

The Foundation of Ethics

3 CE hour course for Licensed Massage & Bodywork Therapists

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Introduction and Course Navigation



In the field of massage therapy, a clear understanding of professional ethics is crucial for practitioners. Many states mandate continuing education on this topic to ensure that therapists maintain their licenses. This requirement exists because massage therapy uniquely involves working with clients in vulnerable situations. As Dean Juhan eloquently expresses in his book *Job's Body*, "to touch the surface is to stir the depths." In our practice, we touch not just the physical body but also the mind and spirit of our clients.

Understanding and implementing professional ethical behavior enables us to provide a safe and therapeutic environment for our clients. Adhering to these ethical standards is essential for being a successful massage practitioner.

In this 3-hour course, we will explore the foundations of ethics, professionalism, boundaries, the mind-body connection, therapeutic processes, and sexual issues in the treatment room. Throughout the course, you will encounter several reflection exercises designed to help you connect the material to your practice and personal experiences.

At the end of the course, you will complete a 15-question exam. You are welcome to refer to the course material during the exam. Upon successfully passing with a score of 70% or higher, you will receive a pdf (printable) certificate of achievement.

We hope you find this course informative and enriching as you deepen your understanding of ethics in massage therapy.

Objectives:

In this self-paced, home study course, participants will:

1. **Define Key Concepts:** Identify and differentiate between values, morals, and ethics, and understand their roles in guiding professional behavior in massage therapy.
2. **Recognize Professionalism:** Explain the significance of professionalism in massage therapy, including the concepts of accountability and liability, and how they impact practice.
3. **Understand Standards of Practice:** Describe the Standards of Practice and the Code of Ethics established by professional organizations, and their importance in guiding ethical conduct in massage therapy.
4. **Establish Boundaries:** Articulate the importance of setting and maintaining clear boundaries in the therapeutic environment to foster safety and professionalism for both therapist and client.
5. **Navigate Ethical Dilemmas:** Develop strategies for identifying and addressing ethical dilemmas in practice, utilizing reflective questions to guide decision-making.
6. **Assess Emotional Dynamics:** Understand the mind-body connection in massage therapy, particularly regarding transference and countertransference, and recognize the importance of maintaining professionalism in emotional situations.
7. **Handle Dual Relationships:** Recognize the implications of dual relationships and learn how to set boundaries to avoid complications in the therapeutic relationship.
8. **Utilize Health History and Consent Forms:** Explain the significance of health history and consent forms in ethical practice and how they contribute to informed consent and client safety.
9. **Make Appropriate Referrals:** Identify situations that require referrals to other healthcare providers and develop an understanding of when to refer clients to ensure ethical care.
10. **Evaluate Treatment Outcomes:** Implement methods for evaluating therapeutic outcomes and assessing the effectiveness of treatments to enhance client care and improve professional practices.

These objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of ethics in massage therapy and to equip practitioners with the knowledge and skills necessary for maintaining ethical standards in their practice.

Lesson 1: Understanding Values, Morals, and Ethics



To build a solid foundation in understanding the topic of professional ethics, it is important to understand the differences between values, morals, and professional ethics. These three concepts guide our behavior in different ways:

- **Values** are personal principles that help us determine what is right or wrong and good or bad. They also assist us in making choices and setting priorities. For example, people often align with political parties based on their values.
- **Morals** carry a higher social significance and are based on our ideas of right and wrong. These are often shaped by our upbringing, culture, or religion and are used to judge both ourselves and others.
- **Ethics** are the professional standards or rules that guide behavior within a specific field. In massage therapy, ethics are formally adopted by professional organizations and help define the conduct of therapists.

Reflection Exercise:

Think of an example from your life for each of the following concepts. How do they differ from one another, and how do they relate?

- Values: _____
 - Morals: _____
 - Ethics: _____
-

Lesson 2: What Does it Mean to Be a Professional?

Professionalism is more than just being formal or distant. It is an educated way of being kind and maintaining clear, respectful boundaries with clients. According to Webster's Dictionary, a profession is "a calling requiring specialized knowledge, usually obtained by academic preparation." In massage therapy, this specialized knowledge is in the manipulation of soft tissue for the purpose of maintaining good health and well-being.

