

Ten Top Tips for setting up in private practice

1 Premises

Firstly, you need to decide from which location and premises you want to work. Sometimes it's worth just having a walk around your local shops and looking up at the floors above to see if they are empty or used as store rooms. There aren't many landlords who would refuse the offer of a good tenant (legally binding) and you may be able to convince them that you will redecorate the premises in return for an initial months free rent. Which ever premises you decide on, invest in a good solicitor to look and if possible to talk you through your tenancy agreement or maybe you know someone who can help in that way.

All of your marketing material will be based on the premises that you choose such as contact details i.e. postal address (a lot of work still comes in by post), you'll need a land telephone number, even in the days of high technology, many people still prefer to call you on a landline.

Is the building/property safe? Imagine what it will be like in the winter evenings walking to your car, is it far from the nearest car park? Just like you and your home, your business needs roots - just like a mighty oak starts from a little acorn. This is where it all begins, allow yourself to be excited ~ you've earned it.

You can also consider employing the use of one of the many excellent virtual answering services available; this provision gives callers the impression that you work from a very busy practice. The cost can be anywhere from £80.00 - £150.00 per month depending on which company that you use.

The caller dials the number and is immediately directed to the virtual assistance programme – which will have details of you and your company on a screen in front of them. You set a default of what you would like them to say to callers: i.e. "Jane is with a client at the moment, would you like me to take a message or send her an email?"

You can set any default message that you require; they will cover holidays, sickness leave as well as day-to-day response. Any new caller message is then transferred to you via whichever channel you choose: such as email or text message. It's a brilliant idea and a great gatekeeper for sales calls (of which you will get hundreds)!



Marketing

When you're working as a self-employed therapist in any field, you need to be a marketing coordinator first and a therapist second. Your logo, leaflets, business cards, posters and anything else you decide to produce, will say more about you and the way you work than you will ever realise. If you want to be taken seriously and earn a decent living:

NEVER EVER PRODUCE HOMEMADE LEAFLETS AND/OR BUSINESS CARDS.

There are many really good modern print and design companies in high streets and online, who are cost effective and who will design your logo to suit the company name and all further designs to coordinate and match. Do shop around though, I've met some very good, talented but (ridiculously) expensive companies, but when I started I didn't know any different.

You will undoubtedly change your ideas, layouts, and information over the years over and over again, but to have a print and design company who knows you and your business is invaluable.

Name of business - e.g. Beacon Counselling; once you've decided on a name, think about colours and combinations, many therapists just look at other business's design and either copy or use the same images and colours as everyone else. Be original!

Dare to be daring, go right outside what might be considered as normal. Do you want to be calming and serene with blues and greens, dynamic red and black or fresh red and white with daisies, trees, purple pebbles, tigers, birds or beach scenes.

The choices are endless and with a bit of thought you can decide what fits you and what feels comfortable with your style, and this will continually mirror the service that you provide. So, once you have your corporate logo and image - aim to spend at least six to ten hours every month either emailing your leaflets in a PDF version (all good print and design companies will supply you with this when they do your artwork - mine does it free of charge)!

Having a website is crucial in this day and age and to try and keep up with technology can be a mine field, which is why having the support of a print and design company is so useful to you and your private practice.

Advertising

This needs to be realistically thought out, for example; if you are going to advertise in a local newspaper or glossy county magazine, choose an appropriately timed for issue, such as over a bank holiday weekend when many people will have time to sit and read, therefore noticing and absorbing details of your advert.

You can also run a small advert with just your name, what you do, telephone number and website in most local newspapers which often have free delivery - placing your presence in thousands of homes and businesses every week. These type of adverts can often be cheaper if the newspaper have a guaranteed number of adverts placed in advance.

Maintain caution when placing expensive and potentially ineffective adverts in paper telephone directories or GP surgery booklets, rarely if ever, do clients contact you through this medium, the only people who realistically look at your telephone pages advert are you.

