

WHAT IS CLINICAL SPORTS MASSAGE AND HOW DOES IT COMPARE TO SPORTS MASSAGE?

To begin, sports and clinical sports massage are not identical, but they do bare similarities to one another. Both forms of massage include the assessment and treatment of conditions, with sports massage focused on athletes. By its formal definition “sports massage entails applying massage and adjunct techniques to a particular client population. That population can range from the active individual to the professional athlete” (Lurch, pg. 62).

By its definition, clinical sports massage therapy is a “therapeutic assessment, manipulation, and movement of locomotor soft tissues (muscles, tendons, ligaments, fascia, and joint capsules) to prevent, reduce, or eliminate chronic pain or injuries through the body” (Clinical Massage Therapy, p. 4). By including the name “clinical” the name suggests that this type of therapist will be able to treat ANY client suffering from pain associated with soft-tissue in the upper and lower body. The client may be an athlete, or they may not.

There are no specific strokes or techniques to sports massage or clinical massage. Both require the use of many techniques when designing a treatment protocol. As part of that, both require the use of critical thinking to know what technique to use and when it is appropriate to use it in the treatment phase. Additionally, both a sports and clinical sports massage therapist require “an advanced understanding of anatomy and physiology and injury pathology, and be proficient at palpation and assessment, including history, range of motion, manual muscle testing and orthopedic tests” (Lurch, p. 62).

For example, take a sports massage therapist who works with marathon runners who have iliotibial band syndrome (ITBS). This doesn't imply that only athletes get ITBS or that only sports massage therapists can treat ITBS. It just means that a sports massage therapist is more likely to encounter ITBS because of the population he works with. That's all. A clinical massage therapist can do just the same, but he or she may see a broader spectrum of conditions than someone only working with athletes, especially if it is a specific athletic population like distance runners. Hopefully you are beginning to see the strong similarities between the two and the fact that clinical massage can be applied to a much broader population of people.

Most massage therapists are not trained in clinical massage and therefore there are few massage therapists doing clinical work. Inherently, there is a lack of exposure and little common knowledge of what it is and what it looks like. A similar situation is found within sports massage. For much of the general public and even the massage therapy world, a sports massage is viewed as a therapeutic massage with firm pressure and light stretching. Some clients may even misconstrue “sports massage” as another term for “deep massage.” These are common, real misconceptions among the public and many have no idea what power a well-trained clinical or sports massage therapist can do. “One of the biggest obstacles in getting into the field [of sports massage] is the lack of understanding by other health care practitioners about what we do and how we can help” (Lurch, p. 82).