

# Setting up in private practice



ILLUSTRATION WORKS/GETTY

**Dorrit Prichard** answers commonly-asked questions about setting up in private practice, and offers advice for counsellors who are thinking about going it alone

I have been counselling for 14 years including being a volunteer for the Samaritans, working in the NHS and in higher education, and latterly nearly five years as a case manager with a major EAP provider. I have also been in private practice for 12 years on and off, with I have to say varying degrees of success. I have been an EAP affiliate for five years, working for two major EAP providers, so I have seen it from both sides.

If I am honest, I have to admit that I don't follow all the rules all the time, but most of the rules most of the time – so there may be an element of 'Do as I say...' but this makes it no less valid.

I left the IT business to become a counsellor, as I came to hate the politics and ruthlessness, and I wasn't prepared to be that mercenary. I naively thought the counselling world would be different, but soon discovered that there are a surprising number of similarities. Having walked away from my background in business, computing, management and sales, I now find these skills are invaluable in private practice. So bear in mind that if you take this route, you will not only need your counselling skills, but also skills in the following areas:

- sales and marketing – you will have to sell yourself and your services effectively
- administration – you will have to manage and administer your client paperwork, EAP paperwork (there is lots!), business and financial systems
- legal and ethical matters – such as contracts, insurance, confidentiality, boundary issues in

counselling in the workplace and for EAPs

- finance and accounting – you need to set up and manage an accounting system that the Inland Revenue will accept, file tax returns, etc
- secretarial/PA
- business management
- planning
- IT
- facilities management.

You will have to run a business! Where the only employee is... you! And the ultimate objective is... to make money for you!

Do you feel you really have this mix of skills, and more importantly will you be able to put them to use? I set up in private practice just after completing the diploma course, but soon found it wasn't for me. At that time, I didn't have the right skills and experience, I lacked confidence in my counselling skills, I found it too difficult to play all the different roles and I didn't know my way around the counselling world enough to know how to go about getting work. And I had a business background – most counsellors don't!

One of the valuable lessons I learnt in business was the importance of answering the simple questions – to quote Kipling (he makes exceedingly good quotes!):

*I kept six honest serving men  
They taught me all I knew  
Their names were What and Where and When  
And Why and How and Who.*

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## What?

What is workplace counselling and how is it different from other counselling work? The major difference for me is that there are three parties involved – the client, the counsellor and the employer. With EAP counselling there is an extra party, the EAP provider. The counsellor must seek to provide a quality service to all these parties, and the interests of these parties can differ, leaving the counsellor with a difficult ethical and professional dilemma. For example, confidentiality rules differ when there is an employer or the employer's representative involved.

An area where this is a potential conflict of interests is around client disclosure. Imagine your client is an employee of the transport industry, where there are essential and rigorous contracts about substance abuse and taking medication, for obvious safety reasons (known as Safety Sensitive in EAP parlance). The client has been abusing alcohol, then going to work potentially over the limit. The cause of the drinking is depression over some personal issue and work stress due to increasing demands. If you report this, the client will be disciplined and his job may be at risk. If he stops drinking and starts a course of antidepressants, he has to report this to his employer and may be considered unfit for his job, again putting his livelihood at risk. If you do nothing, he may be the cause or the victim of an accident. Where do your priorities lie – with the client, the employer, the general public, or the EAP, if that is the origin of the counselling referral?

Another area that requires careful consideration and advice is liaison with human resource (HR) and occupational health (OH) professionals, whose boundaries, awareness of the counselling process and adherence to confidentiality may well differ from yours. I will illustrate the finer points of this with a few examples of quotes from OH/HR professionals, to give a flavour of the potential difficulties.

HR director: 'We don't have stress in our organisation. If you don't believe in it, it doesn't happen and you don't have it.'

OH Nurse, on discovering that a client had been encouraged and enabled to open up in counselling about a trauma in the workplace that had occurred eight years previously, which was the root of a current and repeated episodes of depression: 'What did he want to drag up all that old stuff for?'

OH Manager, client suffering work-related stress and health issues of which the employer was aware: 'It's not work, you haven't grieved for your mum yet, you're depressed'.

In defence of HR and OH, and for purposes of objectivity and balance, I would like to point out that I have worked with a number of clients where these professionals were involved, and the majority have been well-informed, supportive of the client while maintaining the interests of the employer, and it was very much an experience of working with the client's consent and their best interests at heart.

