



Massage Therapy: A Profession on the Rise

EVERGREEN, Colo., February 28, 2005 — Massage therapists elicit an impressive level of goodwill and increasing popularity among American adults. Fully two out of five adults have visited a massage therapist and 12% received at least one massage in 2004, putting massage on a par with consumer use of chiropractic and physical therapy services.

These results come from a January 3 to 11, 2005 national telephone survey of a representative sample of 1,027 adults age 21 and older. The study was commissioned by Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP) and conducted by Harstad Strategic Research, Inc., the national public opinion research firm in Boulder, Colo.

“What is striking about the overall survey results is that there are very few detractors, few negative expressions about massage,” says Bob Benson, President of ABMP. Most of those who haven’t yet received a massage simply haven’t felt a need for it. According to the survey, 51% have favorable feelings about massage therapists versus just 6% with unfavorable feelings.

“Experiencing a massage therapy session is its own best advertisement for changing perceptions,” Benson says. According to the survey, receiving a massage promotes favorable regard of its value: 96% of those who received at least one massage in 2004 have favorable feelings toward massage therapists as compared to 72% of previous users and 32% of those who have never had a massage.

More impressive than Americans’ lopsidedly favorable feelings is their *trend* in feelings toward massage therapists over the past decade. A 45% plurality say their feelings have changed for the better over the past 10 years, 3% say for the worse, 40% say no difference, and 12% are not sure. This 15-to-1 better-to-worse feelings ratio is promising confirmation of growing acceptance and goodwill toward massage therapists.

“The massage therapy profession has worked to legitimize its standing among complementary therapies, distancing itself from out-dated, negative stereotypes. Massage now generally enjoys a receptive, welcoming climate,” Benson says. Compared to the 12% of adults who reported visiting a massage therapist in 2004, the survey found that 13% went to a chiropractor and 10% to a physical therapist. Of those who received massage in 2004, their average number of visits was nine — quite similar to frequency numbers for individuals accessing chiropractic (10) and physical therapy (11) services. “What’s especially impressive about these comparisons,” Benson says, “is that most chiropractic and physical therapy treatments are reimbursed by health insurance while more than 90% of massage therapy sessions are paid out of the client’s own pocket.”

Massage therapists are especially popular among adults under age 50 (58% favorable) and women (also 58% favorable). Indeed, those favorably-disposed include *two-thirds* of women under age 45 and *two-thirds* of women with at least two years of college. Those least favorable and least familiar with massage therapists are age 65 plus (37% favorable).

The market strength among younger adults bodes well for massage therapists as these Americans age. “The combination of these baby boomers reaching peak earning years just as their bodies begin to creak suggests that massage demand will only grow,” Benson says. For the amount of stress relief, restoration, and relief of muscular soreness massage provides, that service remains a relative bargain. The survey found that the median price nationally for a one hour massage is just \$60. Prices vary regionally and by setting; charges in spa settings tend to be higher than elsewhere.

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The finding of 12% of adults visiting a massage therapist has a statistical margin of error of plus-or-minus 2%, at the 95% confidence level. In other words, the chances are 95% that the response about utilization of massage in 2004 would be between 10% and 14% if all adults in telephone-equipped households were interviewed. This 12% finding contrasts with two recent studies of the same behavior which produced widely divergent estimates. An August 2004 Opinion Research Corporation study commissioned by the American Massage Therapy Association estimated 21% received a massage that year while a 2002 National Institutes of Health study found only 5% of adults received a massage for health reasons during the prior 12 months.

“A lot has to do with how the questions are framed and phrased,” says Paul Harstad, President of Harstad Strategic Research, Inc. “The NIH survey asked about massage received ‘*for your own health,*’ which phrasing may have limited affirmative answers since many people receive a massage for relaxation or enjoyment and may not perceive it as for their health per se. The Opinion Research Corporation survey solely asked about receiving a massage. It isn’t clear whether that survey distinguished between massage work provided by a massage therapist versus other health care professionals, whose inclusion would drive up the affirmative response rate.”

“In the 2005 telephone survey conducted for ABMP, visitation with massage therapists was posed in a battery amongst other healthcare providers — which approach often reduces any possible respondent resistance or inclination to provide socially acceptable answers. Respondents were not told at the outset of the interview who commissioned the survey, nor could they have had any clue at the time of this early question that the survey would focus more on massage therapy. To help minimize possible confusion between physical therapists and massage therapists, respondents were always asked about massage therapists *after* physical therapists,” Harstad says.

Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals is the nation’s leading professional organization for massage therapists, with more than 53,000 members throughout the United States. For additional information, an extensive article database, or to find a massage therapist, visit our consumer website at Massagetherapy.com.

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Harstad Strategic Research, Inc., an independent, national public opinion research firm in Boulder, Colo., conducted the research.