMTs) maintain professional boundaries and do not subject them to abuse of any kind.

The client is not sexually abused by an RMT.

Registered Massage Therapist outcomes

The RMT always maintains professional boundaries with clients to preserve the trust and respect of the therapeutic relationship and to prevent boundary crossing, boundary violation, and abuse. Respecting and understanding the importance of boundaries is critical to the prevention of abuse, sexual abuse in particular.

The RMT does not sexually abuse clients or engage in any activities of a sexual nature with clients and takes active steps to prevent sexual abuse. Sexual abuse of a client by a RMT means:

- Sexual intercourse or other forms of physical sexual relations between the massage therapist and the client;
- Touching, of a sexual nature, of the client by the RMT; or
- Behaviour or remarks of a sexual nature by the RMT towards the client whether in person or through other forms of communication.

“Sexual nature” does not include touching, behaviour, or remarks of a clinical nature appropriate to the service provided.

Requirements

RMTs must:

- Maintain a therapeutic relationship built on mutual trust, respect, and the client's best interest. As a first step, it is essential to follow an agreed-upon treatment plan which should include: interviewing to gain an understanding of treatment goals; assessing the client's history; obtaining informed consent for the assessment; and developing a treatment plan and obtaining consent to treat the client.
- Establish clear professional boundaries throughout assessment and treatment to ensure clients know what to expect when receiving treatment.

The following areas are critical to ensuring professional boundaries:

- Practice setting: The therapeutic relationship begins with the client's experience of the massage therapy practice setting, which should be consistent with the public's expectations for an appointment with a health-care professional. Whether the setting is a clinical space, home office, or mobile practice, the RMT must take reasonable steps to ensure professionalism in the practice setting.
- Interpersonal behaviours and non-verbal communication are significant to setting professional boundaries within the therapeutic relationship. The RMT must refrain from behaviours, remarks, or physical gestures that increase the risk of boundary violations.
- Verbal communication is a critical component of any therapeutic relationship, and it must be respectful, professional, and appropriate to a health-care environment.
- Draping: Using professional techniques when draping is one way that RMTs establish and maintain physical boundaries. Clients may find having someone seeing and touching their unclothed body disconcerting and somewhat uncomfortable. Appropriate draping techniques can maintain a client's sense of physical privacy, dignity, and safety. These are critical factors to ensuring the trust and respect necessary for a healthy therapeutic relationship. Providing secure draping technique options, including the option to work through clothing or a sheet barrier (where possible), can facilitate a client's comfort and safety. When inappropriately or inadvertently applied, poor draping can result in boundary violations and instances of perceived physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
- Treatment of sensitive areas of the body: RMTs will at times be asked or may deem it appropriate to provide treatment to areas that may be considered "sensitive" areas of the

body. Massage, or indeed touching in any way, of these areas poses a potential risk for misinterpretation or misunderstanding, and may be experienced by the client as a violation of their body — and possibly as sexual abuse. As the treatment of these sensitive areas is considered a high-risk activity for the profession, RMTs must take specific cautions when treating these areas. Sexual abuse represents an extreme boundary violation and abuse of the power inherent in the therapist-client relationship. Sexual abuse is often preceded by growing boundary crossings and violations. This slippery slope can be avoided by a clear understanding of boundaries and the limits of the professional relationship.

- Treating family or friends: Certain situations create the need for extra vigilance in the maintenance of boundaries. RMTs must not provide massage therapy services to an individual with whom they are in a sexual relationship, including spouses or romantic partners, as it is considered a boundary violation. They must also **avoid** treating family or friends where professional boundaries could be at risk of being violated. RMTs are responsible for their decision to treat a family member and must be prepared to explain their rationale for doing so. Exceptions for “minor/emergency treatment” would be determined on a case-by-case basis. If a member needs clarification regarding this position, they must consult with MTANS.
- Preventing sexual abuse: Given the power differential, it is always the health professional’s responsibility to ensure that sexual abuse of the client does not occur, i.e., a client can never give true consent to a sexual or romantic activity or relationship; even consensual relationships constitute sexual abuse. Clients can expect that their treatment will be free from conduct, behaviour, or remarks of a sexual nature. Ending the therapist-client relationship does not eliminate the power imbalance that exists between the RMT and client. This is because there may be continuing trust, knowledge, or influence derived from the previous professional relationship.
- Giving or receiving gifts: RMTs are responsible for minimizing the risk of ignoring boundaries when receiving or giving gifts from or to clients. Gifts from clients may be offered, even unintentionally, as a way to secure “special” or preferred treatment.

For details on how to apply practices to prevent boundary crossing, boundary violation and abuse in the areas listed above, please refer to the Maintaining Boundaries and Preventing Sexual Abuse Guidelines that accompany this standard.

Relevant documents

- Code of Ethics
- Maintaining Boundaries and Preventing Sexual Abuse Guidelines
- Mandatory Reporting Policy
- Standard of Practice: Consent
- Standard of Practice: Communication
- Standard of Practice: Draping