

talk about touch

WITH MARY KATHLEEN ROSE AND MARY ANN FOSTER



Mary Ann Foster, left, and Mary Kathleen Rose. *Rick Giase Photography.*

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“WHAT SHOULD WE WEAR?”

MARY KATHLEEN ROSE: I picked up a copy of a health magazine the other day and found an article about alternative health practitioners. While it featured several women who practiced various healing arts, it focused on the clothes they were wearing—stylish fashion, seasonal colors, and they were fully accessorized. I thought, “Wow, this article seems to emphasize the look of the practitioners more than the work they do.”

MARY ANN FOSTER: What to wear—a perpetual issue for massage therapists. Do I wear long sleeves to cover tattoos or do I wear short sleeves to keep cool?

MKR: Every massage school has a dress code—often a topic of controversy, as standards of professionalism jockey with the changing norms of fashion. I know many teachers who are weary of the struggle—they just want to teach massage.

MAF: Although I’m fairly accepting, I do find certain attire unacceptable, like obnoxious slogans or sloppy, unkempt clothes. I have trouble trusting the judgment of a practitioner who stands and walks awkwardly because of oversized pants that threaten to expose posterior cleavage.

MKR: Some of my students claimed they couldn’t buy anything but revealing clothes these days, so I offered to take them shopping with me!

MAF: One attractive young student came to class dressed looking like she was ready for a night on the town, then complained when another student made advances. I suggested she dress more appropriately for massage work and warned that such apparel

could draw untoward advances in her practice. She took my advice, and the problem stopped.

MKR: Occasionally, I take students to assisted-living facilities to practice on the residents. The most common question the students ask when we are discussing arrangements for the field trip is, “What should we wear? School uniforms? Scrubs?” They are relieved when I tell them they can wear whatever they consider comfortable, professional attire. I also mention the seniors love colors that brighten up their day.

MAF: I remember visiting medical facilities where most of the staff wore starched white uniforms, which I learned to associate with illness. White shirts aren’t that practical for massage uniforms, since they show oils and lotions and grow dingy with use.

MKR: Many massage schools and clinics now require uniforms, scrubs, or polo shirts with their logos. While this is practical and can ease anxiety about the dress code, it can feel stifling to bodyworkers who want to express their own style. It also reflects an outdated image of medical norms, since most medical professionals now wear more colorful or personalized clothing.

MAF: Schools should offer guidance and professional boundaries around massage attire, but it’s great when students have some choice. Clothes can express who we are, which many clients appreciate.

MKR: One therapist I spoke with said, “My personal feeling about appearance is that the more you are yourself, the more the clients who want you will find you.”

MAF: I do know people who balk at going to massage therapists with tattoos or piercings. One client told me she associates facial piercings with self-mutilation. She’s highly kinesthetic and has a visceral response that makes her uneasy.

MKR: Clothing needs to convey a healthy appearance. It also needs to be loose enough to allow a full range of movement when doing physical work. If we are comfortable and appropriately dressed, our clients are bound to feel more comfortable.

MAF: On the flip side, I would feel uncomfortable with a massage therapist who showed up to give a session wearing high heels, long acrylic nails, or distracting jewelry.

MKR: Equally disturbing would be a therapist whose clothes reek of cigarette smoke, strongly scented perfumes, or essential oils.

MAF: Just as the ambience of the massage room reflects who we are and sets a tone for a therapeutic experience, there is also room for expression in massage attire. If we make sure our clothing is always clean, comfortable, and appropriate for the work we do, we will be dressed for success. **m&b**

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