Eco-friendly Massage Therapy

The Effects of an Environmental Sustainability Workshop on the Environmental Attitudes and Pro-Environmental Behaviours of Students at a New Zealand Massage Therapy Provider

**Introduction**

Holistic healthcare, such as midwifery and massage therapy (MT), acknowledges the role of the environment in overall health.1,2 By extension, holistic healthcare endeavours to implement pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) in practice to minimise the impact on the planet. PEB is actions that consciously seek to reduce one’s impact on the environment3 and the scarce literature on eco-friendly MT indicates that while massage therapists demonstrate positive environmental attitudes (EA), they do not always use PEB in their clinical practice.4 To reduce this gap, this study suggests the adoption of zero waste MT (ZWMT) as a mechanism to improve massage therapists’ ecotourty (one’s concern, knowledge, and actions to help the planet) and their use of PEB in clinical practice.7 Zero waste participants significantly decreases waste generated by adherence to the 5 R’s (reduce, refuse, reuse, recycle, and not [compost]).8

**Objectives**

To investigate the effects of an eco-friendly MT workshop and access to reusable MT products on students’ environmental attitudes (EA) and clinical practices (PEB) at a New Zealand MT provider.

**Research Design**

Intervention: 40-minute Eco-friendly Massage Therapy workshop designed and delivered by researcher (HW) with PowerPoint. Topics included: environmental sustainability, benefits for therapists, ZWMT, and practical eco-friendly MT applications. Reusable MT products were introduced to the classroom and clinical practice alongside disposable products to facilitate change (Figure 3) in Week 1.

Pre-test and post-test questionnaires, adapted from McGinn9 to a MT setting, measured participants’ EA, PEB, environmental knowledge, and eco-tourty index; administered Week 1 and 4. A 40-minute semi-structured focus group, moderated by HW with a voluntary self-selecting sample, explored participants’ long-term EA and PEB change, barriers to PEB, and ZWMT, 8 weeks after the intervention. Inclusion criteria: All current students at the MT provider; recruited by HW during pre-arranged classes. Data collected between May and July 2018. Ethical approval from Southern Institute of Technology.

**Participants**

Pre-test questionnaire: n = 28 (85.0% response rate; 92.3% female (24/28)) and all age groups and classes represented. Post-test: n = 22. Focus group: n = 7 (5 women and 2 men; all classes and age groups represented), pseudonyms used to report results.

**Results**

Findings from the pre-test and post-test questionnaire (Table 1). The workshop was received positively with all seven therapists gaining at least one new idea for PEB, such as soap nuts, microplastics, waxed wax, zero waste, and composting. It was interesting when you did the numbers. When you worked out the amount of massage students, the amount of product used, and how it accumulates over time . . . When you look at the overall picture, it can be quite astounding (Oliver). Enhanced environmental awareness and pro-environmental behaviour All participants reported a small or large increase in their environmental awareness since the workshop, with the reusable MT products offering “decision-making awareness” (Brooke) was surprised “how easy it is to minimise the stuff you do use . . . and just make a little change that makes a big difference in the scheme of things.” Most participants had changed their MT behaviour a little or was limited to the classroom but many had made changes to their PEB in their personal lives, with Brooke forging produce bags and Sarah purchasing reusable ones. Sequoia noted, “that’s what the workshop’s done. It created a conversation.” Barriers to eco-friendly massage therapy ETH Many participants reported cost and convenience as barriers. For example, the cost of natural-fibre linen can be prohibitive however half of participants suggested that the minimal ongoing costs associated with reusable products could offset the higher initial cost. Forrest reflected, “maybe it’s not an extra cost but “a cost in time.” Several participants believed that selecting reusable products is more time-consuming but Sequoia disagreed, choosing reusable products added “90 seconds to [her] workload throughout the day.” ZWMT was deemed to be feasible with some concessions in certain circumstances. Therapists’ feedback positively received the knowledge, skills, and values and the classroom and clinic culture contributed to participants’ level of PEB engagement. Brooke stated massage oil was not “sticky enough for therapeutic massage.” Technological abilities in two of the older participants were cited as a barrier to using technology in their clinical practices but one persevered because of the “stress” (Sequoia). Holly noted that therapists must wash and dry their hands with the product’s level of cleanliness (or not). Eva never used it, it triggered their anxiety. If they choose, to use their own supplies. An environment’s culture sets the expected standard of behaviour and can support or suppress PEB. For instance, although a new experience for current students, reusable MT products will be normal for new students. It was important to see PEB modelled for participants such as you “use your clothes, you clean it” (Holly).

