

So You're Starting a Therapy or Counselling Practice?

by Jude Fay



Whatever the reason you are choosing to go down this path, good for you!

It is a big step towards what will hopefully be a rewarding and satisfying career for you. In setting up a practice, you will be making available to the public the specialist knowledge and skill that you have developed over the years of your training. As you continue to practice, you will be offering the benefit of your ongoing growth and learning, on the job, or through additional training or CPD. You will be offering to your clients not only your presence and your attention, your care and your support, your interest and your commitment, but an opportunity to grow together in a relationship unlike any other. Do not underestimate what a huge gift to your clients this really is. Some clients will never have had the luxury of being listened to before, and many will never have received quality time and attention devoted just to them and their concerns.

What sort of practice do you want to create?

Your first task in setting up, is to decide what sort of practice you wish to create. This may strike you as an odd sort of question, but I would encourage you to look around you. Counselling and therapy practices come in all shapes and sizes, how do you want yours to be? What are your “must haves” and what are your “like to haves”?

If your training has been specific to a particular issue or population type, such as bereavement counselling, or play therapy, then you may already have some idea of what your practice will look like. If your training has been more general, you may have not given any thought to how you might like it to be. Take a moment now to reflect on those clients you have worked with up till now, and ask yourself what work do you enjoy doing? What clients do you enjoy working with? And why? This will be really helpful for you when you begin to look for work, as it gives you a focus.

Other issues to be considered include whether your work will be purely one-to-one sessions with individual clients, or whether you also intend to work with couples or groups. Will your practice focus exclusively on therapy or counselling work, or might you like to provide other services as well, such as training or education?

So you will be getting the message here that it helps to have an idea of what you want to get from your practice. There may be any number of reasons why you are choosing to go self-employed. Perhaps you

are looking for a new challenge, or wanting to give something back to the community, meet a need or fulfil another social responsibility. Perhaps you want to earn your own income, or supplement what you currently earn. You may be looking to have independence and freedom to control your time and your income, and flexibility to make your own schedule and decide who you want to work with and when.

All of these factors and more may be affecting your decision. However, it is worth spending time thinking about your main motivation, because what you are hoping to get will in large measure determine the direction you go. If this is to be a full time occupation for you, then your decisions may be different than if you simply wish to supplement your income from another job. If your main intention is to provide a social service, to help people in distress, rather than one where you will be relying on the income it generates, then your approach will be different again.

What Structure to Choose?

Most therapy practice is sole practice, i.e. one person practising on their own. A much smaller number operate as partnerships, and still fewer as limited liability companies. In legal terms, the main difference between these choices relates to what happens in the event of insolvency. In a sole trade, the individual is personally liable for all the debts of the business, so if a sole practice goes bankrupt, the practitioner may be in danger of losing their home, even if they did not practice from it. In a partnership, each of the partners may be liable for all the debts of the practice. In a limited liability company, the extent of the liability is generally limited to the amount of capital invested, unless there has been fraud.

A company provides the most

protection, a sole trade the most flexibility. It is a question of weighing the risk and choosing the most appropriate vehicle for the practice, as there are significant implications (cost and other) attached to establishing and running a company. I am greatly simplifying what is a complex issue here, so do get legal and financial advice about what is the best structure for you.

House Keeping Tasks

In order to set up a self-employed practice, there are a number of “housekeeping” things you need to do:

1. Register your business name,

if you intend to practice under anything other than your “true” name. So if I trade as Judith Fay, or even just as Fay, I do not need to register, but if I trade as “Jude Fay, Counsellor & Psychotherapist” or (as I do) as AnneLeigh Counselling & Psychotherapy, I need to register the business name with the Companies Registration Office. It costs €20 online at CRO.ie.

2. Notify the Revenue: whether or not you expect to have a tax liability. It is your responsibility to ensure that returns are made and any tax owing is paid, and not the Revenue’s responsibility to chase you. Income Tax is payable on 31st October each year for the estimated liability for the current calendar year and for any balance due for the preceding calendar year. (So tax is payable on 31 October 2013 for the year end 31 December 2013 together with any balance due for the year end 31 October 2012.)

3. Obtain appropriate insurance:

You should have Professional Indemnity Insurance, and Public Liability Insurance. If you practice from home, you should check with your insurer whether your home insurance needs to be amended. You might also consider whether

you need some form of income protection insurance, (in case you become ill or unable to work for an extended length of time,) and a pension.

