

Why Massage Therapy Makes a Great Encore Career

By Lorraine Gengo

Instead of seeking retirement, many Baby Boomers are catching a second wind with a career in massage therapy, as well as in other healthcare related areas, a phenomenon experts call “encore careers”—a trend they see as the biggest paradigm shift in the labor force since the 1970s women’s movement.

The hallmark of these new second career choices is that they are not based on financial considerations, but rather on whether or not the work is personally gratifying and contributes to the greater good of society, according to Marc Freedman, author of *Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life*. As a demographic group, Baby Boomers encompass everyone who was born between 1946 and 1964, a constituency that has been accused of indulgently using resources that we now know are extremely limited. While many boomers are happily ensconced in their golf communities, others are investing their wealth of talent and experience in what Freedman calls a “new social compact,” whereby they find their most meaningful work in second careers that are essential to the national well-being, such as education, healthcare, social services and government, at a time when these services are most in demand.

For John Hamm, massage therapy turned out to be the ideal second career. With a bachelor’s in physics and a master’s in secondary education, Hamm taught science and math to high school students; he also held jobs as a factory worker, home improvement contractor and as a senior engineer with Electric Boat Corp. in Groton before he finally retired. After about five years into retirement, he decided to pay attention to a lifelong inclination to study massage. When a friend told him that the Connecticut Center for Massage Therapy had opened a campus in Groton, not far from where he lives in Westerly, Rhode Island, he decided to check it out.

When he dropped by the Groton campus, he says, he received such a warm welcome he knew he was in the right place. “When I went to the initial open house, I was about 60. The person I went with asked, ‘Aren’t we too old to be considering this as a career?’ But I didn’t think of myself as too old,” recalls Hamm.

A common misconception is that you have to be young and physically athletic to work as a professional massage therapist. But Hamm, who is now 65, hasn’t found his age or physical stature to be a hindrance. “I can go hours and hours without stopping, partly because I watch my body mechanics, but also because there are modalities that don’t require me to be an athlete in my prime,” he says.

Hamm’s part-time practice is highly varied. For instance, he performs chair massage at exhibitions, volunteers at the hospital in New London, works out of a local chiropractor’s office, visits clients’ homes to do massage, and he does chair and table massage at special events like wedding parties.

The variety of applications for massage therapy expands almost daily, and as the population of the United States ages, the healthcare field only keeps growing with job opportunities—especially for Baby Boomers, rich in life experience, who are looking for encore careers. What Hamm and other boomers are finding is that there are plenty of avenues open to them as massage therapists other than sports massage. They are shifting the public’s view of massage therapists as burly muscle mashers to that of therapists who provide calming touch to cancer patients in hospitals in the growing field of medical massage therapy, where softer touch and less rigorous techniques are employed, as well as other new arenas such as infant massage.

Hamm says his work as a massage therapist has paid dividends that he didn't expect. "Being able to concentrate on one person for an hour at a time, where it's only me and that person in the whole world...it's very grounding," he says. "Life gets pretty busy and hectic, but when I'm in the massage room it's not at all."

Hamm admits to having felt "kind of odd" about wanting to be a massage therapist at his age. But the encouragement he received from his family allayed any doubts he had. "I've always had an interest in touch since I was a child. It just took me a while to find it, and I'm so grateful I did. It keeps me young."

William Courtland looks at his second career as a massage therapist as his "insurance policy" to aging well. Courtland spent 30 years working as an art director in the magazine publishing industry in Manhattan. His longtime interest in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) gave him a perspective on how to achieve longevity in a meaningful way. When he hit 50, he says, "I was aware of what had to be done." According to TCM, mid-life is all about letting go, so he quit the publishing business and went back to school. He graduated from CCMT in 2001 and in a short time was on staff teaching acupuncture and TCM to students at the Westport and Newington campuses.

"The biggest danger for anyone over 50 is to adopt the view that you are not going to move as much anymore," says Courtland. "When you're a massage therapist you're forced to use your body, and in the process you're moving chi. For me, it was a great reminder of what I need."

By moving chi, or life-force energy, the massage therapist not only helps his or her client to attain a more healthful state of being, but also taps into stores of energy within themselves. Courtland notes that TCM teaches one to work from a deep, core center—known as the hara—instead of using brute strength to perform the work. In order to work from this energy center, "one has to be there and be attentive," explains Courtland. His younger students often have a difficult time connecting with their hara, because they don't think they need to, given their youthful stamina. But, as one ages, it's an essential lesson to learn, he adds.

While he now resides in a retirement community in Southbury, Conn., William Courtland is anything but withdrawn from society. In addition to seeing his massage clients, many of whom are past 55, Courtland has been very busy giving lectures on TCM at wellness centers, assisted living communities and to senior organizations around Connecticut. He's also writing a book that gives his unique perspective on Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Courtland exemplifies what longevity research has discovered about why certain people are more mentally and physically fit than others as they age. Finding meaningful work that keeps you mindful of your own physical wellbeing, that keeps you grounded, reduces your stress, and energizes you, is key to staying youthful, and these qualities can be found in a massage therapy career. And, as important, it's a career that requires that you keep learning something new, thanks to the fact that body-mind science is the new frontier in medicine and health care.

There's no doubt that we live in a culture where growing old is viewed negatively. However, as more boomers re-enter the workforce to find meaningful second careers which benefit society, perhaps the view of elders will transform into one where they may be recognized for embodying the kind of wisdom that's found in many other cultures.