As well as this, many people serious about their need for therapy, increasingly search the Internet via specific counselling directories such as BACP (It's Good to Talk) Counselling Directory, Counselling Pages and a host of others. All of these Internet therapy directories, although priced at around £15 - £20 per month are continuously creating interest and raising awareness of your profile and presence.

Certification

Your qualifications are not only important to you but are the bones from which you work and grow, they represent the years of sacrifices and hard work that you have invested. Your main certificates should be displayed in your place of work such as Counselling, Insurance and CRB as well as your ICO or Data Protection Document in frames on a wall in your therapy room or kept in a folder in clear transparencies. This does have a positive effect on clients and having researched this controversial element over many years - clients ultimately feel confident that they are in safe hands when they can see evidence of certification.



Note keeping

Aim to start as you mean to go on and create a number or alphabet sequence such as 001, 002 or 100001, 100002, you could put the clients' initial somewhere in the sequence i.e. A100001SW, B100002JH - as long as you can keep your records accurately without using the clients full name on them this will give you added confidentiality, as notes should never be easily identifiable to others. Once you have your chosen number sequence it can then be set up on a spreadsheet enabling quick reference when needed, if this is how you would like to work.

Rules about keeping notes change frequently, the BACP include the following guidelines in their Ethical Framework:

"Respecting client confidentiality is a fundamental requirement for keeping trust. The professional management of confidentiality concerns the protection of personally identifiable and sensitive information from unauthorised disclosure. Disclosure may be authorised by client consent or the law. Any disclosures should be undertaken in ways that best protect the client's trust. Practitioners should be willing to be accountable to their clients and to their profession for their management of confidentiality in general and particularly for any disclosures made without their client's consent".

http://www.bacp.co.uk/ethical_framework/good_standard.php

What happens to your notes and client information if you die suddenly? Its a good idea to set up a Joint Death Agreement or JDA, which involves you locating another therapist, colleague or your Clinical Supervisor and signing an agreement that sets out them taking on your clients or disposing of your client notes. This may entail client contact in the event of either of your deaths. You will need to design this document between yourselves and this information may also be included in to your terms and conditions documentation so that your clients are aware of it at initial assessment stage. The same system can be put in place for long-term illness.



Accounts, Tax and National Insurance Liabilities.

When setting up in private practice, keep every receipt for the set up costs and later, items and any groceries such as tea, coffee, tissues. Keep all paperwork for both monies in and out, make copies of all invoices that you provide for monies in and retain them in a folder so that you have a balance of outgoings and incomings. You can complete your own annual accounts or you can pay a nominal fee for a professional to do them for you. Some accountants and book keepers who work from home are happy to accept monthly payments and will complete your tax returns and communicate with the tax office on your behalf. You must register as self employed and you can do this by contacting your allocated tax office. It is worth noting that they are usually very helpful and approachable.

Charging for Services

At first this can be a problem, asking for money or therapy fees can be awkward or the therapist may feel embarrassed. There is no need - we must not do what we do for the money, but we must be paid for what we do.

People often pay more to have their hair and nails done than you are charging for therapy, clients expect to pay a fee and come to you with that knowledge.

Make sure that your fees are shown on your website and on all of your online counselling directories. You can choose to offer a concession fee for unemployed clients if you wish. You can also choose to offer concessionary fees for advanced bookings for local businesses or for schools and colleges.

On a practical level you need to decide how you will accept therapy fees i.e. by cheque (which incidentally, are slowly being phased out), cash (needs to be recorded daily) online bank payment (BP) you can also set up a PayPal facility on your website, you will be charged for each transaction. Card machines are becoming more popular in the counselling and therapy arena and these machines will also incur a charge, which can be passed to the client when accepting payment by card if you wish.

