

INFORMATION AND GUIDELINES FOR  
PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR REGARDING  
PREVENTION OF ABUSE OF  
MASSAGE THERAPY CLIENTS



College of  
Massage  
Therapists of  
Ontario

## Bulletin Number 4

### Diversity Toolkit: Understanding Difference in Your Practice

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*Understanding diversity and developing related skills is important for health care professionals. The College of Massage Therapists of Ontario has established a diversity initiative as part of its Client Relations Program to help massage therapists deal with the multicultural aspects of practice, provide quality care based on respect for the individual and, in some cases, to potentially help prevent client abuse.*

*This bulletin provides further discussion on diversity and the diversity competencies essential for massage therapists in providing professional and client-centred care.*

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## Introduction

“In the health care setting, we need to look at the concept of respect and the process of honouring and cherishing someone because of their special status as a human being in concrete terms.” (Cidalia Paiva, Keeping the Professional Promise, p. 94)

Race, ethnicity, culture, age, sexual orientation, gender, ability, occupation, and communication styles are among the traits that make

people different from one another. When confronted with difference, people may feel resistant or uncomfortable because they lack a framework to help them understand these differences and how to deal with them.

**The cornerstone of quality health care is respect for the individual, regardless of similarities or differences.** Massage therapists have a professional obligation to develop their sensitivity regarding diversity issues in order to promote a treatment environment for clients

free from stereotypes, judgement and bias and to provide optimal massage therapy care.

To achieve this, it is important that massage therapists develop “diversity competencies,” as outlined Bulletin Number 3, “An Introduction to Diversity.” These competencies include:

1. Understanding one’s own values and attitudes;
2. Effective communication skills;
3. Conflict resolution skills;
4. Team-building skills;
5. Leadership skills.

The first three competencies relate to ensuring that massage therapists are continually engaging in self-reflection in relation to diversity issues and that when dealing with diversities, the massage therapist/client relationship is client-centered and reflective of the College’s Code of Ethics. The last two competencies relate to ensuring that, while massage therapists maintain their own sensitivity to diversities and development of related competencies, they encourage the development of these competencies among others within their treatment environments.

These five competencies are explained in this toolkit so that massage therapists have practical tools to welcome diversity into their practices.

### **Diversity: What is it?**

Canada is a society made up of “differences.” Canadians from different cultures, sexual orientation,

and race, for example, live and work together and our differences may present challenges to some.

Massage therapists need to understand the potential difference their clients may bring to the therapeutic relationship so that they can take a leadership role, ensuring that they offer a clinical environment that is safe, secure and respectful. Massage therapists need to reflect on their personal and professional values and contemplate whether or not their personal bias is harmful to their clients. Sometimes, simply a lack of knowledge or sensitivity on the part of the massage therapist may cause unnecessary distress to the client.

### **Barriers to Diversity**

There may be barriers to embracing diversity in your practice that you are unaware of. Different communication styles, languages, or personal biases and prejudice are examples of barriers that may be impeding your ability to relate to and respect certain clients. Learning how to recognize these and other barriers is the first step to breaking them down.

The way people communicate with each other varies greatly. People often communicate differently with health care practitioners than they do with their friends and family. The power imbalance between a massage therapist – who has specialized knowledge that the client may not – and a client can disrupt effective and positive communication. If a client feels that the massage therapist is using clinical language they do not

understand, they may become quiet and not as engaged in the conversation or even the treatment plan.

In their book, Health Professional and Patient Interaction, Ruth Purtilo and Amy Haddad define personal bias as “an individual’s feeling about a particular person or thing that colors his or her interpretation of it” (p. 36). It is essential that you conduct your practice in a way that is safe, non-judgmental, and client-centered. By examining your own personal background, you can determine what biases you bring to your clients. Once identified, you can challenge these biases to determine if they are preventing you from offering the best client care.

