



You love working as a therapist, but sometimes your days can feel a bit isolated. But there are resources at the ready to give you the support you need.

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# GET CAREER SUP



# PORT

**THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO THE REAL WORLD CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR ANYONE. BUT FOR MASSAGE THERAPISTS, THIS CAN BE MORE DAUNTING, AS SO MANY OF YOU HAVE PRIVATE PRACTICES WHERE YOU DON'T HAVE THE CHANCE TO INTERACT WITH YOUR PROFESSIONAL PEERS EVERY DAY.**

Even though you are communicating with your clients, there is often a sense of isolation. If you have a busy practice, you can go weeks without having contact with a peer with whom to share an idea or question.

Such minimal peer contact can lead to workplace loneliness. In fact, this is often a complaint that many massage therapists express about the work they do.

Neil O'Brien is senior massage therapist at the Integrative Care Center with the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. One reason O'Brien chose to be a massage therapist is because he enjoys the intimate one-to-one contact with people. Yet he says, "I find loneliness when my schedule is not full or during slow periods."

The good news is that finding and building ongoing work-related support is easier than you may think.

**THE MENTORING EXPERIENCE**

The word mentoring may make you think of a child and parent or teacher and child relationship. In today's busy world, when parents/caretakers or teachers are not available for various reasons, the mentor can step in and play a critical role in a child's development. Through support, leadership and example, the mentee can build confidence, get experience or find emotional support he or she cannot find from his or her usual resources.

But mentoring is increasingly common among adults in the work world. It is not so much about age as it is about experience and a true desire to help another reach his or her full potential. Many adults are now recruiting mentors to help them with their chosen career. As the field of massage therapy continues to grow and change, the idea of mentoring is something more are looking into.

Jessica Libero, a student at the Connecticut Center for Massage Therapy–Westport program, already has two mentors lined up to help her after she graduates in July—a teacher she immensely respects as well as another massage therapist who has been licensed for 10 years.

"Having more than one mentor gives me a more balanced way of handling the months ahead," Libero says. She says working with mentors also helps quell the natural fears involved with graduating and taking the next step. "It assures me that I am not alone in my new adventure and that I will have at least two professionals in my field to consult with who have been through the process before, ranging from graduating and taking the boards to finding a job and networking once I'm licensed. It has proven to be a very valuable tool in other areas of my life and has already assisted me in my massage therapy endeavors."



For more information about mentoring, go to [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org).

Tommi Poelstra works full time at Stella Dieci spa in Milford, Massachusetts, specializing in chronic pain. She has been working with mentors for some time and continues to rely on them for guidance. “I have a couple of mentors and it is fantastic,” says Poelstra. She says she calls or sees them for two different reasons—one for issues about work, the other for when doing massage takes a toll on her.

“When I have a difficult situation that deals with boundaries (sexual, monetary, etc.), I call my mentor on the phone, explain the situation and glean from her 20 years of experience,” she says. Poelstra calls on the other mentor when she thinks her body mechanics are the issue. “I feel incredibly fortunate to have two mentors with 20-plus years of experience whose wisdom I can gain from and whose hands are some of the best in the business,” she says.

Mentoring requires a real desire to share experience, knowledge and wisdom with others who may be just beginning to establish their practice. It is a relationship that should provide

growth for both parties. Even though the mentor may have the experience, the new questions or techniques that the mentee brings to the relationship can spark different ideas for the more seasoned practitioner to begin to think about, and possibly apply to his or her own practice.

Kathleen Clayton, a New York City-based massage therapist with a hospital-based practice, realized she was mentoring when she was giving out the same advice she had received from the person she had called when she needed help solving a problem. Clayton has very high regard for mentoring.