Copyright

It's important to protect your business and the name and logo you've chosen. For example Beacon Counselling & Therapy Services ~ Guiding you through the darkness.... is a brilliant professional name and many counsellors and therapists would probably like to have such a name. But let's say you have thought of it first - you've purchased the website domain name of www.beaconcounselling.co.uk and everything is in place. Then one day out of the blue, you get a call from a lady called 'Mrs Drew' who says she cannot keep her appointment this morning, you can't find her in your diary and it soon becomes apparent that another therapist has set up in the same name.

If you don't have copyright on your name and design, you won't have any right to complain about it. Many people have tried to copy and/use the Jigsaw name and a short sharp letter from a solicitor including the copyright reference numbers has always stopped them in their tracks, resulting in them changing their name rather quickly.

EAP

EAP (employee assistance programmes) and contractual work. This is the bread and butter of most qualified therapists, EAP's are increasingly available across the UK for many employees, depending on where you live, you may find an EAP who will be recruiting therapists. Some will take unaccredited counsellors and some won't - you will have to take the time to go through each and every application process to find that out.

Here are just three of the more 'well known' EAP companies.

- Right Management
- PPC Personal Performance Company
- Health Assured

Contract work can be set up with a Service Level Agreement (SLA) Which is an agreement between a service provider and a company or organisation. It describes the level of service expected from the service provider.

Keeping self safe

Regular Peer Group Supervision - It's always a good way of working to meet regularly with other therapists, this can be structured weekly, fortnightly, monthly or quarterly. Working in this way keeps you updated with continued professional developments and training available. Often hearing others perspectives on working with a certain client can help you to work with them.

Clinical Supervision - There is a general obligation for therapists to have regular clinical supervision – details of such an obligation this can also be found below:
http://www.bacp.co.uk/ethical_framework/good_standard.php
Working with your supervisor is crucial to maintaining healthy therapeutic relationships and ethical boundaries, keeping you safe and ensuring that you are working safely.

Friends and Family - In the beginning, many new therapists tend to work and play their new role and it is so important to have a good work/life balance in this job. We all need laughter, fun and as many outside activities and interests as we can possibly fit in.

It can sometimes be hard to switch off, but remember that every person in all walks of life is entitled to time off for self reflection and/or to go on holiday, this is a time when work phones can be switched off, diverted to an alternative therapist or virtual assistant and email notifications set up.

There are also 'apps' available for mobile phones, which send automatic text message responses. All of these automated services allow a clear bounded detachment for you and your service, giving peace of mind whilst you have a break.

Intake Sheet

Self-referrals, people are less likely to abuse you if you have information about them. Consider what would be essential for you and your practice to be included on an intake sheet for private and self-referrals. Possible inclusions may be: Name, address, mobile and landline contact details, next of kin or GP details, medication, number to call in case of emergency and most importantly their signature.

Position in therapy room

Make sure that you can get out if you need to get away from a client if they become threatening or aggressive.

Therapy Room Alarms

Have a simple wall alarm fitted that will, at the very least, disorientate an angry client once it is activated. There may be no one else in the building but the client won't necessarily be aware of that – giving you a few extra seconds to get out. Excellent cost effective Therapy Room Alarms are available to purchase from our Therapy Tools Website Page <http://www.traumaresources.co.uk/therapy.php>

Buddy system

If you work in a domiciliary setting you will already know that a buddy system is the best way to keep safe. This involves you leaving the name and address of the person you are visiting at an agreed chosen place in your home or at your place of work. If you do not return or call in, in the allocated time frame your 'buddy' will raise the alarm and call the police.

Setting up in private practice can require determination, a strong will to succeed and sometimes making sacrifices. However, you can only do your very best and I hope that you will gain insight and useful information from the above tips. I set up in private practice in 2003 and found that many doors were closed to the idea of private counselling or therapy. Many GP surgeries and Medical Centres would not entertain having my leaflets in their premises. (This is very different now). I made many mistakes and often chose services that were worse than useless, in terms of advertising or printing and it really does take time to become the therapist that you want to be and to develop your own style.

I wish you well, Always.

Sue

Jigsaw

