



## Professional Associations & Organizations for Massage Therapy

Being a professional is more than just earning a living from a specific activity. Professionals in every industry, including massage therapy and bodywork, are expected to perform their work to the highest standards, stay current with best practices and new research, commit to continued learning and professional development, practice ethical conduct, and actively participate within the industry. Professional associations can help massage therapists to meet these expectations.

What are professional massage associations? **Professional associations are organizations that serve the interests of the members of the profession. In this case, it is the interests of professional massage therapists. Each specific professional organization has its own unique mission, benefits and requirements, and will appeal to different types of practitioners. Professional organizations may go by different names such as *Association, Society, Board, Commission, Professional body, Agency, and Foundation.***

This article lists the largest massage therapy associations and organizations in the USA. It is helpful for massage therapists and students entering the profession to understand the basic purpose, functions and benefits of these massage associations, especially if you are considering joining one. Massage students or therapists preparing to take the MBLEx may also see a question or two on this information in the *Professional Guidelines* content area of the massage licensing exam.

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## What is the purpose of professional associations for massage therapy?

Professional associations exist to support the interests of people working in that profession (members), as well as to support the industry itself and serve the greater public good. They serve as a way to advance the profession through encouraging connections, advocacy for massage

issues at the federal, state and local levels, promotion of the industry to the public, and facilitating communication and innovation.

Professional associations range from large national and international organizations, to small local and highly specialized groups of professionals. They typically have an elected leadership body and require dues to cover organizational costs. Many professional associations enlist volunteers to fill certain roles within the organization.



## Why join a professional massage association?

There are a few reasons why massage therapists may choose to join a professional association or organization. The most common reason is to **receive benefits** that the organization offers to members. In the massage and bodywork industry, these benefits may include:

- Professional liability insurance
- Continuing education courses, workshops or webinars
- Professional recognition or credentials (for resumé-building, marketing, or your massage bio)
- Access to industry discounts such as massage apps and software
- Industry resources and publications (e.g. magazine, journal, newsletter)
- Peer support and connections with other providers
- Business startup guidance, networking and job searching
- Listing in a member directory for marketing / promotion
- Access to industry events and conferences
- Opportunities to connect mentors & mentees

Massage therapists may also choose to join a professional association as a way of **supporting their industry**. For example, some associations:

- Promote awareness of the massage therapy profession to the public and other healthcare providers
- Provide legislative advocacy in their jurisdiction (e.g. state or national)
- Provide representation at the state massage licensing board meetings
- Keep members notified of updates or changes in laws and rules that affect members

## Four types of professional organizations

There are four main types of professional organizations.

- Member-benefit organizations
- Designation-granting associations
- Certifying bodies
- Professional regulatory bodies

### Member-benefit organizations

The purpose of a member-benefit professional association is to create value for its members. These organizations typically offer various products or services to members. This may be their own physical or digital products and services like those listed above. Or it may be that the organization collaborates with other businesses to offer members discounts for their products. Member-benefit organizations often have their own code of ethics, but they generally have no way to enforce compliance. AMTA and ABMP could be classified as member-benefit organizations.

### Designation-granting associations

The main function of designation-granting associations is to provide its members with a professional designation. A designation-granting association is a type of member-benefit organization. Many people aspire to be seen as professionals, and seek a way to signal their professional status to others. Obtaining a designation can also be way to demonstrate commitment to one's occupation. It can demonstrate a specific achievement, such as learning advanced skills or earning a certification in a specific type of massage. Certifications usually need to be renewed every couple of years which is done by completing continuing education, documenting clinical

hours, or some other method to show continued competency. An example is AMMA. \*It is important to note that a designation does not necessarily protect the public from incompetent or unethical practitioners.

## Certifying bodies

Certifying bodies are similar to designation-granting associations in that they issue credentials to members who meet specified requirements such as education prerequisites, professional experience, or passing of an exam. However, the main purpose of certifying bodies is to issue these credentials and ensure that all certified members maintain competency. An example is the NCBTMB which offers therapist the opportunity to earn *Board Certification*.