“Mentoring for me is giving back to the community of massage therapists,” she says. “By imparting what I have learned over 24 years as a massage therapist, I hope that each generation of massage therapists can grow and answer the questions we couldn’t answer 24 years ago and continue to ask more questions, teach, advise and help problem solve. I remember being the mentee and how much it meant to me to talk to someone who knew the ropes, and could

## FINDING THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

If you are an AMTA member, you have a networking system already built in through your local chapter. In addition to holding meetings and conducting the business of the chapter, chapter leaders also provide professional and social networking opportunities; organize educational, legislative, public relations and membership programs on the state and local levels; and provide various means of communication, among other things. For more information, visit [www.amtamassage.org](http://www.amtamassage.org) or call 877-905-2700.

Another resource can be found at [www.message.meetup.com](http://www.message.meetup.com). So far there are groups in Houston and Austin in Texas, Las Vegas, Atlanta, San Diego, New York City and Manila in the Philippines. Many of these groups are new, but hopefully their memberships will grow and other cities will form groups as well.



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— K. D. Fan

listen to my challenges with clients and direct me in the right direction, to better myself.”

AMTA Member-at-Large Glenath Moyle became a mentor when she was the AMTA Oregon Chapter president in 2004. During her two years as chapter president she had the opportunity to mentor new massage therapist, Nathan Nordstrom. Now Nordstrom serves as the Oregon Chapter’s immediate-past president.

“Mentoring is a mutually beneficial relationship based on encouragement, constructive comments, openness, trust, respect and a willingness to learn and share,” Moyle says. “With Nathan, this meant nurturing, empowering, building his strengths and confidence to become a successful leader; resisting the urge to take over; answering his questions in such a manner that he found his own answers; giving him access to my computer files of letters, minutes, meeting agendas, etc., where he might base his administration; and being available by phone and e-mail at all times.”

For Nordstrom, he finds the mentor-

ing process to be like a nurturing friendship. “Glen [Moyle] is a friend to anyone,” Nordstrom says. “If she gets a few seconds with you she will find out two things: one, how she can help you (usually one of her many contacts) and two, how you can help yourself (through service to your profession). Also I feel it important to note that even though Glen is on the [AMTA] national board, maintains a busy practice, assists in other functions, and is a very caring wife to her wonderful husband she still finds time to give me advice, insight and friendly greetings.”

Perhaps one reason Moyle understands the importance of mentors so well is that she herself has one. “Adela Basayne, a past president of AMTA, was one of my instructors in massage school and I continue to consider her my friend and mentor.”

#### **SUPPORT IN NUMBERS**

When you think of support groups, you may think of groups where those recovering from an illness gather to lend support to others in a similar situation. But there is a clear distinction

between a *support* group and a *therapy* group. In support groups, members share a common issue and provide empathy, education or problem solving, and encouragement to one another.<sup>1</sup> In therapy groups the focus is more on patterns of an individual’s behavior, and the thought or feelings around those behaviors that the group may bring to a member’s attention.<sup>1</sup> By this definition, it is easy to see how massage therapists can benefit from a support group.

Even though he’s a seasoned massage therapist, O’Brien still sees the value of support groups. “They are important in developing a deeper understanding of the issues we all face as therapists and possibly assist in finding the tools and support to grow our practice,” he says. O’Brien adds that he’d like to have a support group discuss everything from personal health and body mechanics issues, to working with difficult clients and sharing new ideas with one another.

There are different kinds of support that one may get in a group—

emotional support, which can offer you the chance to have another therapist listen or to offer encouragement; informational support, which is educational and where you can learn something new or get advice to help you make a tough decision you are facing; and concrete support, which involves something tangible, such as borrowing a book from another group member or showing someone a specific hands-on technique.<sup>2</sup>

Paul Minchin, a student at the Swedish Institute in New York City, currently does not attend a support group but feels they are important. “It is imperative to have someone to bounce ideas off of and to be able to access someone who may have more experience in the field,” he says. “Speaking as a student, different attitudes and opinions can add a whole new dimension to the learning experience.”

Minchin’s fellow classmate at Swedish Institute, K. D. Fan, adds, “the massage therapy field still has a long way to go in terms of earning the respect it deserves. I think a support group can help build a professional community with a bigger voice to promote the importance of massage therapy.”

