

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS
FOR COUNSELLORS

Counselling and Psychotherapy in Private Practice

Roger Thistle



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*Counselling and
Psychotherapy
in Private Practice*

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS FOR COUNSELLORS

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
Introduction	1
1 You and Private Practice	3
2 Business and Private Practice	24
3 Trading Style, Accounts, Taxes and Private Practice	41
4 Assessments, Contracts, Records and Private Practice	49
5 Premises and Private Practice	62
6 Safety, Boundaries, Insurance and Private Practice	77
7 Promoting Private Practice	87
8 Defining Success in Private Practice	103
Appendix 1: Personal Financial Plan	115
Appendix 2: British Association for Counselling Code of Ethics and Practice for Counsellors	117
References	128
Useful Addresses	130
Index	133

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Introduction

For some, starting up in private practice as a counsellor or psychotherapist will be a step towards a successful career, for others it will be a financial mistake. Some practitioners will jog along, receiving a reasonable financial return for their efforts, while others will be highly successful, both financially and in the professional reputation that they develop. If you have undergone a substantial training in counselling or psychotherapy, and are committed to professional development while seeking a fresh challenge, then you may be considering starting up your own private practice. Or perhaps you are already seeing clients privately but are wondering how to expand or become more successful. Be assured that this book was written by someone who has had to face many of these challenges in the course of his practice. Whether you earn, or you are planning to earn an income from working privately as a counsellor, counselling psychologist, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist or psychoanalyst, this book will be relevant to your circumstances.

I came to write this book because my working life to date has had two major strands, namely finance and counselling. I grew up in a family where my father was a tax consultant and my mother, aunt and uncle were all bankers. I too spent ten years in banking, credit approval and financial marketing. These experiences provided the financial background I needed when, twelve years ago, I changed career, retrained as a counsellor and developed a private counselling practice and related consultancies.

There is of course a lengthy debate that could be had about the differences and the similarities between counselling, counselling psychology, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Offering long-

2 Counselling and psychotherapy in private practice

term therapy rather than short-term counselling may well provide a more steady income for the practitioner, but this is not necessarily the case. Most psychotherapists would probably admit to having some clients who leave after one or two sessions and many counsellors continue seeing clients for several years. Differences between these professions are largely not relevant to the success of a private practice and so are not explored further in this book. Of course this does not mean you should deliberately blur the differences. It is important that you are clear about the training which you have undertaken and that you only work within your capabilities for it would be unethical to do otherwise.

There has been a relatively slow growth in articles (Blower and Rink, 1987) and books on private practice in counselling and psychotherapy in the UK (Coltart, 1993; Syme, 1994; McMahon, 1994). My purpose in writing this book is to pass on some practical experiences, explaining how it is possible to integrate an ethical and caring approach to clients with a businesslike attitude to work. Potentially there are many pitfalls for people working outside institutional settings, but it is perfectly possible to develop a professional practice that delivers income, variety of work and most importantly satisfied clients. The issues of appropriate training, supervision, qualification, accreditation or registration and personal therapy are essential considerations for any counselling or psychotherapy practitioner.

Other matters that I have covered include planning and research, marketing, accounting, tax matters, premises, legal issues, in fact everything that helps build a successful business. This book should be of interest to those who are already in training or wondering about beginning; those who want to plan their career; those who wish to weigh up their prospects of establishing a private practice and those wanting to improve an existing one.

You and Private Practice

What is private practice?

What exactly is meant by the term 'private practice' as it relates to counselling and psychotherapy? In this book I refer to 'practitioners', by this term I mean mainly counsellors and psychotherapists, who earn all or part of their income directly from their clients, working professionally in the context of a therapeutic relationship.

Such practice is private in the sense that it is not publicly funded (such as the NHS and social services). Consequently services are not generally free to clients. Practitioners are self-employed people, responsible for generating their own income and managing their own businesses although they may co-operate with others, establish formal partnerships with individuals or organisations or have other sources of income including part-time employment.

Such a working arrangement means that there is a direct and confidential business relationship between each practitioner and their clients, usually based on a contract which is either formal or a verbal agreement between them (Sills, 1997). People working for themselves are not employed as such, neither are they managed (by an individual or an organisation). This means they are responsible primarily to their clients although they may well belong to professional bodies which expect certain standards from them. This independence allows for freedom of operation and methods. However, with freedom comes responsibility and

4 *Counselling and psychotherapy in private practice*

there is always a risk that anyone working in isolation might overcharge, offer a poor service or abuse their clients in any other way.