## Professional regulatory bodies

Professional regulatory bodies function primarily to serve the public by establishing and upholding licensing or certification requirements for a specific occupation. These organizations help with establishing expectations and boundaries of the profession. They also coordinate industry practices with state and federal guidelines. Examples of professional regulatory bodies for massage therapy include *state massage boards* and the *FSMTB* which administers the MBLEx.



## List of professional massage associations and organizations in the US

- American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)
- Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP)
- American Organization for Bodywork Therapies of Asia (AOBTA)
- American Medical Massage Association (AMMA)
- National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (NCBTMB)
- Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB)

- Massage Therapy Foundation (MTF)

There is also a *Coalition of National Massage Therapy Organizations* in the US which includes the following members: AMTA, NCBTMB, FSMTB, COMTA, ABMP, Massage Therapy Foundation, and Alliance for Massage Therapy Education.

A few states have established successful **state massage associations**. Plus, the AMTA has state chapters in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

- Florida State Massage Therapy Association (FSMTA)
- Tennessee Massage Therapy Association (TMTA)
- Washington State Massage Therapy Association (WSMTA)
- New York State Society of Medical Massage Therapists (NYSSMMT)
- California Massage Therapy Council (CAMTA).

There are also professional massage organizations that function to support to massage schools and educators. These organizations strive to strengthen educational standards through supporting and accrediting educators. Examples of these organizations include:

- Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA)
- Alliance for Massage Therapy Education (AFMTE)



## American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)

### History, purpose and functions of AMTA

The American Massage Therapy Association is the largest nonprofit professional association for massage therapists. AMTA was formed in 1943 under the name American Association of Masseurs and Masseuses (AAMM). This organization worked to help legitimize massage therapy through state law by creating a model law for states to register practitioners. The name was changed to **American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)** in 1983. This organization established what is now known as the NCBTMB, and what is now known as the COMTA in the 1990's. The AMTA has continued working to promote the value of massage therapy to the public and within the health care industry, advocate for the profession, and ensure the professionalism and ethical practice of massage therapists.

## AMTA member benefits

- Massage liability insurance
- Online continuing education classes
- Publication subscription (*Massage Therapy Journal*)
- Membership to local (state) chapter
- Discounts on products and services

The AMTA offers three levels of membership for massage practitioners. Each level has certain qualification requirements. The AMTA also offers memberships for massage schools, which includes liability coverage the school, faculty and administrators (not the students).

1. **Professional.** \$235/yr or \$20 month. Requires graduation from a minimum of 500 in-class hour massage program, proof of current massage license, *OR* NCBTMB certification. This membership must be renewed every year in order to keep the benefits.
2. **Graduate.** \$89 or \$8/month. 1-year membership for recent graduates (within 1 year), or students within 2 months of graduation from a 500 in-class hour (minimum) entry-level massage training program.
3. **Student.** Free. Must be enrolled in a 500 in-class hour (minimum) entry-level massage therapy program.



## Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP)

### History, purpose and functions of ABMP

Associated Bodywork & Massage Professional (ABMP) was founded in 1987, and is a professional association that provides massage liability insurance and other benefits to members. In addition to providing liability insurance, ABMP advocates for reasonable regulation of the massage profession in all 50 states. The purpose of this is to minimize regulatory burden on practitioners while increasing public safety.

### ABMP member benefits

- Massage liability insurance

- Free continuing education hours
- Subscription to *Massage & Bodywork* magazine
- Member discounts at affiliate companies
- Listing on MassageTherapy.com

ABMP offers two levels of membership for massage therapists. The *Professional* level costs \$199 for 1 year, and the *Certified* level costs \$229 for 1 year. They both provide the same insurance, but the *Certified* level has a few additional benefits such as a monthly payment option, more CE courses to choose from, and bigger discounts at affiliate companies. Learn more about ABMP.



## American Organization for Bodywork Therapies of Asia (AOBTA)

### History, purpose and functions of AOBTA

The American Organization for Bodywork Therapies of Asia (AOBTA) is a professional association that serves Asian Bodywork Therapy (ABT) practitioners, students, educators and schools. AOBTA was formed in 1989 and currently serves about 1,100 active members in the US and abroad.

