

Feathering Your Nest

Personalizing your space may seem easy enough if you're in business for yourself, but for those therapists who work for someone else, or who work in a medical setting, a gym, or salon, it may present a challenge. There may be rules you have to adhere to as far as having personal items in the workspace, which can cramp your style. If you work for a franchise, chances are that each therapy room looks alike...same color of paint, same furnishings in the same positions. Part of the philosophy of such establishments is that the client knows what to expect, not only of the massage, but down to the sheets on the table and the pictures on the wall. Most franchises provide a tabletop frame for your license so you can take it to the room you're working in, and that may be the only personal item you're allowed to display. Otherwise, here are some tips for feathering your nest, no matter what circumstances you're in.

Your Own Space

If you're the owner or renting your own space and free to do as you wish, please bear a couple of things in mind. First, cleanliness is the most important thing. It doesn't matter if you have the latest in modern lobby furniture or an antique cabinet in your massage room, if it's wearing a layer of coffee stains or the dust bunnies are multiplying underneath. It's a reflection on you as a professional. You wouldn't greet clients and give massage dressed in dirty clothes, so don't have a dirty office.

Laura Allen
for Massage & Bodywork

Second, clutter is not a style of décor, and it's not conducive to a relaxing experience. It's amazing how easy it is to accumulate things, and you've got to suppress the urge to keep it all in your massage space. It's okay to personalize your workplace, but keep knickknacks and personal mementoes to a minimum. Do periodic purges of the extraneous "stuff." Take things home, or give them away. Recycle the magazines in the waiting area.

Therapists who practice at home must be especially mindful of the clutter issue. If it's at all possible to have a separate entrance into your massage space, it will keep clients from traipsing through your home. If you own your house, it may be well worth the investment to have a door installed so you can truly have a private workplace. If that's not a possibility, remember that clients coming in your front door shouldn't see last night's cold pizza remains on the coffee table or have to negotiate a maze of your toddler's toys on the way to the treatment room. In the event that the desk or table you use for taking care of business is located in the same room as your massage table, do your best to keep it neat-looking, or purchase an inexpensive screen to hide it.

If you have a choice in the color of paint in your space, pale shades of blue, like robin's egg, and pale shades of purple, like lavender and lilac, are soothing to the senses. Pastels like buttery yellow or pale pink and neutral hues are also serenity-inducing, as are creamier shades of white. Avoid using vibrant colors in your space, except for small accents.

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You don't have to spend a lot of money to have a nicely decorated office. Green plants are cheap, and they add a lot to the atmosphere (not to mention helping to filter the air). Even if you don't have windows, there are plenty of plants that will thrive without sunlight.

Other than your massage table and stool, all the furniture you really need in your massage room is a small table or shelf to hold your lotions and potions, and a couple of stacking shelves or a small bookcase to hold your music, sheets, and so forth. If you need extra pillows, sheets, and so forth, under-the-table shelves are a great storage place for things you want to be out of sight but that still need to be easily accessible. A chair for the client is a necessity; they need to be comfortable while you're conducting the intake interview and have a place to sit for putting their shoes on, post-session. If space is at a minimum, a folding chair will work; you can put it behind the door during the massage and unfold it for them on your way out. You can make a small room appear more spacious by covering one wall with mirrored tiles, or by hanging a larger mirror horizontally (never vertically, that actually makes the space appear more narrow.)

Don't make the walls too "busy." Of course you will want to display your credentials, and in fact in most regulated states that is a requirement. Other than your license and/or certification, a few well-placed pieces of artwork or photography are all you need.

Massage suppliers sell posters and framed prints specifically for massage therapists. If you don't want to use those, choose artworks that harmonize with each other—a theme is good—for example, use all pictures of birds, flowers, landscapes, or other things that go

together. A reprint of a Leonardo DaVinci's *Creation* is nice, and so is Andy Warhol's pop art, but it detracts from both if they're hanging side by side.

You may also want to have a muscle chart in your treatment room—not because you don't know the muscles, but because it's a great client education tool. A lymphatic drainage practitioner might want a lymphatic system chart instead, while a Shiatsu practitioner might have a chart of acupuncture/pressure points.

If you work for someone else, whether that's as an employee or an independent contractor, it's necessary to respect their wishes as far as how much personalizing you may do in your workspace, and that goes double if the space is shared with someone else. Be sure to clarify that before bringing your belongings into the office. For example, if you're a part-timer who shares space with another part-timer, both parties should have enough respect not to take up every square inch and not leave room for the other person's things.