Science and ethics

While such treatment seems to be of benefit to many, opponents point out that there is no scientific proof of effective treatment (Eysenck, 1992). This contrasts with the medical world, where for example, there is clear evidence of patient recovery following drug treatment. Counselling and psychotherapy rely on general theories and practices established over time and an impression that most clients feel better following treatment. Some researchers, however, are now confident that the case for the effectiveness of counselling and psychotherapy has been firmly made (Smith et al., 1980).

Without scientific proof these professions remain vulnerable to criticism. For example, in general medicine, doctors and their patients are protected by the British Medical Association which lays down clear ethical standards for treatment, whereas counsellors and psychotherapists may choose to belong to one of a wide range of training or professional bodies or to none at all.

This split between medical and psychological treatment can be traced back to differences of approach among the founders of the professions. There has always been controversy over whether psychoanalysis was a profession which should only be staffed by qualified medical practitioners or whether it was possible for non-medically trained people to become equally proficient.

In the late nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud found himself at the centre of this challenge from the medical profession. In more recent times there has been some serious thinking about the ethical basis for people advertising themselves and working in private practice as counsellors or psychotherapists. Today there is a recognition that poor quality practitioners cast a shadow on the profession as a whole and this has led to the formation of professional bodies with defined codes of ethics and practice for their members, including the power to investigate complaints from clients.

This type of work requires life experience, so it is not suited to school or college leavers or those with little experience of adult life and human relationships. Some practitioners do come from a

background of health care but there are many other routes which lead into this kind of work, including teaching, education, personnel management, social work and the churches. Some choose counselling or psychotherapy as a completely new career in mid-life, perhaps after a positive experience of undergoing personal therapy for themselves. While lack of life experience means that it is not a suitable career for the very young, it has been known for people who have retired to train and set up in private practice.

Despite attempts to introduce legislation and professional registers, currently anyone may operate as a counsellor or psychotherapist in the UK with no training, no qualifications, and without registering with any organisation. The respected professional bodies would regard this as an unethical thing to do, but it is not illegal. This is because it involves the acts of talking and listening and it is really quite difficult to design legislation which accurately defines the differences between analysis, psychotherapy, counselling, listening and befriending. (For a detailed discussion of the arguments see Jenkins, 1997.) For several years the bodies that have attempted to regulate these professions have wrestled with their differences and been unable to arrive at a common definition of acceptable practice. This is hardly surprising when counselling and psychotherapy appear to do very similar things and yet are regarded by many of their own practitioners as different professions (James and Palmer, 1996). However, there are now real attempts to co-ordinate registration of counsellors and psychotherapists through the United Kingdom Council of Psychotherapy Register and the United Kingdom Register of Counsellors. At the same time, there is a backlash by those unhappy with over-professionalisation (Mowbray, 1995).

There is a wide spectrum of training courses available within the fields of counselling, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. This ranges from evening classes in basic counselling skills to courses over several years for those training as psychoanalysts. While some practitioners will work without charge in voluntary settings others will charge Harley Street type fees comparable with any private medical practitioner. Practitioners cover a wide range of therapies including marriage and couple work, family, group, art, and drama therapy, behavioural and cognitive therapists, bereavement and trauma counsellors and so on.

Despite strenuous attempts to lay ground rules it is clear that no one body of professionals can as yet lay claim to a single definition

6 *Counselling and psychotherapy in private practice*

of the 'talking cure' which embraces all aspects of counselling and psychotherapy practice. It is difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at a clear definition for elements of counselling and psychotherapy are practised in a whole range of other jobs as well, such as social work, teaching, psychology, psychiatry and religious ministry. Many people simply use counselling skills within their work. Others who are simply good listeners use this in everyday life and relationships and do not regard it as anything professional at all. For a full discussion of these issues see Feltham (1995a).

