



Canadian Massage Therapist Association *Association Canadienne de Massothérapeutes*

Final Report
Sexual Harassment and Assault Working Group
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Prepared by: Morgan Richard, Doctoral Student, Department of Psychology, University of New Brunswick



CMTA Sexual Harassment and Assault Working Group Members

Morgan Richard, *Graduate Student, University of New Brunswick;*
Gordon MacDonald, *Executive Director, Canadian Massage Therapist Association;*
Ian Kamm, *Chair, Registered Massage Therapists Association of Ontario;*
Lizette Tucker, *Board Director, Registered Massage Therapists Association of British Columbia;*
Tina Plourde, *Secretary, New Brunswick Massotherapy Association;*
Tom Peppard, RMT, Brookstone Massage Therapy;
Wendy Thienes, Executive Administrator, Canadian Massage Therapist Association

Scope of Issue

In collaboration with the Canadian Massage Therapist Alliance, the National Survey of Sexual Harassment and Assault of Canadian Massage Therapists by Clients was undertaken in 2021-2022. This study addressed the need to better understand the rates and nature of Canadian massage therapists' experiences of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace. All active and student members of massage therapy associations across Canada were invited to participate on three separate occasions via email listservs.

Results from this survey of 479 professional massage therapists in Canada revealed:

- 81% feared sexual harassment by a client
- 61% feared sexual assault by a client
- 80% experienced sexual harassment
- 22% experienced sexual assault
- 66% received a sexual phone call
- 77% of incidents occurred during treatment
- 95% of perpetrators were men
- 57% of perpetrators were repeat clients
- 63% discharged the client
- 84% told someone about the incident
- 95% did not contact the police over the incident

What do RMTs want? Survey respondents said they want further education on (i) communication skills; (ii) client screening; (iii) grooming techniques; (iv) what to do during and after an incident.

Purpose of Committee

This working group was established to address sexual harassment and assault of massage therapists by clients. A directory of resources and tools for massage therapists pertaining to sexual harassment and assault in the workplace was developed for members of the Canadian Massage Therapist Association. The working group had five virtual meetings from May 2023 – September 2023. Basecamp was used for group communication and collection of documents and resources.

Resources Developed

The working group developed multiple resources to raise awareness and increase prevention of incidents of sexual violence in the workplace. All resources will be available in English and French and will be housed publicly on the Canadian Massage Therapist Association's website.

A directory of Canadian sexual violence prevention centres was compiled. Contact information for multiple centres is listed for each province. The intent of this resource is to help survivors navigate services that specialize in responding to acts of sexual violence.

A brochure was developed based off by the Association of New Brunswick Massage Therapists. This brochure was updated to fit the national context and includes information about client boundary crossing and the scope of the issue. The working group received permission from the Association of New Brunswick Massage Therapists' Assault Prevention and Education Committee to reproduce this brochure. The intent of this resource is to raise awareness about the prevalence of this issue and the potential for clients to cross professional boundaries.

Infographics containing quotes from respondents of the national survey describe experiences of sexual harassment and assault of massage therapists by clients. These infographics aim to demonstrate the seriousness and extent of the issue. Some massage therapists may find similarities in the quotes to their own experiences, making them feel less isolated. In addition, this resource gives some context to what is meant by 'sexual harassment and assault'.

The Association of New Brunswick Massage Therapists (ANBMT) was the first provincial organization to investigate sexual harassment and assault against massage therapists. This investigation was led by their Assault Prevention and Education Committee. The purpose of the Assault Prevention and Education Committee is to provide information, support, and advocacy to those RMTs affected by sexual violence (of all types) in the workplace. This working group benefitted from having a member who is also part of the committee in New Brunswick. It was brought to our attention by this member that the ANBMT Assault Prevention and Education

Committee established a peer mentorship program in their province. The peer mentor program was developed to provide peer support to survivors of sexual harassment and assault through providing information, resources, and emotional and practical support. Peer mentors are volunteers in the field who go through training provided by Sexual Violence New Brunswick. The peer mentors are not intended to act as counsellors or psychotherapists. Peer mentors are a caring first line of help and not an ongoing support. Additionally, this program is not a resource for reporting official complaints. Peer mentors do not act on complaints. The working group agreed that the rest of Canada could benefit from duplicating this peer mentorship model. A member of the working group met with Sexual Violence New Brunswick to gain insight into how volunteer peer mentors could be ethically selected and trusted. Volunteers for a peer mentorship program should be required to provide a criminal record and vulnerable persons check, successfully complete all peer mentorship training, and provide a letter of reference from another RMT. The intent of this resource is to provide support for massage therapists from someone who understands the field and who can help them navigate these often ambiguous and shocking incidents.

Challenges

As much as possible, this working group did not want to reinvent the wheel. Many resources and programs exist in other fields to address sexual violence in the workplace. While the unique context of massage therapy cannot be discounted, the working group was able to produce helpful resources without having to start from scratch. This was important because the scope of the issue is so large that there are nearly endless directions one could go in attempt to address it. By not reinventing the wheel, we were able to produce solid resources when a few months.

One of the biggest challenges of this working group was difficulty in standardizing recommendations across Canada. Ultimately, each province is independently responsible for addressing this issue. The Canadian Massage Therapist Association can only make national recommendations and cannot enforce national mandates. With schools of massage therapy being privately owned, this made it impossible for the working group to develop and implement standardized training modules about sexual harassment and assault by clients.

Ultimately, it is the clients who are responsible for these incidents. We can raise awareness about and prepare massage therapists for handling these incidents, but that is not enough to eliminate this form of sexual violence. Throughout our work, the working group strived to develop resources that will empower massage therapists without inciting blame.

Massage therapists have conflicting responsibilities to protect the client's privacy while also holding perpetrating clients responsible for their actions. Clearer standards of practice are needed to address how a massage therapist can report a client and how they will be supported and believed when they do so. No matter why a client is seeking massage therapy, it should never be acceptable practice to refer a client to another RMT in response to them harassing or assaulting their current therapist.

Recommendations

The potential for clients to cross boundaries will always exist. This working group aimed to give massage therapists some tools to prevent and cope with these incidents. Based on our work, we present the following recommendations:

1. **Have a discharge policy.** Discharge policies should include instructions for situations of client perpetrated sexual violence and boundary crossing.
2. **Establish an Assault Prevention and Education Committee.** Sexual harassment and assault by clients is an ongoing issue in every province. Each province should have a group dedicated to preventing these incidents and supporting massage therapists with programs such as peer mentorship.
3. **Teach RMTs about boundary crossing and communication.** In situations of sexual violence, it is normal to freeze. Massage therapists must be prepared to deal with these incidents with specific training on recognizing red flags, trusting their instincts, and asserting themselves without fear of pushback.