

Massage Trends  
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Once upon a time, not so long ago, massage pretty much came in two flavors around here—Swedish or Deep Tissue—and it was usually women who enjoyed it. Massage was the purview of expensive spas (unless you're talking about something sleezy, and we're not!) and something one did perhaps once or twice a year as a pampering indulgence, usually for a special occasion. When sports massage sprinted on the scene, it added a new option to the massage menu and opened the door for a more therapeutic approach as well as a way for men to get a treatment and still feel manly. (Hey, if Michael Jordan does it, it's got to be cool, right?).

But today there's a lot more to choose from in Wisconsin and throughout the country. The steady growth of the complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) industry over the past decade and the concurrent spa industry boom have given rise to a whole new world of massage therapy offerings, many of them based on ancient techniques. Add in the fact that the largest population segment is aging and, presto, you've got a skyrocketing massage industry.

“The massage explosion can be attributed partly to the growing population of tired, aging, not-quite-as-limber-as-they-once-were baby boomers, partly to increased awareness of the effects of stress and of the physiological benefits of pressing the flesh,” states a 1999 American Massage Therapy Association article titled Trends in America: Growing Demand for Massage Therapy. It goes on to state, “Doctors are prescribing massage to help patients manage stress and pain. Today, massage is an important component of physical therapy, sports medicine, and some nursing practices. Of the types of alternative care commonly available, people say they would be most likely to use massage therapy (80%).”

The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB), the not-for-profit organization that certifies professionals in the massage and bodywork industries through a recognized credentialing program, announced in March that its certificant population had reached 50,000. More than half of those—28,000—were certified in just the past five years. “Massage therapy is one of the fastest growing segments of alternative medicine and with this comes an increased demand for qualified practitioners,” NCBTMB executive director Christine D. Niero, Ph.D stated in a press release.

At the same time that CAM has been revolutionizing health care, the spa industry has been soaring to new heights. I/SAP, the trade association for the spa industry, a few years ago reported that the number of day spas in the U.S. grew from 30 to 600 from 1987 to 1997. In 1999 American Spa Magazine reported that there were 2000 day spas in operation. Massage is one of the top services requested at spas.

Jerry Grotzinger, director of education at Grafton's Blue Sky School of Professional Massage the Therapeutic Bodywork, categorizes massage into three specialties: medical/therapeutic (i.e., trigger

point and sports massage), Eastern energy (i.e., Jin Shin do, Lohmi Lohmi, Reiki, Tui Na) and spa techniques (i.e., aromatherapy, pre-natal massage, heated stone massage). “Many therapists integrate various techniques into their practice. They get to a point when they understand the techniques and develop their own style,” Grotzinger said. He spoke about the trends in a recent telephone interview: “Spa and relaxation techniques are becoming very popular,” he said. Therapies are “becoming more exotic as we learn more about other cultures. But it’s also a marketing thing,” he said.

A recent news release from SpaTrade, an industry news outlet backed that up, pointing out the current trend of internationally themed treatments at spas. “Spas are recreating a vast array of treatments and mind/body therapies that have previously been available only to those who travel extensively,” said Susie Ellis, Vice President of Industry Development for Spa Finder, a marketing services company for the spa industry. “Ultimately, this is about the spa industry going global—gathering the best of what’s out there and translating it into something that is appealing to American spa-goers,” Ellis said.

Eastern-style massage techniques in particular have gained popularity in the U.S. in part because of the growth of CAM, which includes several Eastern modalities, the one most widely recognized being acupuncture. “People are turning to Eastern methods because they work!” according to certified Focused Touch Shiatsu massage therapist Dawn M. Larson, BA, RMT, OBT, NCTMB. “People want results. Massage is not just for people with money or to just relax and be pampered. People are using it for healing and are getting relief. These therapies are thousands of years old. There’s a reason they are still around. If they didn’t work, they would have disappeared,” she said in a recent interview at her office in Shorewood.

While there is focus on exotic and imported styles of massage, the industry is also becoming more aligned with the medical community and therefore students “need to have a medical understanding, be able to converse with the medical community, chart like physicians” and more, Grotzinger said. “Massage is no longer just pampering. It’s therapeutic. That’s why practitioners are called *massage therapists*.”

The upshot of all these new techniques and trends is that therapists are becoming more and more trained—students at Blue Sky and Lakeside School of Massage Therapy, another school in the Milwaukee area, log between 737 and 750 hours or more of instruction and hands-on practice before receiving their certificate. To become board certified through NCBTMB, a practitioner must complete a minimum of 500 in-class hours of education and training as well as pass a written National Certification Exam (NCE). The state of Wisconsin does not offer licensing to therapists, only registration. To advertise oneself as a massage therapist or bodyworker in the state, a therapist must be a registered massage therapist (RMT), which means they have logged 600 hours of training, passed the NCE, have insurance and filled out their paperwork locally.