By definition therefore, there must be as many types of private practice as there are private practitioners. Because private practice is a confidential arrangement between two people and (at least in one-to-one work) there is no third party involved, it has to be based upon trust and so inevitably carries some risk that one person may abuse the other. Clients may be less likely to ask about qualifications than a potential employer, so working privately may be used unethically by some practitioners as a means of disguising a lack of qualifications. Certain political objections to private practice have also been advanced by Pilgrim (1993; 1997).

Having said that, there are many people who derive great satisfaction from providing a well run, ethical and successful private practice and many clients who appreciate the private, anonymous or confidential setting (Feltham, 1995b).

Would private practice suit me?

All potential practitioners need the ability to listen to their own needs and this is a particularly important exercise to undertake before entering the world of private practice. It can be difficult to do this alone, and even if you are undergoing personal therapy yourself you may feel it is difficult to raise such topics within the course of the therapy. Consider discussing your ideas with a trusted friend, a colleague or another practitioner but for a truly objective view don't choose somebody nearby that you may eventually be competing with for clients! Probably you have already asked yourself why you want to do this kind of work, but why specifically do you want to work privately?

Look at the questions below as a starting point. Try to have a really honest dialogue with someone whose judgement you trust:

- Will it suit me to be alone with my clients for much of my week, or would I be happier in a partnership or a centre working with colleagues?
- Will I be aiming to work full-time or part-time?
- Do I need variety in my week, such as lecturing, supervising or other kinds of work that are unconnected with therapy?
- Can I afford to risk being entirely reliant upon my clients for my income?
- Do I have other interests outside the world of therapy that enrich the quality of my life?
- Does my training equip me to work in private practice?
- Is there likely to be a demand for services in the area where I plan to work?
- Am I prepared to promote myself and my practice in order to find sufficient clients?
- Will private practice fit in with my family or other relationships?
- How do I feel about the politics of private practice, especially charging people money for my time?
- How would my needs for supervision change if I were to work in this way?
- Do I have the use of suitable premises?

Be as objective as you can in answering these questions, and think these things through carefully because not everyone has a personality suited to private practice. It is better to be clear in advance whether it is right for you. If you are the sort of person who likes plenty of company, good job security, regular working hours, and prefers to keep work and home life completely separate, then you may want to think again. A private practice can be lonely and isolated unless you put in place regular breaks, a variety of work, quality supervision, and a good support network which offers the opportunity to meet regularly with other practitioners.

Getting these ideas clear from the start can save a lot of problems later. Are you planning to make as much money as you can from your practice or are you offering counselling as a service to the community? Or, like many practitioners, do you accept that some clients will be able to pay 'in full' while others will never be able to do so? Is your aim to bring in a little extra income on top

8 *Counselling and psychotherapy in private practice*

of another job, or will this be your only source of income to support a family and see you through to retirement?

For many people starting up in private practice it makes sense to see some private clients, but work part-time somewhere else such as a counselling centre, GP practice, helpline or employee assistance programme. Having other regular work reduces reliance on private clients for income. This may be particularly important in the early stages as a practice becomes established. It also creates the opportunity to meet regularly with a group of colleagues. Talking to others as I wrote this, I was struck by the number of occasions on which professional isolation was mentioned as a problem for private practitioners. In addition to formal supervision arrangements, peer groups can offer mutual support and (provided confidentiality is respected) somewhere to unburden yourself informally after a difficult client session. Having such a place to share professional concerns can be a positive benefit to the practitioner who at other times works alone.

Working for yourself

Have you ever worked for yourself before? If you have, you will know how important it is to be self disciplined about your day. You will only make a living if you are prepared to be single-minded about your business. Whether you see a couple of clients each week or you have a busy full-time practice, you will want to provide an ethical, caring service for your clients, but you will also need to ensure that your costs do not exceed your income, that you are efficient when it comes to chasing up unpaid bills and that you maintain a regular flow of cash.

When I decided to train full time as a counsellor, I was not entitled to a grant so I had to support myself and my family throughout my training. A nine-to-five job was out of the question because it would clash with the times of my seminars and yet I would also need to be available to see clients in the evenings. I needed a part-time job with flexible hours that would provide a regular income for up to three years, so I ran a small gardening business, offering turfing, weeding and general tidying. I placed a simple small ad in the local free paper and soon I was inundated with customers.

I had never intended that this work would be permanent, but it not only provided a modest income while I studied, but also