### AOBTA member benefits

- Professional liability insurance
- Resources and tools to build a successful practice
- Access to continuing education events
- Professional development & networking events
- Listing in AOBTA professional directory

AOBTA has membership options for ABT practitioners and instructors. The *Certified Practitioner* membership requires completion of specified education requirements, and has annual membership dues of \$150 (+\$30 initial application fee). There are two levels of



instructor memberships for Asian Bodywork Therapy educators to choose from. Learn more about AOBTA.

## American Medical Massage Association (AMMA)

### History, purpose and functions of AMMA

The American Medical Massage Association (AMMA) was founded in 1998 and functions to promote medical massage therapy as an allied health care profession. They have created professional standards to help ensure patients receive safe and evidence-based massage treatments from certified members. The goal of AMMA is to use education and awareness to establish medical massage as a valid therapeutic intervention in health care facilities. The National Board Certification Agency (NBCA) has established and administers their certification examination for practitioners to become certified as a *Medical Massage Therapist*.

### AMMA member benefits

- Advanced credentialing for massage therapists
- Continuing education

Prerequisites for AMMA membership and NBCA certification include a minimum of 600 hours training in a program that meets curriculum requirements, as well as completion of the AMMA application. Learn more about AMMA.



## National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (NCBTMB)

## History, purpose and functions of NCBTMB

The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (**NCBTMB**) was founded in 1992. It is a private, independent, nonprofit organization that functions to elevate the massage therapy profession in the US by creating, offering and promoting professional credentialing and standards. Specifically, the NCBTMB offers the Board Certification in Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork (**BCTMB**) exam that massage therapists and bodywork professional may choose to take if they want to be recognized as *Board Certified*. The NCBTMB also performs an important function of ensuring that continuing education providers meet high standards to become an *Approved Provider* of continuing education. The NCBTMB previously offered *Specialty Certificates* such as certifications in sports massage, oncology massage, and clinical rehabilitative massage, but these were discontinued in December 2021.

### NCBTMB member benefits

- Recognition of being a *Board Certified* massage therapist / bodyworker
- Discounts for NCBTMB members

To become a NCBTMB member, you must meet certain educational requirements, pass the BCTMB exam and become a *Board Certified* therapist. The application fee is \$275. This certification must be renewed every 2 years by completing 24 hours of continuing education courses through NCBTMB-approved providers, and paying the \$110 renewal fee.



## Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB)

### History, purpose and functions of FSMTB

The Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB) was formed in 2005 as ABMP met with massage regulators and educators to establish an organization to provide a unified regulatory community for the massage and bodywork profession. The mission was to create a valid and reliable licensing exam to ensure the competency of massage license candidates.

The FSMTB also works to increase the uniformity of state license requirements to facilitate therapist mobility when moving to a different state. It serves as a support resource for member state boards of 41 states + DC and Puerto Rico. In addition, the FSMTB **CE Registry** provides a registry of in-person and online continuing education courses for massage therapists, and is accepted in 31 states.

### Massage & Bodywork Licensing Exam (MBLEx)

The FSMTB governs and administers the Massage & Bodywork Licensing Exam (**MBLEx**). This entry-level licensing examination is utilized in 46 of the 49 regulated jurisdictions in the USA and its territories in their massage license application process. Learn more about the MBLEx.

Find out more about the FSMTB here.

## Other professional organizations in the USA related to massage therapy

There really aren't many active professional associations for massage therapists or bodyworkers in the US. Much like the high percentage of small businesses that start up and then close down within a few years, many massage associations have been started to only fade away within a few years. There could be many reasons for this such as an organizations's poor leadership, a lack of clear purpose of the organization, insufficient funding or promotion, or potential members were just not interested or properly motivated to join.

In addition to the professional massage associations already discussed in this post, there are numerous groups, clubs, societies, etc. of *related* practices that are open to massage therapists joining. These professional organizations can offer a variety of benefits to help therapists continue learning and expanding their skill and their professional network. There are also associations created specifically for practitioners of specialty types of bodywork or healing modalities.