### **SUPERVISION: ANOTHER OPTION**

Supervision is another resource you may consider; it is a tool that is used in such fields as psychology, social work and nursing. Although it is usually a one-to-one relationship, it can also take place in a group setting.

However, it differs from mentoring and support groups in a few ways. Usually, supervisors are individuals who have been working for some time in their chosen field, and have accumulated knowledge and experience from the work they do. Supervision should be based on the needs of the practitioner, meaning the supervisee.<sup>3</sup> The supervisor needs to be direct, committed to ethical practice guidelines and willing to develop strategies to overcome any obstacles the supervisee may have. A supervisor needs to know how to use his or her intervention techniques to best help the supervisee, and also needs to be able to give answers if asked. But the supervisor should also be able to let the supervisee come to his or her own conclusions. In the time spent together the only topic should be the therapeutic work being done and how it relates to the supervisee and his or her clients.

One possible drawback to supervision is that the relationship is usually a paid one. The supervisor and supervisee agree on a fee that is paid to the supervisor and a time and place to meet—usually once a week. Supervisees typically learn by mirroring their supervisor’s examples. It is imperative that supervisors have strict guidelines and that there are consequences when supervisees fail to pay their fee, keep their appointment or know when it is time to terminate the relationship.

Poelstra feels that massage could benefit from a supervision relationship. “If we want the respect of our

### **MENTORING ORIGINS**

Mentoring has become a familiar term in many educational and social outreach programs in recent years. In fact, the Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America began in 1904 and is the oldest and largest organization in the United States to provide successful one-on-one mentoring to children. But to find the beginnings of mentoring one needs to look at Greek mythology. In Homer’s *The Odyssey* the character Mentor was a wise and trusted tutor to whom Odysseus entrusted his son Telemachus when Odysseus left for his 20-year journey. The relationship that developed between Mentor and Telemachus set the standard for modern day mentors and their “mentees.”

To search for a massage therapist meet-up group in your area, go to [www.message.meetup.com](http://www.message.meetup.com).



profession to increase, I think that supervision for new therapists is fundamental—both for the overall profession, and for the individuals who represent us through their small practice,” she says. “I’m equating the word supervision with the word mentoring and see it as a mutually respectful relationship that gives the new therapist increased confidence and skill to help whoever walks through his or her door.”

The subject of the paid relationship can be controversial for some. “I don’t necessarily think that paying for supervision makes it any more valuable,” O’Brien says. “I think finding someone with whom you feel safe to expose your work and process to, who actually will listen to you and support you to make the changes you are interested in making is what is important. We should choose a mentor or supervisor carefully and feel comfortable to change the relationship at any time,” he says.

There are certain scopes of practices such as hospital-based work or working with children that can

raise questions of whether supervision should be required rather than optional.

“Hospital-based work and working with children should require stricter supervision. The contraindications for massage are greater in a hospital, which I think is enough reason to require stricter supervision requirements,” Poelstra says. “Children cannot protect themselves the way an adult can, so stricter supervision is more for the protection of the children than the therapist.”

Having worked in hospitals himself, O’Brien agrees that these settings should require weekly individual sessions and weekly group supervision. “[Working in environments] where people are in chronic crisis, pain, fear and anger really can drain us of our good spirit, our willingness to help and our ability to process our own worries and concerns when our client’s issues seem so much more important or acute,” he says. “Creating a safe space with other therapists to expose our fears, our insecurities and our own issues will help us be able to continue to

manage our clientele who rely on our undivided attention and care.”

Mentoring, support groups and supervision are some tools beginning massage therapists or a seasoned therapists can utilize to help bring more guidance into their practices. Taking advantage of one or even all of these options can be beneficial, and help keep you in touch with those experiencing similar work issues. Just knowing there is another massage therapist out there you can talk to who is dealing with a similar work issue can go a long way to helping you throughout your career. ■

#### REFERENCES

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