

The Business of Self-Care

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In any business, having a realistic and workable business plan can help the businessperson achieve their career goals and establish themselves successfully in a competitive marketplace.

A crucial component of any business plan is risk management: identifying, assessing and managing potential risks that could endanger a new professional's career and earning power. Risk management studies often concentrate on classic risk scenarios, like dealing with a difficult economy, or facing new competition in one's target market. An area that is often overlooked, however, is identifying and managing the risks that can put one's own health, and career, in jeopardy.

Studies have shown that manual therapists have a high risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) due to the physical demands of their work. MSDs and their symptoms can have both short and long-term effects on a therapist's ability to maintain their normal workload, advance in their career and, in some cases, even remain in their profession. When you weigh the potential implications for a therapist's earning power and bottom line, it becomes clear that therapists need to be aware of these risks and find effective strategies for managing and reducing them.

Creating Your Risk Management Plan

You can put together an effective injury risk management plan for your own massage practice based on proven workplace injury prevention and ergonomics principles. The study of ergonomics has shown that multiple factors are involved in causing workplace injury. As a result, a successful prevention strategy must be holistic and multifaceted, combining a number of tactics to address all potential causes. The most important areas to emphasize in this holistic approach to self-care are:

Setting up a Safe Workplace

A therapist's treatment space must be designed to fit the therapist's body characteristics and the type of work they do. You need enough space to move freely around their table to avoid static positioning and awkward postures. Using a power-adjustable table allows the therapist to work comfortably and efficiently as they change techniques and move from one client to another. It is also very important to maintain a consistent, manageable workload from day to day and week to week, with sufficient rest and recovery time between treatment sessions.

Using Good Body Mechanics

Learn to use your bodies in a natural and efficient way, maximizing strength while avoiding overloading vulnerable parts of the body like the hands, thumbs, neck, or low back. Modify or eliminate any technique that causes pain or discomfort. Plainly speaking, if it hurts, don't do it.

Staying in Shape

Lack of physical conditioning is a risk factor for injury. To stay healthy throughout a career, you must have the necessary conditioning to keep up with the physical demands of your work. Be sure to develop a multifaceted conditioning program you can practice at least three times a week.

Taking Care of General Health

Getting enough sleep, eating well and avoiding unhealthy habits like smoking can help you withstand the rigors of your work and heal tissue damage before it progresses to the point of injury.

Paying Attention to Emotions

Difficulty setting limits with clients, unreasonable expectations of oneself, or inflexibility about treatment methods can increase risk of injury or burnout. Learn to be good to yourself, and a long, healthy career will be within your grasp.

Prepare for Unforeseen Events

A good business plan also takes contingencies into account: those cases where, despite your best efforts, unforeseen events can still occur. Manual therapists can start developing symptoms even if they have been careful and used good prevention techniques. How much of a financial impact the symptoms will have on the therapist's work life depends on how early and effectively they choose to address those symptoms. With early, appropriate treatment, therapists may be able to continue to work as they treat their symptoms, or perhaps only have to take a week or two off to rest the affected part of their body. By waiting to treat or choosing treatments that are less effective, they may end up with a full-blown injury that can require months off of work for rehabilitation and recovery. They may even risk chronic injury that can interrupt or cut short their career. It is very important to seek early, effective treatment, and understand the potential consequences of doing otherwise.

Don't Forget Insurance

Since injury can happen even with good prevention efforts, your business plan should also include obtaining adequate insurance. Health, workers' compensation, and long term disability insurance all give therapists an important safety net that can keep you afloat financially if injury does happen, as well as peace of mind during your career.

Therapists that develop an effective injury risk management strategy have a significant competitive advantage: the tools to maintain your health and protect your investment in your livelihood throughout a long, successful career.

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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 in massage schools across the U.S. and Canada since 1995. Save Your Hands! offers consulting and training services to help massage therapists prevent workplace injury, affordable continuing education courses, and the Certified Injury Prevention Instructor program. For more information, please visit www.SaveYourHands.com or call 877-424-0994.