- National Association for the Self-Employed (NASE)
- Spa Industry Association (SIA)
- Reflexology Association of America (RAA)
- American Society for the Alexander Technique (AMSAT)
- National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA)
- International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association (ISMETA)
- National Association of Myofascial Trigger Point Therapists (NAMTPT)
- Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy Association of North America (BCTA)

- Massage Therapy Foundation (MTF)

There are numerous associations that focus on research, education, treatment protocols, and raising awareness about specific conditions or diseases. For example, the National Fibromyalgia Association. Practitioners who specialize in working with clients with specific conditions may want to consider joining a relevant association.

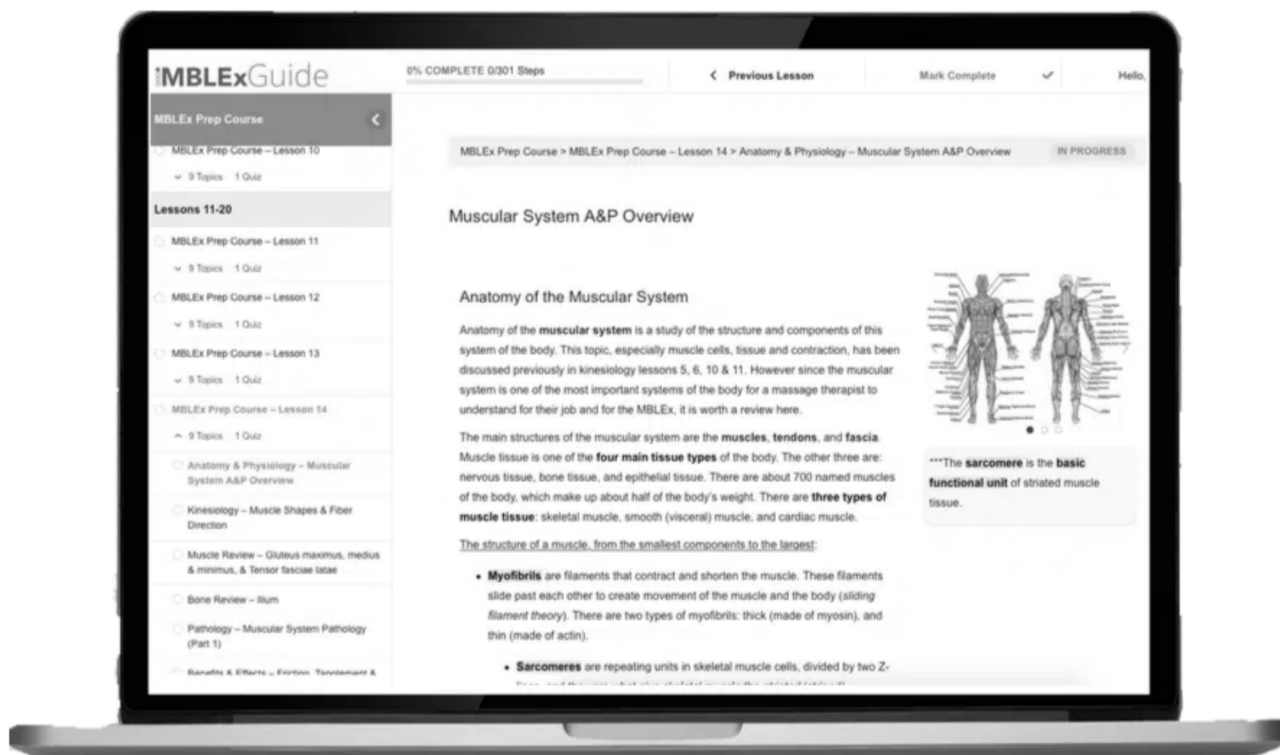
## Frequently asked questions about professional massage associations

### Should I join a professional massage association?

Massage therapists should consider joining a professional association *IF* it is worth it to you. First, see if the association aligns with your short-term and long-term career goals. Then determine the costs of joining and the value that you would get from the membership. This value could be in the form of member benefits such as continuing education, industry discounts, professional liability insurance, massage business marketing, access to publications, etc. Or it could be value knowing that you are supporting an organization that supports something that you believe in. Finally, find out if you meet the membership requirements or are willing to meet them.

