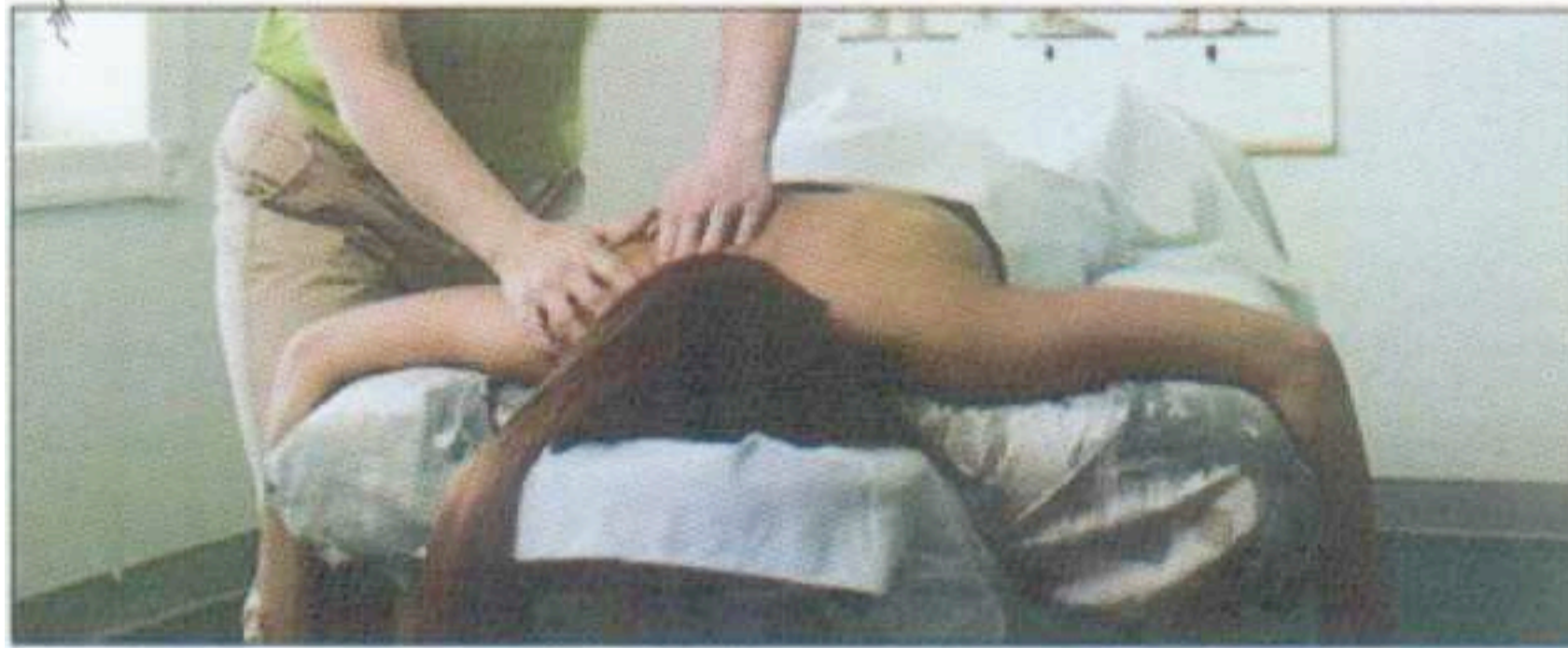


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The surprising, rewarding path many career changers are following

Trust in ever-resourceful and adaptable Americans to create opportunities to improve their own lives, and the lives of others, from the shambles of the economy. With unemployment rates still making news, many Americans are finding new ways to make a living, turning layoffs into launch pads for new careers.

That drive to find something new, secure and rewarding is drawing many to the health care industry, where career opportunities are expected to continue growing at double-digit percentages through 2016, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Within the industry, many careers offer a fast track into lucrative, secure jobs with less than four years of education, making them especially appealing to people who are changing careers.

For many, massage therapy tops the list for realizing monetary and spiritual rewards within a manageable time frame. The profession seems a natural fit for career changers. In fact, the average massage therapist is in his or her 40s, and has entered the profession as a second career, according to the American Massage Therapy Association.

Given that profile, a switch from handling baggage in the airline industry to handling humans in massage seemed a natural progression for Birgitta Salomonsson of Streamwood, Ill. Salomonsson, 47, is attending the Cortiva Institute Massage Therapy School in Crystal Lake, Ill.

She actually began massage classes before being laid off from her 15-year job with an international airline. "Both my daughters are in college and independent," Salomonsson says. "I felt it was time for me to look

into one of my old dreams. I started evening classes in October and in August I was notified that my office was closing and I was being laid off. The timing was perfect. I was able to change to the 12 months program going daytime instead."

When a reduction in her hours at a retail management job left her with more time on her hands, 28-year-old Beth Mitchell of Lowell, Mass. saw an opportunity to explore something she'd always wanted to do, and break an unhealthy emotional cycle she found she'd fallen into. "I was working, but only part-time," recalls Mitchell, a student at Cortiva's Boston school. "There was one day where I didn't even have the mental, physical or emotional strength to get up and go to that job, nor could I afford financially not to go. I knew I was in the vicious cycle of severe depression. I knew I just didn't want to have that be what the rest of my life was like and I knew I wanted to help people."

The drive to help others also drew Kimberly Bachman, 36, of Chicago to the field of massage therapy.

"I have always enjoyed helping others and I have a very nurturing personality," says Bachmann, who left a high-stress job in new home sales to study massage therapy. "I had recently discovered the world of chiropractic as well as had a few cranio-sacral treatments. I realized there was definitely something powerful in the healing world of touch."

Salomonsson and Mitchell are finishing up their training. Bachmann works as a massage therapist at a spa in Chicago and in a chiropractic office. Her dual role exemplifies the evolving role of massage therapists, whose work is no longer relegated to

the realm of luxury, but instead is now recommended by doctors across the country for its many healthful benefits. Growing acceptance and understanding of the benefits of massage - both physical and psychological - have created opportunities for therapists to interact with and serve the public in exciting new ways.

In addition to traditional settings like spas or resorts, independent businesses, chiropractic clinics and athletic clubs, massage therapists are working with insurance networks, within corporate settings, in hospice care, and in hospital oncology, maternity or post-natal care departments.

"We've even had graduates who traveled to Antarctica on contract to provide massage therapy at scientific outposts for the summer months," says Dina Boon, president of Cortiva Institute-Seattle.

While financial security and a chance to step out of the "rat race" appealed to Salomonsson, Mitchell and Bachmann when choosing to change careers to massage therapy, all three women also cite the spiritual rewards of the profession as strong motivators as well.

"Since moving into the field of massage therapy, I take better care of myself," Bachmann says. "I enjoy the simpler things in life and live in the moment, as opposed to stressing about my day tomorrow or the next week. And the reward I get from my clients after I have relieved their pain is such an amazing feeling!"

It's possible to achieve a career in massage therapy in less than four years. To learn more about massage therapy careers and how to get started on becoming a certified massage therapist, visit www.cortiva.com.

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