

Setting Up an Ergonomic Workspace for Massage and Bodywork

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The design of your workspace plays an important role in your ability to prevent work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) such as low back pain and wrist tendonitis. To guide you in setting up a healthy work environment, you can use principles of ergonomics that have been proven effective in preventing injury at work. These principles can help you lower and even eliminate your exposure to MSD risk factors in your work, like awkward postures and fatigue as a result of using poor body mechanics.

The main goal of ergonomics is to make the workspace fit the worker's own body, allowing you to use good body mechanics as you work. Let's talk about some easy-to-apply guidelines to help you arrange your workspace to promote the use of good body mechanics and lower your injury risk.

The first aspect to consider as you set up your work space is the amount of space you will have to move around your table. Put your table in the room you have been assigned, and measure the amount of space around it. As a general rule, you should have at least 3 feet (1 meter) of open space around all sides of the table. The typical treatment table measures approximately 7 feet by 2-½ feet (2 meters by 0.75 meters), so your work space would need to measure at least 14 feet by 9 feet (4.25 meters by 2.75 meters) to give you adequate space to work. To work efficiently at your table, you need enough room to allow you to stand in whatever place is most comfortable for any given technique. If you are comfortable, you will be more likely to assume relaxed, efficient, naturally-aligned postures while you are working.

Setting up a new workspace gives you a good occasion to evaluate the massage table you are currently using, and decide whether it is adapted to the work you do. The width of the table is an important aspect of this decision. While a wide table may be more comfortable for some larger clients, it encourages reaching out and other awkward postures for the therapist using it. It is best to opt for a narrower table that gives you easier access to the client; some even come with side extensions for larger clients. Tables are also available that are wide at the shoulders and feet, but narrow at the center. These tables better match most clients' body proportions, and provide the practitioner better access to the low back and hips, which are typically a major focus of hands-on treatment.

Along with width, the height of your table is also an important consideration for your working posture. There really is no one height that is appropriate for every type of technique used in a typical massage practice. Small, precise, low-force movements of the hands should be done at or a little above elbow height while seated in a neutral posture. Work involving larger movements and moderate amounts of force should be done several inches or more below elbow height while standing, also in a neutral posture. As the force requirements of the work increase, the height of the work surface should drop, so that body weight and larger muscle groups can be used to apply the force. Since most practitioners do a combination of different techniques with each client, nearly all massage therapists would benefit from having a power-adjustable table in their workspace. While power-adjustable tables do cost more than other tables, the benefit of being able to adjust the table as you move from technique to technique is well worth that investment in your long-term health, particularly if you do massage full-time. If you currently have a manually-adjustable table, retrofit kits are available that you can attach to your table to provide height adjustment through a hand crank or power unit.

Since you will spend most of your day standing as you work, the flooring in your massage space is another element to evaluate as you set up your work environment. Standing on hard surfaces such as tile, stone, concrete, or thin carpet over concrete is particularly difficult and tiring for the practitioner. Prolonged standing in place on hard surfaces without much movement can result in conditions like varicose veins in the legs. Standing on hard surfaces can also aggravate foot injuries, such as plantar fasciitis, and cause low back fatigue. Better surfaces for standing while you work include traditional wood flooring (lamine floors over concrete do not have enough “give”), carpeting with a cushion backing or underlay, and foam-backed vinyl flooring. If you cannot change the flooring in your work space, you can purchase anti-fatigue mats to place around your table. Good mats are about ½ inch thick, just soft enough to provide some “give” under your feet, but not so soft that you sink in and have trouble moving around. The outside edges of mats should be beveled to prevent tripping. Place them on all sides of the treatment table so you have consistent footing.

You may have other tools or equipment in your practice that could use a little ergonomics attention as well. If you use heavy pieces of equipment, like hydroculators, hot stones or equipment for spa treatments, pay attention to how you store and lift them. Try not to place too many tools in one container, to keep the weight down, and make sure the container has good handles to make lifting easier. Store heavy or frequently-used equipment between knee and waist height, so you can lift it without bending or reaching. Better yet, use a cart so the equipment can be wheeled about rather than lifted and carried.

Nearly all practitioners use a very common piece of equipment that can contribute to MSDs: a computer. You will need to set up your computer workstation to make sure that the chair, keyboard and monitor are positioned in a manner that promotes neutral posture. There are some very good, free resources on computer workstation ergonomics available on the Internet.

Now that you have adapted your workspace to your body and your work, keep in mind a few other important ergonomics guidelines to help you stay healthy on the job:

- Try to keep a stable workload from day to day and week to week: sudden increases in workload can overload your body and cause symptoms to arise;
- Leave enough time between massage sessions to allow your body to rest and recover from intense physical activity: be sure to leave a minimum of 15 minutes break between clients to give you enough time to rest, stretch, drink some water, walk around a bit, and let go of the previous client to be ready for the next one;
- Build in recovery time and short breaks within a treatment session by alternating intensive hands-on treatment with other techniques like Strain-Counterstrain or Trager that do not require as much hand force or repetitive movements. Another way to give your hands a break during massage sessions is to use modalities that do not use the hands, like hydrotherapy, aromatherapy or energy balancing.

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Lauriann Greene, CEAS and Richard W. Goggins, CPE, LMP are co-authors of the all-new 2nd Edition of *Save Your Hands! The Complete Guide to Injury Prevention and Ergonomics for Manual Therapists*, the leading textbook on self-care used in massage schools across the U.S. and Canada. Lauriann and Richard have published numerous articles in national massage and spa magazines on this subject, co-authored the first statistical study on injury among massage therapists, and offer continuing education courses, a Certified Injury Prevention Instructor program, and consulting and training to help massage therapists prevent workplace injury. For more information, please visit www.SaveYourHands.com or call 877-424-0994.