Wherever You Are

No matter what type of place you're working in, if you can't do much decorating, there's one thing you *can* do, and that is to make your massage table as luxurious as possible. A waffle pad or memory foam pad is a great thing for making a massage table more comfortable, even if it has thick padding. Add a table warmer. If you're supplying your own linens, investing in flannel sheets, or the highest thread count cotton sheets you can afford, and a wonderful blanket or comforter, can turn the most functional table into a

comfy and cozy nest. It will make the client feel good before you even place your hands on her. Don't forget to equip yourself with a couple of pillows and/or bolsters.

Another strategy that works great for therapists who can't permanently personalize a space is to have a small folding table—even a folding TV tray works great—covered with a beautiful scarf. It can hold your massage potions. Add a small vase with a single rose, an I-Pod and a dock, and you've created an instant atmosphere.

Baskets are good. They can be used to store and/or carry everything except for your massage table, and they add a nice, natural-looking touch to a room. Use one with a lid for containing your soiled linens.

Working at a Gym

Clients who get massages at the gym tend to be one of two types: bodybuilders and athletes who are looking for sports massage, and people who just find it convenient to get their massage there because they're working out there. Before you take a job or rent space in a gym, check out the room during a busy time when the gym is full. Noise may be a prime factor, with treadmills and other machinery running and weights clanging. There's not much you can do about that unless the owner has had the foresight to purposely put extra insulation in the walls and use an exterior door for the treatment room. If it's noisy, you might offer the client an I-Pod with earphones so they'll have music, or a pair of earplugs to wear while they're on the table. Another alternative is one

of the machines that makes white noise, or has programmable sounds like ocean waves crashing or rain falling.

Working at a Salon

A busy salon may have the same noise issues as a gym, and on top of that, the smell of chemical odors may pervade the air. If that's the case, a little aromatherapy is in order!

Avoid using chemical air fresheners—they'll just compound the problem, and many people are as sensitive to those as they are the ammonia-smelling color and permanent solutions emanating from the hairdressing stations. Diffusing a pure organic essential oil, or even a drop or two of oil sprinkled right on the sheet is a good cover up for that salon smell. Even those people who are chemically sensitive are usually not irritated by pure oils—it's the propellants and other laboratory-manufactured ingredients that get to them, but it's wise to check with the client first. If you have a variety of oils, you might offer to let them choose one. Peppermint oil is stimulating. Wintergreen smells medicinal. Rose oil is very uplifting. Citrus oils are nice and usually the least inexpensive.

Working in a Medical Office

If you are working in collaboration with a physician or chiropractor, or renting space from one, chances are the atmosphere is clinical instead of cozy. Ask if you can have a little leeway in your massage room...point out that after all, stress is probably causing, contributing to, or resulting from whatever condition the person is being treated for, and that you'd just like to create a stress-free zone in your massage room. Don't go

overboard; one assumes you're practicing medical massage in such a place, so you're not trying to create a spa-like atmosphere; you just want to make the room look a little more inviting than a hospital room. Medical offices almost always have overhead fluorescent lighting, which is certainly not the effect you're going for. There may also be prohibitions against having candles in the medical office due to the presence of oxygen, so go with a small table lamp, electric candles, or unobtrusive floor lamp. Something as simple as a beautiful blanket or comforter on the massage table can make the room appear less sterile. Even though the client is there for a medical reason, you still want them to feel relaxed and nurtured during their time with you.

Outcalls

Therapists performing outcalls may go to the client's home or office, a hotel or bed and breakfast, or may be providing chair massage in a corporate setting. You never know until you get there what the atmosphere is going to be like—so bring some with you. The table warmer will fit in your massage table carry case. Memory foam pads can be rolled up and carried along, too. Nice linens always make a good impression. A rolling suitcase can hold the small folding table for your accoutrements like your table scarf, and if you don't want to carry fresh flowers, a tiny vase with one realistic-looking silk flower. If state regulations require displaying your license wherever you go, you could have a smaller copy made and put it in a nice frame. A candle is a nice touch. Take along your music. If you're doing chair massage, put a single drop of lavender on the face cradle cover. Even if you're providing massage in the middle of a noisy factory, you can enhance the experience.

Laura Allen
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Although it's your effectiveness as a massage therapist, your professionalism, and your friendly service that will bring in repeat clientele, clean, uncluttered, nicely decorated surroundings is a part of the total client experience. You only get one time to make a first impression. Creating an atmosphere of peaceful serenity will help your clients leave their stress at the door.