4. Comply with any requirements of your professional organisation:

Update your profile with your professional body and ensure any required information is provided (such as copies of insurance certs). The main professional bodies retain and publish online directories of practising members where the public can find an accredited therapist or supervisor in their area.

5. Find somewhere to work from:

Issues to consider include: the suitability (is it quiet, private, comfortable), the cost (expect to pay between €12 and €18 per hour on an hourly basis, or a little less if you pay for a block of hours), safety (are there other people around in case a client becomes violent?), convenience for you (and for your client), privacy (this may be a huge issue in small country towns). You may decide to opt for a transitional decision in the short term until you become established.

6. Start keeping appropriate financial records:

At a minimum, your records should include details of your income and your expenditure, and supporting receipts and invoices. Keep records and documents for a minimum of six years. Records should be capable of showing the state of your business at any point in time, i.e. they should be current. Learn what expenses are and are not allowable for tax purposes. See Revenue.ie for details or consult your financial advisor. Typically, expenses incurred wholly, exclusively and necessarily for the purposes of your business are allowable, so the cost of renting a room will be allowed, but your personal therapy will not.

7. Arrange for supervision:

check with your professional body to ensure your supervision meets their criteria, for hours and accreditation.

8. Hire professional advisors if necessary:

for example, an accountant to complete and submit your accounts to the revenue, or a solicitor to advise on legal aspects.

Build It and They Will Come

Having decided where you are going to practice and put the framework in place, you will want to get some clients to work with. This is where having an idea of what you'd like your practice to look like really helps. There is a saying that if you are marketing to everyone, you are marketing to no-one. For example, if you know you want to work with children, that will largely shape how and where you market your services. You will look to where parents, guardians, or teachers of children in difficulty are likely to be. The same principle applies for any other work. While many therapists are reluctant to be too specific about the type of work they want to attract, fearing that this will mean they will be pigeonholed, this is not true in practice.

Also, try to think broadly about who might be a possible source of referrals for you. Many therapists confine their ideas to doctors, and while GPs and other health professional can certainly be a good source of work, many potential clients will not think of their doctor when facing a problem. Anyone you know: friends, family, work colleagues past or present, other therapists and any professionals in a caring or helping role are potential sources of referral for you. For more thoughts about this issue, visit my website at www.thisbusinessoftherapy.com for a free copy of my report "Five Ways to Boost Your Therapy Practice."

How do you get the word out there?

There are many, many ways in which to let the world know that you are open for business. Business cards, brochures, advertisements, entries in professional and local directories, sponsorship of local activities, articles in local newspapers or magazines, presentations or workshops, your own website, and social media are all ways in which practices can highlight their services. Have a look at what others are doing, and see what appeals to you.

In deciding on how best to present yourself, it is useful to reflect on what makes you different from other practitioners providing what appears to be a similar service. This may be a particular training or qualification you have that perhaps others do not. It may be your own personal story, to which others may relate (e.g. that you work with families of cancer patients, because of your own experience in this area). It may be your values or beliefs that bring a particular flavour to your work. Whatever makes you unique, use it directly or indirectly to convey something of yourself to your prospective clients. Clients begin to form a relationship with you from the first time they see or hear your name, which may be long before they pick up the phone to make an appointment. What would you like them to know?

Looking After Yourself in the Work


The last topic I would like to cover in this short article is perhaps one of the most important. There is a serious danger in this work that the practitioner's needs become eclipsed by the needs of her clients. Look after your own needs, and balance them with the needs of those you seek to help. You cannot give what you do not have, or what you do not allow others to give you. This means respecting what you have to offer your client, and placing a fair value

on that in terms of your fee. It means giving space to your own needs and desires. It means being clear about your own values and boundaries, including how you deal with fees, cancellations and no-shows. It means allowing yourself to own what you want, and knowing that it is okay to want it, rather than settling for less.

Looking after yourself not only means all the practical stuff such as exercising, taking appropriate breaks and rests, and practising disciplines that help you to manage the stress and impact of the work. It also means giving yourself a free choice when it comes to deciding whether you want to work with someone or not, and not judging yourself harshly for your choice. It means acknowledging that you are as important as your family, your friends and your clients. It means supporting yourself, giving yourself the benefit of the doubt, and being kind and compassionate to yourself when you get it wrong. It also means allowing others to support you.

So take care of yourself. You are, after all, the most valuable asset in your practice!

Conclusion

I hope this article has given you some food for thought, and will help you to begin to create a practice that will reflect who you are and who you want to be. You will find more details and resources on many aspects of your practice at my website www.thisbusinessoftherapy.com 

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