So You Want to be a Massage Therapist?

by Gloria Coppola-Gaber, L.M.B.T. (Excerpts adapted from FutureLMT.com)
(blue italics added)

You've made a decision to embark upon a new career, and now the time has come to determine what school will be the right choice. What do you need to be aware of when considering a school for massage training?

As the former owner of a massage school, program director and curriculum writer for several schools across the U.S., I can surely advise you on what you want to consider. First, ask yourself this question and answer honestly: **"Why do I want to be a massage therapist?"** If your answer is *because you want to be of service, make people feel good, you have a calling in the healing profession or you feel drawn to this field, then listen to the following advice*.

Find a school that truly offers a well-rounded education---one that is serious and informed about the massage industry. I am cautious with some of the technical school trainings, as I have seen this is not their area of expertise. I have even been employed at a couple and found students were being placed just because there was funding available. The student was not academically or emotionally prepared, they could not keep up with the workload and disappointed their fellow classmates when it was time to exchange bodywork. This is not a good situation for anyone.

If you are entering this field because you understand it is a health profession and a healing modality, you want to make sure your school of choice understands this as well.

Will it provide adequate anatomy and physiology training? I would suggest at least 150 hours of training. What modalities of bodywork does its program offer? Swedish is the basics. Does it offer oriental bodywork, myofascial release, sports massage…? ***Healing Mountain Massage School has courses like Anatomy, Physiology, Kinesiology, Pathology, and Medical Terminology that total 160 hours, among others. We also offer the most varied amount of highly marketable courses in western, eastern, and energetic modalities of any vocational school in one program at one price.***

How long is its program? I would avoid the *quick* "crank-them-out" programs. I have personally seen the difference in the quality of those taking shorter trainings. I have also seen the frustration levels of students, because they didn't realize there was so much work involved and so much studying. Occasionally, I have found someone who can do these accelerated programs and have a natural gift and be able to make it in the industry. Most others never get started, give up or just can't cut it with the experienced colleague.

There is a lot to learn and understand when taking this profession seriously. These shorter programs just don't give you the time you need to fully grasp the concepts, gain the confidence you need and cannot help you explore your healing process.

I would suggest a program with *no less than 600 to 700 hours* and/or one year of training. I prefer programs that offer more than the required number of hours and have the availability for a clinic setting and a teacher-student ratio that allows for an intimate learning environment. ***Healing Mtn. has a 750 clock hour program that can be completed in as little as 7 months or taken during evening or weekends in about 10 months. And, if you take our free elective course "Spa Operations & Management" the program is 810 hours.***

You must take into consideration and understand that the amount of hands-on training you will receive truly requires the attention to make sure you are performing your techniques appropriately. Teachers or assistants should be available to watch and feel your technique.

Prior to registering for a class, ask to sit in on a class that is in process. This will give you a good sense of the classroom environment, the teacher's ability and the student's satisfaction.

Don't let anyone in admissions pressure you to sign up now. This is a major decision, and you want to make sure it feels right to you. Look into several schools and compare the curriculum, the instructor's background, the mission philosophy, the length of the training, the books they use in their courses, the business training and the support you will need along the way.

If they are pushing incentives to save you money, think about the hard sell. Don't just consider the price of the program, look at the whole package. This profession requires commitment, continuing education, passion and dedication…

If you decide to open your own practice and charge $60 an hour, you will not net that amount after all your expenses. You will also need to put in a lot of hours to market yourself. People like to schedule appointments with someone they know or have met perhaps at a health fair or community event. You better make sure you understand the challenges of running your own business and the time it requires to build a practice.

Perhaps you will start out working for someone else. Fees vary depending on location and type of environment. I know spas that start their therapists at $8 per hour and practices that might give a therapist up to 55 percent to 60 percent commission. Consider all that they provide, including linens, advertising and clients. Ask if they will be able to keep you steadily employed. Find out if you are able to work with another massage provider in the same area or if you are restricted in any way.

In more than 20 years, I have worked in a variety of situations. I rented space from a chiropractor, I worked for commission, I worked hourly and I had my own practice. From spa settings to beach massage, chair massages, home-based massage, medically-oriented practices, nursing homes, pregnancy massage and more, I have experienced most of the typical types of massage-practice settings. I have worked alone and I have employed up to six massage therapists.

My preference, because I am business-oriented, is to have my own practice, make my own schedule and be responsible for all aspects of running the show. This works for a small percentage of those who enter this field. It requires a lot of commitment, time and patience. If you are the type of person who is not so organized, detailed-oriented or familiar with bookkeeping and advertising, you would do better to take a position where someone can employ you.

Perhaps you like the idea of the spa setting, creating a relaxing feeling for clients or tourists and pampering people. There is a great need for qualified therapists in these areas. You will want to know how to perform spa techniques…*which will* be a bonus in the spa industry, as it will make you more employable. A huge consideration when entertaining the idea of working in a spa is to consider your personality and temperament. ***Healing Mtn. has the most comprehensive Hydrotherapy & Spa Training program in the western United States. You learn, experience, and practice all of the most popular spa treatments not only in class but during your student clinic as well. No other massage school offers this, and considering spas are the largest employer of LMTs that goes a long way to make you more marketable at getting the best job out there.***

Maybe you are considering a position that is more rehabilitative. You want to work with injuries and specific ailments. If that is the case, you will need to continue your education in modalities to support a more orthopedic or medically-oriented massage practice. Consider taking some continuing-education classes in neuromuscular therapy, myo-fascial release, craniosacral therapy, myoskeletal alignment, etc. Realize that you may be communicating with other health-care professionals, and they may require progress notes or medical reports… Respect your colleagues, and refer to those that truly know the type of techniques that can assist your client until you have the proper time to train. They will appreciate you and respect you for that.

Are you an athlete? This is another option for those interested in sports massage. Check out the workshops in this area, and attend sporting events in your community. Volunteer your services while in massage school, and get acquainted with the event atmosphere and the types of techniques appropriate for pre- and post events. ***Healing Mtn. also offers a certification course in medically-oriented massage that teaches trigger point therapy, origin & insertion techniques, and myofascial methodology along with SOAP notation, invoicing and CPT codes. Additionally we have certification courses in pre- and post-event sports massage as well as rehabilitative massage for athletes.***

So you can see, this industry avails many opportunities depending on your personality and interests.

Be realistic! What will your skills be upon graduation? What would be the most appropriate environment for you to gain some experience? Will you be working full time or part time? What are your finances? I ask this because you will need to be able to support yourself while you build a practice or gain experience in your new place of

employment; this takes time. Too many therapists have told me they are angry and frustrated with their employers for not paying them enough or not keeping them busy enough…

So you want to be a massage therapist? Congratulations on making this decision. It is a fascinating and fulfilling career with a variety of opportunities to enjoy an abundant profession. Be your best, and serve those with compassion and honor the profession.

Gloria Coppola-Gaber, L.M.B.T., *has been in the healing arts for more than 20 years. She is the former owner of a massage school and currently teaches NCBTMB-approved continuing-education workshops nationally.*