

How can I expand my massage practice to include cosmetic-surgery clientele?



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People who choose to enhance their bodies with elective cosmetic surgery do so to improve their appearance and quality of life. After choosing to undergo a body, breast or facial procedure, a client will often consult with a few surgeons to select the best fit.

Even with considerable preparation and planning for an elective surgery, what people experience after their surgery is often unexpected. Pain, swelling, bruising, fatigue and postural guarding of the surgical site often take cosmetic-surgery patients by surprise.

Many patients experience slower-than-expected healing, hormonal imbalances, difficulty sleeping, unsupportive family members and depression—results that can lead to a sense of buyer’s remorse. Some people have unforeseen surgical complications, dysesthesias (abnormal sensations) and negative side effects from pain medications and anesthesia. Most patients feel overwhelmed during the healing process—and this is exactly why the time of healing is the prime time for postsurgical massage therapy.

Support, guidance, education, monitoring and encouragement during the recovery process are the main benefits of massage therapy for cosmetic-surgery patients. In addition, gentle massage encourages lymph flow and

postural patterning, and a relaxing environment is a mood enhancer.

There are three phases of recovery following cosmetic surgery: acute, subacute and chronic, and massage therapy assumes a valuable role during each phase.

- In the acute phase, from the time of surgery to several days postsurgery, lymph-drainage techniques facilitate the movement of excess swelling through the lymph system, away from the surgical site.
- In the subacute phase, a couple of weeks to a couple of months later, when the surgical site is healed and sealed, scar work and light fascial work with passive range of motion softens tissue. This allows normal movement of surrounding tissue and activates neuromuscular regeneration.
- In the chronic phase, several months to a full year later, techniques that address postural distortion and help the client learn to use a newly improved body are appropriate.

The human body does not know the difference between an elective cosmetic surgery in a beautiful surgical suite and a traumatic event such as a car crash or on-the-job accident that results in physical injury.

Therefore, the tools a massage therapist already uses on a daily basis are incorporated into sessions for cosmetic-surgery clientele. Such tools address swelling, scarring and postural distortion related to the surgical experience and phases of healing.

Integrated techniques such as lymph drainage, scar manipulation and fascial reorganization are used as the therapist sees fit, depending on what phase of healing and emotional state the client presents. However, it is *how* and *when* these techniques are used, along with a great deal of patience, listening and compassion, that bring the greatest recovery benefit.

Massage therapy after cosmetic surgery is a requirement in many countries. We have clients who traveled to Brazil, Germany and South Korea for their

▶ Read “*Massage Skills Needed for Cosmetic-Surgery Clients,*” by Ann Brooks, R.M.T., and Kent Lemburg, N.C.T.M.B., at www.massagemag.com/perioperative.

procedures because those countries offer a more holistic surgical experience than the U.S.—one that includes multiple sessions of postoperative massage, usually on a daily basis, for at least 10 days post-operation.

Our hope is to expand this level of service to the U.S., and help massage therapists become accepted as ancillary providers to all cosmetic surgeons as part of the rehabilitation team.

This is the perfect time to offer high-level, specialized massage therapy services, because health care is becoming a consumer-driven market. Gone are the days when everything was covered by health insurance. We now hold ourselves accountable to make educated decisions regarding our continued health and longevity. More people are making massage a part of their health care strategy, and this gives massage therapists a new opportunity to create niche specialties.

To market to cosmetic surgeons, first determine if any of your clients has had cosmetic surgery. Your intake form should include an authorization of medical release so that you may communicate with referring physicians, health care providers and insurance companies. That form should also ask, “Have you had a surgical procedure? If so, what procedure have you had, and when?” If none of your clients has received cosmetic surgery, then you can begin by researching cosmetic surgeons’ websites.

Once you choose a medical professional to work with, call her office to let her know you would like to be part of her patients’ health care team.

Suggest scheduling a lunch-and-learn meeting to get to know one another. During your meeting, share the value of postoperative massage and its many benefits to clients and to the plastic surgeon’s business.

Another effective networking opportunity is for you to ask your client if you can go to a follow-up visit with her. This is a great way to understand what the physician expects regarding postsurgical healing phases. Ask specific questions on various topics including how the physician surgically tightened the muscles and tissue in a face-lift or tummy tuck; how much fat was removed and in what body regions during liposuction; and if a breast implant was subpectoral or subglandular for a breast augmentation.

You might wonder if the client and surgeon would be open to you attending a postsurgical appointment. We have participated in numerous client follow-up visits, and our experience has consistently been positive. The patient appreciates our support and the physician is receptive to hear about how we’re working with the patient.

Choosing to provide post-cosmetic-surgery massage therapy means more than simply adding another massage technique to your tool belt. This specialty stands alone, raising the bar of the massage industry by integrating it with the medical community.

Ann Brooks, R.M.T., and Kent Lemburg, N.C.T.M.B., co-own Soulstice Ltd. (www.soulsticewellness.com), a perioperative and massage therapy company in Englewood, Colorado. Brooks has practiced massage for injury clients since 2001. In 2004, she began treating clients recovering from reconstructive and cosmetic surgical procedures. Lemburg has practiced medically based massage therapy since 1991. He began treating cosmetic-surgery patients in 1995, and has assisted hundreds of clients following their varying cosmetic surgical procedures. 



Read “Manual Lymph Drainage Benefits Cosmetic-Surgery Patients,” by The MLD Institute International’s Elisa DiFalco, at www.massagemag.com/lymphcosmetic.

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