Other professional areas to be addressed are:

- supervision needs – basically who pays for what and what is each party's agenda? Internal or external?
- professional indemnity insurance
- data protection
- computer records and note keeping
- Disability Discrimination Act
- health and safety issues
- risk assessment
- counselling assessment and reporting
- employment guidelines and law
- current hot topics such as bullying and harassment, dignity in the workplace, work-related stress, absence management/vocational rehabilitation, career issues.

## Where?

If you are working from home, there are many questions to answer, falling into three categories – the impact on you, anyone who lives with you, and of course the client.

Some EAPs will want to either inspect your home or want a detailed description and possibly a photo too. They may also ask you about various aspects of your home, such as: asking for the directions you would give a client; ease of access for the disabled; how the counselling room is separated from the rest of the house and is it a separate workplace or a spare room that you use to work in; privacy; lighting; style and content of room; parking facilities.

The things you need to consider include all of the above, plus more! Such as is your home and the counselling room really suitable? There has been some debate in the journal recently regarding the suitability of seeing clients from home, and although the writers involved have a great deal of experience in this area, they have very different ideas on this, some of which may be part of their own personal/professional agenda.

Other questions to ask yourself, and maybe others for a fully objective view: Is it ok for you? Is it ok for the client? I always walk the route from the front door to my counselling room every morning when I am seeing clients to check that they won't see anything inappropriate, and also that the house is sufficiently clean and tidy. It's a bit like having my home permanently ready for viewing by potential buyers!

Other points to consider are:

- size and space of the counselling room – particularly if you intend to see couples, or may do any physical work (breathing, relaxation, anger work, 'empty chair', etc)
- the look and feel of it – not too personal, ie no family photos, not too business-like. (I use plants to conceal the filing cabinet, and I refuse to have a desk and computer in the room.) Aim for professional yet pleasant. It is a work place, but it should also be suitable for counselling – welcoming, relaxing, soft. You may be asked to see clients whose jobs vary from factory floor to MD – will it suit them all?
- furniture, lighting, privacy, noise, storage for the inevitable paperwork especially for EAPs
- are there likely to be any interruptions and how will you handle them? eg phone ringing, doorbell ringing, window cleaner suddenly appearing at the window squeegee in hand (it happened to me!), will anyone else be in the house at the time?
- security – personally, I will not see clients if anyone else is in the house, however I have occasionally told friends or colleagues if I am seeing a new client (particularly male) that I have any concerns about that if I haven't rung them by an agreed time to say I am ok – phone the police!
- what impact will all this have on you, and anyone who lives with you?
- boundaries – I used to have a lovely, large dining table and instead I now have a huge pile of paperwork, a laptop and assorted accessories, Post-it notes, pads, pens, stationery, files and folders, books (not to mention the rest of the stuff which is under the 'ex-table' or stacked up against the wall! And nowhere to eat without five minutes tidying up!
- and finally – the great counselling issue of the placement of clock and tissues!

As well as physical boundaries, there are also time boundaries and work/life balance issues to consider. My seven year old son said that we should have a rule that I don't use the computer or the phone between 6-8pm. I agreed to this but have to admit that I waited till he was in the bath then sneaked downstairs to get a quick fix of emails! In my defence, and as a warning, I have to point out that working for yourself, largely from home as I do, is very different to working somewhere else, and for someone else! There are pros and cons, and for me the pros win every time, but they may not for you and yours.

I have recently moved my own boundaries – I now always leave a 30-minute gap after seeing an EAP client for the first, assessment appointment so that I have time to make notes, reflect on the client and

write the feedback and assessment required. I have also decided to keep two days client-free to catch up on other work, life, etc. So one day a week I only see clients between taking my son to school for 9am and picking him up at 3pm – so I can do boundaries!

Many clients referred by EAPs will be working full time and will require an appointment outside working hours (although there may be certain circumstances where it is appropriate for the client to request time off to attend counselling). As I don't see clients in the evenings, I instead offer appointments on Sundays. Saturdays are however a client-free zone.

## When?

Is it right for you – now? Do you have the right mix of skills, experience and commitment – now? Do you have friends and contacts who will help? Are you in a position to take the risk at this time – personally, professionally, financially? If not – when? How will you get yourself to the point when it is the right time for you? How will you know?

Moving from secure, paid employment to working for yourself is a huge change – for me, a good one at this point in my life. However, I do recognise that timing is everything, so you will need to be sure it is the right time for you, and more importantly do your homework to check it is the right time for the markets you are aiming for too.

## Why?

Working as an affiliate for an EAP brings a number of advantages if you are a counsellor either setting up in private practice, or wishing to expand your practice and the range of client issues you work with.