Your cultural identity also shapes your personal biases. Some cultures have expectations of how its members should represent their group. A massage therapist may have to closely examine and evaluate the expectations others may have of them to determine if there is a problem with their loyalty to their group and how they must practise as an ethically sound practitioner.

Families of origin also shape the personal prejudice of people. A massage therapist who was raised in a traditional, paternal family structure may have certain views of women and their roles in the decision-making process of health care.

### **Tools for Embracing Diversity**

Demonstrating the four principles of the College’s Code of Ethics – Respect For Persons, Responsible Caring, Integrity in Relationships, and Responsibility to Society – regardless of client differences, is the expected outcome of this Diversity Toolkit initiative. The five diversity competencies identified by the College will help members develop their knowledge of and interaction with diverse groups and thereby fully realize the principles of the Code of Ethics.

### **1. Understanding One’s Own Values and Attitudes**

“When we value something, we respect it: we hold it up as something we cherish which has meaning for us and has become an important part of our lives and our future direction” (Paiva, p. 73).

Personal values shape your professional persona. Examples of values include integrity, loyalty, compassion, commitment, responsibility, and discipline. By examining your values and attitudes closely, you can determine whether or not they are congruent with what the public expects of a health care professional. Among other traits, the public expects the massage therapist to be supportive, caring and committed to providing the best possible care. Take the time to identify values you feel are integral to a massage therapist and come up with ways you can incorporate those values in your practice.

What attitudes and values do you bring to your practice concerning diverse groups? Do you harbour

prejudice against a certain race of people or do you engage in stereotyping people? What do you value as an individual? Do these values impact positively or negatively on your interactions with your clients? By reflecting on the attitude you have toward diverse groups you can target areas in your life that may need to be evaluated.

For example, do you sit quietly while friends make racial jokes or stereotype people, or do you express your discomfort to them and ask them to stop the damaging remarks? When dealing with other professionals, do you strive for collaboration or are you uncooperative? Do you give all clients the respect they deserve or do you alter the quality of your treatment because you find that you do not relate as easily to certain groups? How do your attitudes and values relate to what is required of you as a regulated professional as detailed in the Code of Ethics?

Assessing your attitudes and striving to uphold the Code of Ethics to present your most professional self to all of your clients and to other practitioners will increase your sensitivity to diversity in your practice.

## 2. Effective Communication Skills

Your perceptions, values and attitudes influence your ability to communicate effectively. Effective communication skills are essential to understanding and respecting the differences in others. Respect and appreciation for differences in communication style enhances your ability to create the optimal

treatment plan for your client. It is important to be open in your communication to create a sense of trust. Being open implies that you are open to differences in people. Being open also means that you take responsibility for your communication by using "I" statements, such as "I want us to understand each other because we need to create your treatment plan." Listening effectively is an important communication skill.

In his book, The Diversity Toolkit: How You Can Build and Benefit From a Diverse Workforce, William Sonnenschein defines active listening as "listening to and trying to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings by restating, or paraphrasing as closely as possible, what the speaker has said" (p. 53). By reflecting the speaker's message back to oneself, effective communication is enhanced because interpretation is not left up to chance. Sonnenschein says that goals of active listening include better understanding of the speaker's intended meaning; decreasing the chance of misunderstanding by allowing the speaker to hear what he is saying to the listener, thereby allowing him to make corrections to his intended meaning during the conversation; and becoming self aware (p. 54).

Effective communication involves empathy. Cidalia Paiva comments that empathy "breaks down the feeling of isolation that people with health problems often experience, and it also provides the patient with a sense of confirmation. When health professionals empathize with

patients, they feel understood” (p. 85).

Effective communication also involves the use of inclusive language by avoiding gender specific pronouns, stereotypes, idioms and acronyms so that all people can participate in the conversation. Words are very powerful and can shape realities, so they must be selected carefully. It is also important to consider the means by which you communicate. Sometimes you need to talk about and clarify your communication to ensure that people receive the intended message.