Two key concepts that distinguish professionals are **accountability** and **liability**:

- **Accountability** means being responsible for your actions and decisions.
- **Liability** refers to the legal responsibility to pay for any damages that result from your professional conduct. In massage therapy, this can involve professional liability insurance to cover potential claims of malpractice.

Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics

While state boards and legislation regulate the legal practice of massage therapy, a professional organization is essential for systematic, uniform, and national self-governance. In the field of massage therapy, several such organizations exist. The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB) serves as a national advocate; however, each state has its own specific laws and regulations that must be followed first. The primary role of these professional organizations is to certify the competency of their members, ensuring public protection.

In massage therapy, a **Standard of Practice** is a set of guidelines that outlines acceptable behavior and performance for therapists. It serves to:

- Educate new practitioners about the profession's expectations.
- Inform the public and regulatory agencies about what to expect from a massage therapist.

Alongside the Standards of Practice, a **Code of Ethics** is a formal set of rules that governs professional conduct. It defines what is right and wrong within the profession and provides guidance on how therapists should interact with clients, fellow practitioners, and society.

At the end of this course, you will find a copy of both the **NCBTMB's Standards of Practice** and the **Code of Ethics** for your reference.



The relationship between a profession and the public is built on a contract where the public expects reliable and trusted services, while professionals gain the authority to practice their skills. All professionals, particularly those in the healing arts, have an ethical and legal obligation to avoid causing harm to their clients; this is the foremost principle.

In massage therapy, our core practice is defined as “the systematic therapeutic manipulation of the body’s soft tissues by a specially trained therapist.”

Lesson 3: Setting and Maintaining Boundaries in the Therapy Room



Boundaries are essential in creating a safe and respectful environment for both the therapist and the client. They define acceptable behavior and ensure a professional relationship. Boundaries may be physical, emotional, financial, or otherwise, and they help maintain the integrity of the therapeutic environment.

As a massage therapist, it is crucial to set clear professional boundaries with your clients and to respect their boundaries as well. This helps create a safe space where clients can feel comfortable and receive the full benefits of your work.

Sometimes, empathetic therapists may find it difficult to maintain boundaries, especially when they feel they are helping a client. However, experience shows that crossing boundaries can interfere with the therapy's effectiveness. As Nina McIntosh, author of *The Educated Heart*, beautifully put it, **“Boundaries are a kindness to a vulnerable client.”**

One of the most critical aspects of professional ethics in massage therapy is the enforcement of clear boundaries. When therapists bend their professional boundaries, it opens the door for clients to treat them as nonprofessionals, which undermines the therapeutic relationship and may harm both the therapist and the client.

Examples of Healthy Boundaries:

- **Sessions start and end on time** – This shows respect for both the client's and the therapist's time.
- **Confidentiality is maintained** – Any information revealed during the session, including the client's identity, remains private.
- **Sessions remain client-focused** – The conversation and attention during the session should be centered around the client's needs, not the therapist's.
- **No sexual behavior or innuendos** – Professional boundaries ensure a safe and respectful environment for both the client and the therapist.

Ethical Reflection:

Ethical dilemmas in massage therapy often present themselves in various shades of grey. Consider these guiding questions to help navigate difficult situations (adapted from *The Educated Heart*):

- Is my intent centered on the safety and well-being of the client?
- Am I aware of the imbalance of power, and am I respecting it?
- Does my action risk creating a dual relationship or blurring the therapeutic relationship?
- Are my actions consistent with the original agreement I made with the client?
- Could my behavior lead to future complications?

These questions help therapists ensure they are upholding both professional and personal ethics.

Reflection Exercise:

List three boundaries you enforce in your massage therapy practice to maintain professionalism:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Why Ethics and Professional Boundaries Matter

Understanding and maintaining professional boundaries are essential not only to protect your career but also to ensure a safe and ethical environment for your clients.