- referrals come to you, rather than you having to generate your own work
- experience of short-term work is invaluable in making you examine how you work with clients, and you may be amazed by the amount of change that can be achieved with the right client at the right time in short-term work – I was!
- you will be working with the full range of client issues, but also maybe moving into the world of work-related issues, such as stress at work, career concerns, office politics, bullying and harassment, workplace risk assessment, change management, etc
- you will need to examine certain aspects of how you work with clients in terms of risk assessment, assessment, setting goals, working within a limited number of sessions, confidentiality, referral on, reporting to third parties, etc
- the money! The work is generally not badly paid, though there will be a delay in payment to you, ranging from a few weeks to a few months
- you are part of an organisation, so may feel less

isolated – some EAPs also offer opportunities to meet them, meet other affiliates, attend training events, etc

- you will have, with most EAPs, a case manager. This may at times feel like a mixed blessing, however it is their job not only to ensure you do your job in an appropriate way, but also to provide you with clinical support, at times supervision, and access to other resources
- a risk shared is a risk halved! If you are working with a client who may be at risk, it is often a comfort to feel that you do not carry all the responsibility for their safety on your shoulders.

## How?

The secret of this is location, location, location... If you are the right counsellor in the right place, you should get work from any EAP who has a contract with an organisation based near you. Check out what companies are in your area, and try to find out if they have an EAP and who with. Other points to consider for your action plan are:

- never be afraid of asking for help, information, advice and support – from colleagues, friends, professional bodies, local council organisations
- presenting yourself well is key – make sure you have an excellent, well-presented and suitable CV and application form. Advice on this is available from a number of sources – including me!
- check out websites and the EAPA, and prepare as much as possible for the application process – get advice and support from others who have followed this route
- ask around other counsellors who do EAP work, to check out what each EAP is like to work for and what will be expected of you. Some counsellors refuse to work for some EAPs, due to fees paid, restrictions and demands placed on you, amount of paperwork and/or feedback involved
- technology – you will require a computer and email for most EAP work
- you will have to be professional, well organised and timely in your responses to the EAP to get the work in the first place and also meet their deadlines for making contact with the EAP, setting up a first appointment with the client, assessment, feedback, invoicing and case closure reporting
- you must consider your set-up and running costs, including phone calls, room rent if you pay it, administration, computer costs, email costs, etc.
- be prepared for a possible long delay in payment, and mistakes do happen! Its no good complaining to the EAP that they have not paid you in time for you to pay bills and keep your partner/children/pets fed, warm and clothed! Keep a reserve of cash for those rainy days – the amount of work can turn

out to be either feast or famine – and never the right way round for you!

- there is no guarantee of work and income – so don't put all your eggs in the proverbial one basket!
- do make an action plan, but don't take too much on at once or set yourself unrealistic goals – you will dilute your resources and if you have too many balls in the air at once you may drop one! One step at a time, please!
- check out very carefully what each EAP requires of you – this varies from minimal to heavy case management, and there may be issues for you around confidentiality, assessment, risk assessment, feedback to the EAP, employers, GPs and other third parties, maximum number of sessions allowed. Not everyone can work for every EAP due to some of these boundaries.
- be your case manager's friend – make their life easier, and you are more likely to enjoy the process, get the best out of it and get more work!

## Who?

Is it for you? It may seem very appealing, you may have friends and colleagues who successfully and happily work in private practice for workplace counselling, but be realistic and honest about yourself and your skills and experience, commitment, attitude, financial position and security, support, needs and wants. Do you fit the criteria – not just for a few months, but for years? Does this role fit you – will it give you job satisfaction, income, fulfil your career ambitions and life ambitions? Can you be a jack of all trades, and master of some?

Will you have the motivation required? Even when things are not going your way? How will you deal with the isolation? What will you miss about paid employment? Will you be able to run a business, as well as be the best counsellor that you can? Are you clear about what you want to achieve and how you will achieve it? What if it doesn't work out – do you have a fallback position? Will you see this as a failure, or a very useful learning experience?

## Further sources of information

- small business advisors at bank and local authority
- ACW (see ACW Helpdesk, page 34) and British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (tel 0870 442 5252)
- Women's Business Network [www.wbn.org.uk](http://www.wbn.org.uk)
- Women at Work [www.womenatwork.co.uk](http://www.womenatwork.co.uk)
- accountant and solicitor
- Business Gateway [www.bgateway.com](http://www.bgateway.com)
- counselling supervisor
- legal advice helplines [www.lawontheweb.co.uk](http://www.lawontheweb.co.uk)
- Citizens Advice [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)