

Massage industry offers security and flexibility

The recession is turning out to be a great equalizer, rearranging our priorities so that recent college graduates and seasoned professionals now share a single top concern—job security. Many likely will find what they are looking for in the health-care industry, where overall employment is expected to rise 21 percent by 2016.

Many paths can lead to a career in health and wellness. Some emerging careers, such as massage therapy or home health aide, require less than four years of college to achieve professional status, and will experience high growth over the next few years, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

These healthcare fields provide ample opportunity for quick entry and job security. The bureau predicts top growing health and wellness jobs will include massage therapy, personal and home care aides, home health aides and medical assistants—all of which are expected to increase by double-digit percentages by 2016.

Some, like massage therapy, offer greater flexibility and variety in career opportunities. A massage therapist can achieve certification in approximately one year and work in a wide range of settings, from a chiropractor's office to an upscale hotel or day spa. Growing consumer awareness of the benefits of massage, increased acceptance by the medical community, and Americans' perception of massage as a health maintenance tool, rather than a luxury, are driving demand for therapists.

"One of the major aspects that attracted me to the profession is its flexibility," said Jeff Mann, president of the Cortiva Institute's Pennsylvania School of Muscle Therapy. "Massage provided me with a career at a time in my life where flexibility of schedule was really important. It allowed me to travel, pursue other interests and be very involved with raising my daughter."

Massage therapy careers can span many related industries. Traditionally, massage therapists have worked in settings that include:

- High-end spas or resorts;
- Solo businesses or independent businesses;
- Chiropractic clinics;
- Athletic clubs.

New opportunities are emerging, however, thanks to the increasing demand. Dina Boon, president of

Cortiva Institute in Seattle, cites a few:

"We have graduates working as preferred providers within an insurance network, or as a corporate account vendor contracted to provide therapy within a corporate office setting on a regular basis," she said. "Some of our grads have worked in hospice care, providing therapy to both patients and their caregivers, while others work 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 in Antarctica," Boon said.

Students at Cortiva Institute, a network of massage therapy schools across the country, cite common reasons for pursuing their careers, and growing demand is just one of them. Many like the range of options for a working environment. Achieving professional status following a relatively short education and training time also is a benefit, Boon said.

And the ability to pursue "meaningful work" that both helps others and allows therapists to support themselves is a key attraction.

"I once had a client who had suffered a severe trauma at a young age and developed an eating disorder because of it," Mann said. After working with Mann, the client also worked with a personal trainer, dietitian and psychotherapist, and the patient was able to drop more than 300 pounds in a little over two years and achieve a more normal life. "She told me massage therapy gave her the acceptance and courage to live within her own body. Where else can you help people like that?"

Anyone considering a career in massage therapy should look for a school that also provides students with hands-on experience. "Getting real experience in a safe, managed environment builds confidence," Mann said. "Many times the only difference between a good therapist and a great one is confidence."

Evaluate schools based on their accreditation and what the program covers, Boon advised. "Also, consider how long the school has been open, what texts are required, the background and specializations of faculty members, the size of the student body and the school's job placement rate for graduates," she said. "Last but not least, talk to or get a massage from one of the graduates of the program." ◆

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