

Chicago spa seven years ago, Hillman was joined by a female guest in her late 60s who sat directly across from him. "I jolted, realizing the lounge was co-ed and pulled at my robe, feeling self-conscious that I was now sitting in a room trying to relax with my mother," he recalled. "I could tell she was uncomfortable, too, so we sat nervously waiting and trying not to look at one another until our therapists came to pick us up. What a way to start your treatment." This experience made such a profound impact on Hillman, in fact, that it served as the inspiration to leave his job in the corporate world and open SIR Spa, an all-male day spa.

ALL THE SPA'S A STAGE

The paint on the walls, the type of background music playing and the look and feel of your spa's furniture and decorations aren't the only factors contributing to its calming atmosphere – the spa's staff also play a significant role, as they are the models of optimal well-being and relaxation for your clients to follow. "It should be understood that from the moment the staff walks through the door that they are 'on stage,' where they are expected to focus entirely on guests' needs," said Courcelle.

But we all know that not every day can be a "spa day" for staff. "There is no doubt that staff members can pass along their own stress to others," said Hillman. "All can feel and see it." At SIR Spa, if it is noticed that a team member is having a bad day, they focus on resolving the issue right away. "Talking it out helps release some of the tension they may be experiencing and put better focus on the task at hand," Hillman explained. "In addition, creating a work environment that is focused on the team and their needs definitely helps their attitudes. Good equipment and well-organized rooms and processes enable team members to walk into SIR and do what they do best – take

care of the guests – while enjoying themselves at the same time."

For staff members who may be suffering from a work-related injury, however, this might be a difficult task. "It's hard to greet clients with a smile and a relaxed demeanor if you are in pain," said Lauriann Greene, president of Save Your Hands and co-author of "Save Your

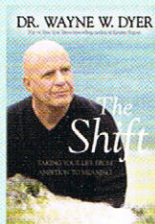
Hands! The Complete Guide to Injury Prevention and Ergonomics for Manual Therapists, 2nd Edition." "Injury and symptoms lead to a general decrease in morale and dissatisfaction with the work environment, and clients definitely pick up on that."

According to Greene, due to the hand-

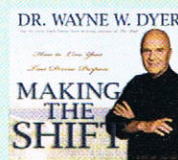
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HAY HOUSE

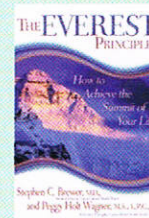
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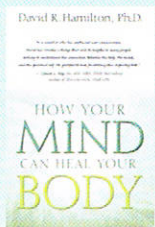
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"...a "burden basket" is hung on the door knob leading into the treatment room, showing how all worries are left outside during treatment."

intensive nature of massage therapy and other spa services, common occurrences of hand, arm and shoulder injuries appear among spa professionals, along with back and neck injury due to bending and lifting. "Wrist and thumb tendonitis, lower-back strain and rotator-cuff injuries are among the most common injuries," said Greene. In fact, in a study Greene did with co-author Rick Goggins and in association with Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals in 2006, it was found that 77 percent of respondents had experienced musculoskeletal pain or injury as a result of their work.

To help prevent these injuries from occurring in the first place, Greene said, "It's in the best interest of spa management to teach their employees how to recognize early symptoms, create a system for reporting those symptoms without prejudice to the employee and develop protocols for referring therapists to appropriate local healthcare professionals for treatment." By creating an open and caring work environment for your staff, they are more likely to address any problem early on rather than try and work through their pain, which could negatively affect a client's experience. "Providing comprehensive information and training on preventing injury is the best way to keep symptoms from developing in the first place," added Greene. "The cost of such an effort is small compared with the benefit. Ergonomics programs have been proven to reduce workers' comp claims, absenteeism and turnover by as much as 75 percent, while improving productivity, morale and job satisfaction. And nothing helps create an atmosphere of well-being for clients more than treatment staff who

are pain-free, happy and have a good sense of well-being themselves."

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Given people's busy lives, for many who come to a spa, it can take all the way up to the time of treatment before they finally achieve a relaxed, stress-free state of mind and body. To further enhance this feeling, at Heavenly Spas, therapists conduct a ritual at the beginning of every treatment to help guests clear their minds of any remaining burdens or anxieties they may still be carrying. In the "release burdens" ritual, for example, a "burden basket" is hung on the door knob leading into the treatment room, showing how all worries are left outside during treatment. At Heavenly Spa at The Westin Moana Surfrider resort in Hawaii, guests are asked to sprinkle Hawaiian sea salt into a gourd before their treatment begins. "The salt represents any thoughts they want to let go of before their treatment," explained McCarthy. The gourd is then removed from the room, and at the end of the day, all of the collected salt is released out into the ocean. "We can truly say that we take our guests' worries and wash them away."

Which is a primary reason why many spa-goers seek spa in the first place: to relieve stress. Although the outside world may be full of potential stressors, the spa is one safe place where none should exist. Through your spa's calming atmosphere, caring staff and careful consideration of the details of each stage of the spa experience, your guests can forget about the pressures they have pushing down on them and walk out of your spa singing a different tune. ■

RACHEL ZAWILA is the assistant editor of *Sommelier Journal* magazine based in Denver, Colorado.