- **For the Therapist:** When boundaries are unclear, there's a risk of misinterpretation, confusion, or even harm. It's crucial to protect your reputation and career by addressing boundary-crossing behaviors promptly and tactfully.
- **For the Client:** Clients rely on their therapist to act ethically and professionally. Many clients have little knowledge to question the practitioner's methods, which makes it even more important to respect their needs and maintain a professional environment.
- **For the Profession:** Ethical behavior strengthens the massage therapy profession as a whole. The more massage therapists act professionally and ethically, the more respect the public and other healthcare professionals will give to the field.

Reflection Exercise:

Think of a situation where you or someone you know encountered a professional behaving unethically. How did that experience affect your perception of that professional?



Lesson 4: The Mind-Body Connection and Ethics



Massage therapists are often in a position where they witness firsthand the powerful connection between the mind and body. Clients may store emotional tension in their bodies, which can be released during massage therapy. This emotional release may take the form of sadness, anger, or even memories being triggered. Understanding this connection is essential for navigating emotional moments that may arise during a session.

It's important to remember:

- **We are not psychotherapists**, but we can support our clients through emotional releases by offering comfort and listening without judgment.
- **Emotions often pass quickly**, but if they intensify or persist, a referral to a counselor may be necessary.

Transference and Countertransference

Transference occurs when a client projects their feelings or emotions onto the therapist. This can sometimes be positive but can also become problematic when clients project unresolved feelings or trauma.

Countertransference is when the therapist projects their own emotions onto the client. Signs of countertransference may include:

- Feeling overly emotional or losing objectivity toward the client.
- Becoming emotionally involved in the client's issues, whether positively or negatively.

Both transference and countertransference are natural, but recognizing them and addressing them appropriately is vital for maintaining professionalism.

Lesson 6: Dealing with Dual Relationships



A **dual relationship** occurs when the therapist and client engage in an association beyond the typical therapeutic context. This can include social, romantic, or business relationships. Such relationships complicate the professional dynamic and can lead to ethical issues.

Massage therapists should avoid dual relationships by setting and maintaining clear boundaries. Consistency is key to avoiding confusion or boundary-crossing behaviors.

The Ethical Therapeutic Process

The therapeutic process involves several steps, each requiring a high degree of ethical care. These steps include assessment, action, documentation, and evaluating outcomes. Each of these must be handled professionally to ensure the best care for the client.

- **Assessment:** Gathering information about the client's needs through observation and client reports, while remembering that massage therapists do not diagnose medical conditions.

- **Documentation:** It's important to document subjective and objective findings from each session. This ensures continuity of care, helps track progress, and may be required for legal or insurance purposes.
- **Client Goals:** Always ask clients what their goals are for each session. Their answers should guide the session's focus and therapeutic action. If a client requests something beyond your scope of practice, it's essential to address this early and professionally.

Reflection:

Consider a situation where you recognized transference or countertransference in your practice. How did you handle it, or how would you handle it in the future?

By maintaining clear boundaries, assessing your clients ethically, and focusing on professionalism, you protect both yourself and your clients while contributing to the integrity of the massage therapy profession.

Lesson 5: Health History/Intake Forms and Continuing Ethical Considerations



In Lesson 4 of this home study course on ethics, we will continue exploring crucial aspects of massage therapy practices, starting with health history and intake forms, an essential foundation for ethical care.

Health History/Intake Forms

Each massage practitioner should begin every session by having their client complete a health history or intake form. This form provides a written record of past and present health events, including any illnesses, accidents, and surgeries the client has experienced or is currently experiencing. Understanding a client's health background benefits both the client and therapist in multiple ways:

- It demonstrates to the client that you are invested in understanding their needs.
- It provides valuable insights into why the client is seeking massage therapy, allowing you to offer more targeted and effective treatment.
- It often brings health issues into the client's own awareness, contributing to a more holistic healing process.
- Written documentation is crucial if your practice ever undergoes legal scrutiny, as it helps protect you by limiting liability.

