

Mystery Shopper as a Preventative and Investigative Measure

Mystery shoppers are an important component of keeping clients safe. They're part of a continual vetting process that helps businesses evaluate their therapists. Even with a heavy vetting protocol during your interview process, predatory therapists can still find their way onto your staff.

Predator therapists often test clients by pushing verbal and/or physical boundaries during a massage therapy session. Too often, these inappropriate actions are not reported, either because the client has not been properly educated by the business to recognize such improprieties, or because the client feels too ashamed or embarrassed to bring the issue to light.

Prior to initiating a mystery shopper visit, organizations need to have collected regular email surveys of their clients' experiences with their massage therapists. These surveys are often primary indications of inappropriate behavior.

Use of a mystery shopper is indicated when inappropriate therapist behavior of a sexual nature is suspected or reported. Certainly, if a therapist has multiple complaints of a sexual nature, a mystery shopper should be engaged. However, even one inappropriate incident is enough to trigger action, based on the severity of the digression.

The mystery shopper should have at least one of these qualifications:

- A massage therapy teacher with at least five years of experience
- A communications teacher at a massage school or similar entity
- Someone who has taught ethics and boundaries at a massage school
- A counselor, psychotherapist, social worker, or psychologist

They should also be:

- An assertive person
- Emotionally mature, of the same gender as the person reporting sexual misconduct, and between the ages of 30 and 50 years. (This criterion is based on Dr. Benjamin's extensive work as an expert witness and reflects both the demographic of those who have brought cases and the maturity level desired for the role of a mystery shopper.)

Staff should be made aware by management of the company's policy of email surveys and mystery shoppers to hopefully curtail any abuses by predatory therapists. The company should also create a system where therapists can anonymously report other therapists who they believe to be or know to be engaging in abusive behavior. However, in all these cases, education is the best preventive measure. Clients need to be educated about what is proper during a session, and when they need to report a therapist. Therapists need ongoing education in ethics, boundaries, draping, and the consequences of not adhering to the company's policies.

How to Interview a Potential Mystery Shopper

- Conduct the interview in person or via Zoom, Skype, etc.
- Explain they will screen massage therapists who have had complaints made against them. The therapist may have poor boundaries and/or predator tendencies.
- Explain signs to watch for during the massage.

A Critical Factor to Consider

- Ask the potential mystery shopper if they would be able to handle it emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically if the massage therapist touched them inappropriately, as this is an unfortunate possibility.

At first, most predatory therapists test client boundaries with behaviors like the following:

- Improper draping
- Asking personal questions
- Sharing personal things about themselves
- Working too high on the inner thigh
- Working on the sides of the breasts while the client is in the prone position
- Leaning against the client's body on the side of the client's leg or hip, or on the top of their head, etc.
- In other cases, the therapist might try to touch the client inappropriately in a first session