**Discussion of Environmental Change**

Successful behavior change is difficult and this barrier was visible within the other barriers. All therapists revealed the difficulty of increasing their PEB. Most participants had not made as much change as they would have liked or did not sustain the change, and cited cost, as the least important as barriers. The inference here is that maintaining behavior change is a difficult and lengthy process; this barrier acknowledges this.

**Implications**

Post-test EA and PEB increased marginally (2.0%) and participants’ EA-PEB values, as compared on the scatterplot graph, generally increased post-test (Figure 1). The ecotourty index decreased slightly (2.0%) due to an 8.0% drop in environmental knowledge. Barriers remained stable except for lack of knowledge that decreased by 50.0% (Figure 2). Both findings suggest that participants’ action knowledge improved (strategies to achieve PEB) rather than their problem-knowledge (knowledge of environmental problems)9 that the instrument measured. Overall, the instrument was not specific enough to detect the desired level of change in MT settings. The workshop was well received by focus group participants with some EA and PEB improvement evident. Barriers to PEB were prominent and suggested that the workshop and reusable products were insufficient to produce long-term meaningful change in participants. To overcome this support is needed, possibly from ‘eco-champions’ and reinforcement of workshop content (e.g. handout, class discussion, or ZWMT challenge). Participants chose to evaluate (PEB) when feasible to do so but the same is possible and has many benefits for massage therapists in their clinical practice. Future research into the long-term effects of the interventions, with improved measurement tools is warranted.

**Conclusion**

This is the second investigation into massage therapists’ EA and PEB and the first study to measure the effects of an intervention on their EA and PEB. Participants reported that eco-friendly MT and ZWMT are both possible in MT classrooms and clinics and the results demonstrated some EA and PEB improvement after the workshop and reusable MT products intervention but did highlight significant barriers. Further research is warranted and would benefit from better addressing changes in management strategies and the influence of culture on therapists’ PEB. This study has started a conversation and provides baseline values for future studies, MT providers, and other CAM therapy providers.

**Limitations**

The questionnaires were adapted from McGinn10 to a MT-setting but not enough to fully capture specific PEB change in MT. The researcher’s (HW) experience with focus groups impacted the data generated and the views of the self-selected sample may not be reflective of the population. This study may not be generalizable to other MT providers.

**References**

6. Pure Product Interactivity: Therapists’ knowledge, skills, and values and the classroom and clinical culture contributed to participants’ level of PEB engagement. Brooke stated massage oil was not “sticky enough for therapeutic massage.” Technological abilities in two of the older participants were cited as a barrier to using technology in their clinical practices but one persevered because of the “stress” (Sequoia). Holly noted that therapists must wash and dry their hands with the product’s level of cleanliness (or not). Eva never used it, it triggered their anxiety. If they choose, to use their own supplies. An environment’s culture sets the expected standard of behaviour and can support or suppress PEB. For instance, although a new experience for current students, reusable MT products will be normal for new students. It was important to see PEB modelled for participants such as you “use your clothes, you clean it” (Holly).

**Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Questionnaire Eco-literacy Components and Index**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test (n = 28)</th>
<th>Post-test (n = 22)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>4.0 ± 0.4</td>
<td>4.1 ± 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour (PEB)</td>
<td>3.5 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>3.0 ± 1.4</td>
<td>2.6 ± 1.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eco-literacy Index</td>
<td>3.5 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.4 ± 0.5</td>
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**Figure 1. Pre-test and Post-test Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours (PEB)**

**Figure 2. Barriers to Practicing Eco-friendly Massage Therapy**

**Figure 3. Disposable Massage Therapy Products and Reusable Alternatives available in Classroom and Clinic**