### What is the best massage organization to join?

The best massage organization to join is the one that meets your needs. As a practicing therapist, you probably need professional liability insurance, and continuing education hours. But you may also want an active local chapter or the opportunity to collaborate with other therapists who are skilled in a specific type of bodywork. The organizations mentioned in this article have been around for a while and would be a good place to start your search for a professional association that provides what you're looking for.



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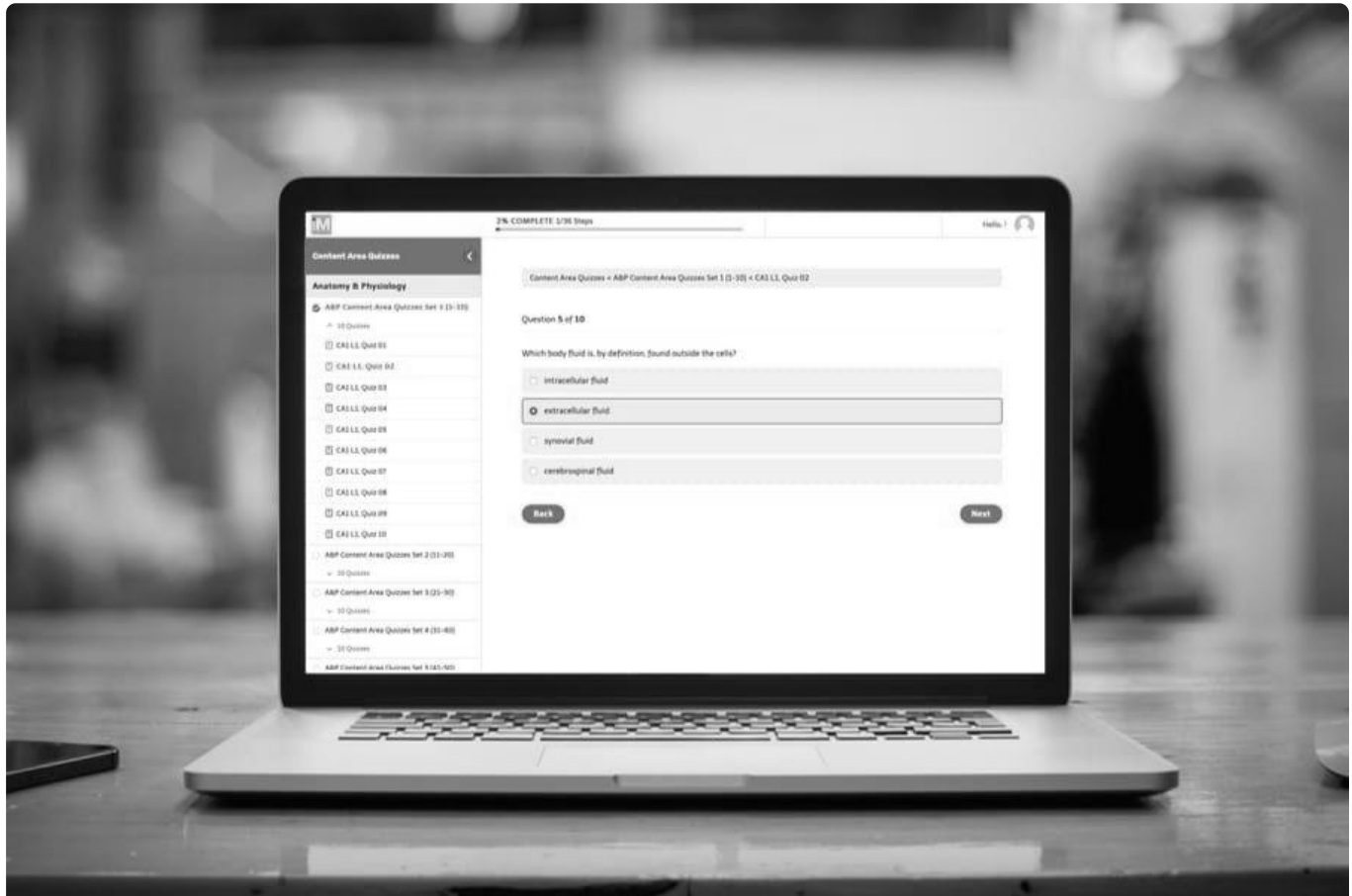
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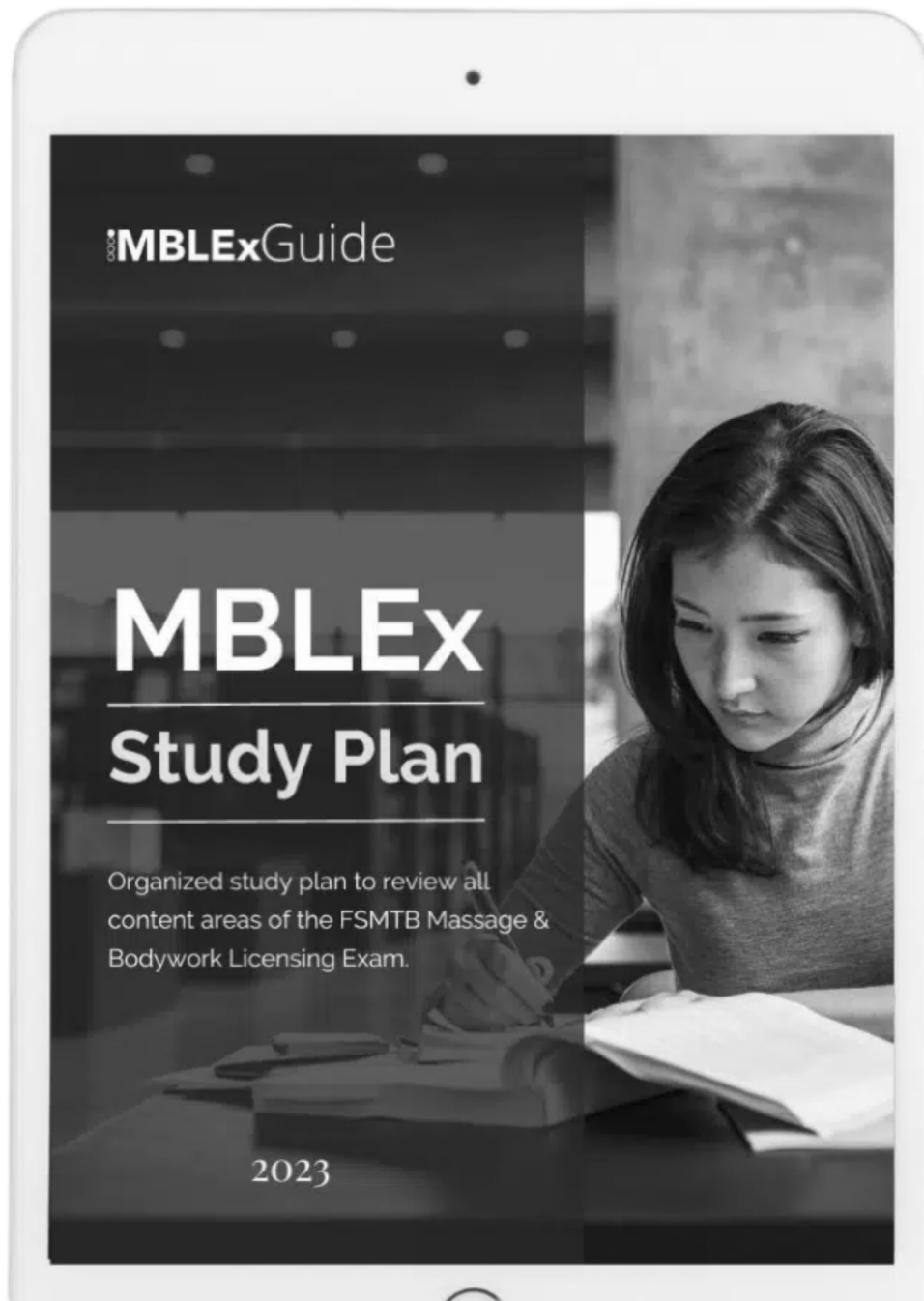


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