

# How can I educate the public about the benefits of massage therapy?

## Nancy Toner Weinberger responds

One of the easiest and least expensive ways to build a successful private practice is by giving presentations about massage therapy to groups in your community.

It's easy, because people are curious about massage therapy and massage therapists. "Who would want to offer such services, and why?" they might wonder; or "I wonder if massage therapy can help me." It's also easy because groups that meet regularly are always looking for something interesting and new to enliven meetings. And the least-expensive part? Well, giving presentations is free.

### Excuses

Most Americans have not received massage. In fact, according to the American Massage Therapy Association's 2014 consumer survey, just 29 percent of Americans received massage in the past five years. Why? The list of excuses that answers the question "why" is largely what you will respond to in your presentation:

**"I don't know anything about massage."** With numerous articles in magazines and newspapers, and online, your first reaction to this excuse may be incredulity; however, reading about massage is very different from having an actual *experience* of massage. In your presentation, you can give your audience a chance to see and feel massage.



RANDY FARIS/FUSE/THINKSTOCK

**“I don’t have time.”** Tell audience members that by giving up just one TV program a month, they will have an hour available for massage.

**“I can’t afford it.”** Most people *can* afford massage, but feel guilty spending money on what they consider a luxury. If they are in pain, they are OK with spending the money, but when it comes to preventive health—in spite of the overwhelming number of articles published daily on the negative effects of stress on our life and health—they persist in a mindset that tells them feeling good is something extra, not something they deserve.

You probably will not convince a person to change lifelong beliefs in just one presentation, but by offering an alternate way of looking at life, you can open the door for later reflection. To get audience members thinking in a different way, have them make a list of who, other than themselves, is affected by their stress—and how. Ask them what the cost of stress-related exhaustion is for their family members and coworkers.

**“I am embarrassed because ...”** The number-one embarrassment that keeps potential female clients off your table is being overweight. Number one for male clients is the fear that they might become sexually aroused. When you behave in a completely professional and kind manner, you can help people get past these issues.

During your presentation, emphasize privacy (undressing in private) and modesty (draping); be open to questions; maintain a nonjudgmental attitude; and demonstrate a lightness, a no-big-deal approach, in your interactions with the members of the group.

**“How do I know it is safe?”** This is the most important aspect of your presentation. Safe in this context means many things: safe in that they will not be talked down to; safe in that they will not be sexually accosted; safe in that their wishes will be respected, and that they can say “stop” or “too much” and the massage therapist will respond; safe in that the massage therapist is competent to deal with health problems; safe in that the therapist won’t overstep any boundaries; safe in that the massage therapist won’t disclose any private information to people in the community; safe in that the therapist won’t hurt the client. You want your audience to

leave knowing you are safe to talk to, and safe to receive a massage from.

## Coordinate

Finding a group to speak to is fairly easy, but may also depend on what modalities you use in your practice and clientele you prefer to work with. If you specialize in sports massage, contact local tennis and golf clubs, for example. If you like working with the elderly, try AARP or senior-citizen groups. Churches, book clubs and drumming groups are good choices. Hospital staff often have regular meetings. There are support groups for alcoholics, Parkinson’s and multiple sclerosis patients, and families dealing with autism. These are just a few suggestions. Look at [meetup.com](http://meetup.com) for more groups meeting in your area. Choose groups that meet regularly, and look for a regular attendance of 10 or more members.

Contact the group coordinator and offer to do a 90-minute to two-hour presentation to her group about stress reduction and holistic health. As the conversation develops, let her know that your specialty is massage therapy, and a demonstration will be part of your talk. Ask to send her an outline of your talk, and get her

## Time, price, privacy and safety are four of the primary concerns potential clients may have questions about.

contact information. When you send the outline of your talk, include a short biographical sketch, a photo and your business card.

After you have sent her your proposal in writing, wait about a week and then follow up, asking to set a date and time for the presentation. Arrive early to set up, and greet people as they arrive. If you are not up first on the meeting agenda, arrange a break before your talk begins so you can set up the room as you would like it. You need to decide where your table and any props you may plan to use should go, and where to put handouts and promotional materials. (If possible, schedule a time to see the meeting room prior to the day of your presentation.)

## Share

Begin your talk with general information about stress. Emphasize aspects of stress that may relate to the group

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you are speaking to. For example, for a drumming group, that might be repetitive use injuries. For support groups, address the emotional stressors as well as the actual stress of the medical problem group members deal with. Purchase a whiteboard so you can make a list of stressors generated by each group. After members have discussed their stress, talk or ask about different ways they deal with the stress they described.

You might teach some hand-and-shoulder stretches to drummers, or do some breathing exercises with a medical support group, making sure that anything you offer is within your legal scope of practice. Pick one, maybe two stretches or self-massage techniques directly related to the problems your group members face.

Next, talk about yourself, what you do and why you do it. Explaining how you came to the massage profession is often a good opener. Include information about your training and licensure; most people have no idea about the rigorous education massage therapists are required to complete. You may talk about results your clients have had, but be very careful not to reveal anything that could identify who you are speaking about. Another option is to bring along a client who is open to describing how massage therapy improved his life.

### Demonstrate

Your 15-minute demonstration will be the highlight of your talk. I suggest you demonstrate a back massage for which a small amount of clothing must be removed, as so many people who have never had a massage need their anxieties about this defused. Bring a client or friend as your demonstration model. You can also canvass the group for a suitable volunteer in the time you have when you arrive early to set up; however, be sure to do an intake to assess for contraindications and have that person sign a release of liability form.

You'll want a male for your demonstration model, unless all the attendees are female and the room is private. If you work on a female, have her lie down first and then undo her bra strap for her. Make sure you have described what is going to happen beforehand.

In the time allotted, don't get sidetracked into explaining what you are doing. Instead, just relax and give the massage as you would in your office. Check in

with your model regarding pressure and comfort, then let the relaxation hypnotize your audience. When you are all done and you have helped your model up, you can gently ask him for feedback. Don't be surprised if he only says something like "good," though. Learning to tune in and give feedback is a skill we develop over time.

If time permits, you can also teach simple massage the audience members can do on each other's shoulders fully clothed, talking about how much pressure to use and how to relax the hands.

Finish your presentation by taking questions. Point out your brochures and business cards in the room. Announce any special offers for the attendees.

### Enjoy

Have fun with your presentation. Remember that nervousness is just excitement masquerading as fear, and remember to breathe. Your talks can educate many people on the benefits of massage therapy, and garner interest in your practice. After all, you are an expert in massage.



Read "Gain Confidence as a Presenter," by Nancy Toner Weinberger, at [massagemag.com/gainconfidence](http://massagemag.com/gainconfidence).

Nancy Toner Weinberger ([dynamicequilibrium.com](http://dynamicequilibrium.com)) has been a licensed massage therapist for 40 years, and a certified Trager® Practitioner for 30 years. She has a part-time private practice in Raleigh, North Carolina, writes and teaches. Teaching skills for massage professionals is one of her CE teaching specialties.