Consent Forms

Alongside the intake form, it is equally important to include a consent form, which outlines the scope of the massage therapy session. While a client's appointment and presence may imply consent, having a written statement ensures clarity on boundaries and session expectations. Below is an example of a consent form that covers key points:

Consent for Therapy and Waiver of Liability

"I understand that a massage therapist does not diagnose disease, prescribe treatments, or provide spinal manipulation. Draping will be used at all times. If I feel uncomfortable for any reason, I may request that the session be ended, and the therapist will comply. Additionally, the therapist may terminate the session due to any inappropriate behavior. I affirm that I have disclosed all relevant medical conditions and that the information I provided is accurate. I will inform the therapist of any changes in my health status. I understand that massage therapy is complementary to medical care, not a substitute, and assume full responsibility for the massage therapy services I receive. I release the therapist from all claims arising from the massage therapy, including claims of negligence."

Making Referrals

A crucial element of ethical practice is recognizing when a client's needs go beyond your scope of practice. Familiarize yourself with your local, state, and professional association guidelines. If a client presents a condition that requires expertise beyond massage therapy or contraindicates your modality, refer them to a healthcare provider. The rule of thumb, "When in doubt, refer out," can safeguard both the client and your professional integrity.

Referral situations might involve collaboration with a client's physician or mental health professional. If that's not possible, encourage the client to get approval from their healthcare provider before proceeding with massage therapy. If a client doesn't have a current healthcare provider, offer them a specific recommendation, ideally from a network of trusted professionals with whom you maintain reciprocal relationships.

Conditions to Refer to Primary Care Providers

The following conditions warrant referral to a primary care provider (PCP):

- Acute pain, unexplained fatigue, or muscle weakness
- Acute inflammation, unexplained lumps, or skin changes
- Signs of infection or contagious disease
- Suspected fractures, dislocations, or unexplained bruising
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Any significant changes in sensation or circulation (e.g., coldness or discoloration)

Conditions to Refer to Mental Health Providers

In addition to physical health conditions, you should refer clients to mental health care providers if they present with:

- Severe mood swings, hallucinations, or violence toward self or others
- Intense grief, loneliness, or unexplained emotional distress
- Dangerous or irrational behaviors

Use Extra Caution with These Clients

Be cautious when working with clients in the following categories:

- Clients on medications that could weaken tissues or the immune system
- Clients recovering from trauma or surgery, as they may have emotional as well as physical wounds
- Pregnant clients that are considered “high risk”, or those with cancer or other complex health conditions

Indications and Contraindications

Massage therapy can provide great benefits, but it also comes with certain risks. Contraindications are present when an action could cause harm to the client or therapist, or delay the client from receiving more effective treatment. When unsure, it's best to err on the side of caution and avoid the action. Staying current with contraindications through continuous education is key to professional practice.

Evaluating Therapeutic Outcomes

To ensure you are providing beneficial services, it's essential to evaluate therapeutic outcomes. Compare the client's initial assessments (pain levels, range of motion, etc.) with their condition after the session. This reassessment helps determine the effectiveness of your treatment and guides future sessions.

Ethical Dilemmas

In practice, ethical dilemmas are inevitable. These conflicts often arise when there are multiple justifiable outcomes, each affecting clients, co-workers, or yourself differently. Examples include managing client expectations, balancing benefits versus risks in treatment, and addressing uncomfortable situations with professionalism and compassion.

To navigate these dilemmas, thoughtful analysis, communication, and understanding of ethical codes are crucial. Ethics are the foundation of trust between you and your clients, ensuring that you offer services that are respectful, safe, and effective.

By adhering to these guidelines and continuously educating yourself, you strengthen your practice and maintain high ethical standards, enhancing the trust and care you provide to your clients.

Conclusion: Foundation of Ethics for Massage and Bodywork Practitioners



Ethics form the backbone of a successful and responsible massage or bodywork practice. This course has outlined key ethical principles that all practitioners must uphold: safeguarding client well-being, respecting boundaries, making informed decisions, and maintaining professionalism at all times. By adhering to ethical guidelines, massage therapists can build trust, offer effective care, and contribute positively to the profession's reputation. Maintaining cultural respect, confidentiality, and ethical decision-making ensures that clients receive the highest level of care in a safe and respectful environment. Ethics are not just rules—they are the essence of compassionate, competent practice.

Resources:

[NCBTMB Standards of Practice](#)

[NCBTMB Code of Ethics](#)

[North Carolina Practice Act](#)

References

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