### 3. Conflict Resolution Skills

Embracing diversity can sometimes lead to conflict because of differences. Acquiring conflict resolution skills can help you navigate successfully through conflicts with clients and other professionals. There are many strategies for dealing with conflict. In her book, Ethics for Massage Therapists, Terrie Yardley-Nohr offers a six-step model for effective conflict resolution:

1. Identify the person(s) involved.
2. Identify the problem(s).
3. Research the facts.
4. Consider possible solutions and outcomes.
5. Discuss solutions with all parties involved.
6. Compromise and resolve.

This is just one model. Find a model that you can incorporate into your treatment setting so that when

diversity issues arise, you have a plan for dealing with them.

### 4. Team-Building Skills

Diversity competencies must be fostered and developed across a client’s entire health care team. Encouraging other health care practitioners to value and support the diversity in clients and themselves can improve the quality of care clients receive. In a multidisciplinary clinic, a client is better served if the chiropractor, physiotherapist, and massage therapist work cooperatively on a treatment plan.

William Sonnenschein offers six tips to help develop team-building skills within a diversity framework (p. 117):

1. Embrace differences—find and value the differences of team members.
2. Celebrate humanity—understand that no matter how different we are from one another, we have more commonalities than differences.
3. Build on uniqueness—build on the strengths and styles of each team member.
4. Establish the team’s mission—help a team focus by writing a mission statement that includes the team’s values, norms, and goals.
5. Develop a supportive climate—model being supportive, facilitate support and encourage team members to support each other.

6. Continuously evaluate—the team needs constant evaluation to keep improving.

Massage therapists can also review and put into practice the elements of the principle of Integrity in Relationships in the Code of Ethics, relating to “Commitments to our Professional Colleagues,” to help strengthen team-building competencies.

## 5. Leadership Skills

Becoming a leader in the massage therapy profession and in society involves more than acquiring new clinical skills. Assuming a leadership role in your clinic, in the profession and in your community requires that you take responsibility for your professional interactions; encourage, support and value the contributions of others; develop conflict resolution skills; and model the behaviour that shows you embrace diversity. Sonnenschein says that “taking responsibility means being sure that you understand communication, understand how to take a leadership role in your organization, and understand how to help others do the same” (189).

Identify areas in diversity awareness where you could take a leadership role. For example, you could create clinic policies concerning diversity issues or you could organize a group of therapists to meet and engage in discussion about diversity. Being sensitive to and aware of diversity issues in your treatment environment will improve the integrity with which you practise massage therapy. Review the principles of

Responsibility to Society and Integrity in Relationships in the Code of Ethics and seek ways to improve your leadership skills through application of these principles to diversity.

### Summary

- Understanding diversity and creating an environment that is sensitive to diversity is part of being a healthcare professional.
- By continuing to challenge yourself in terms of diversity awareness, you can better understand and meet the needs of your clients. Understanding and embracing the principles in the Code of Ethics will help you develop diversity competencies.
- Incorporating the diversity competencies outlined in this toolkit into the treatment environment will ensure that massage therapy care remains client-centered and based on the principles in the College’s Code of Ethics, regardless of the challenges created by a diverse client base.
- Becoming aware of your personal values and then aligning your behaviours to achieve them is an important way to help make the transition from thinking about diversity to doing something to embrace it.
- Understanding communication, managing conflict with others and team-building are also ways to develop professionally.
- Embracing diversity is a way to assume a leadership role both

within the massage therapy profession and your community. Leading by example can foster similar behaviour in others.

- Accepting and embracing diversity in your practice ensures a healthy future for clients and massage therapists alike.

### Works Cited/Resources

Canadian Heritage Department: [www.pch.gc.ca](http://www.pch.gc.ca) (click on "Diversity and Multiculturalism" link).

Canadian Race Relations Foundation: [www.crrf-fcrr.ca](http://www.crrf-fcrr.ca)

City of Toronto: [www.toronto.ca/diversity](http://www.toronto.ca/diversity) (diversity management and community engagement).

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