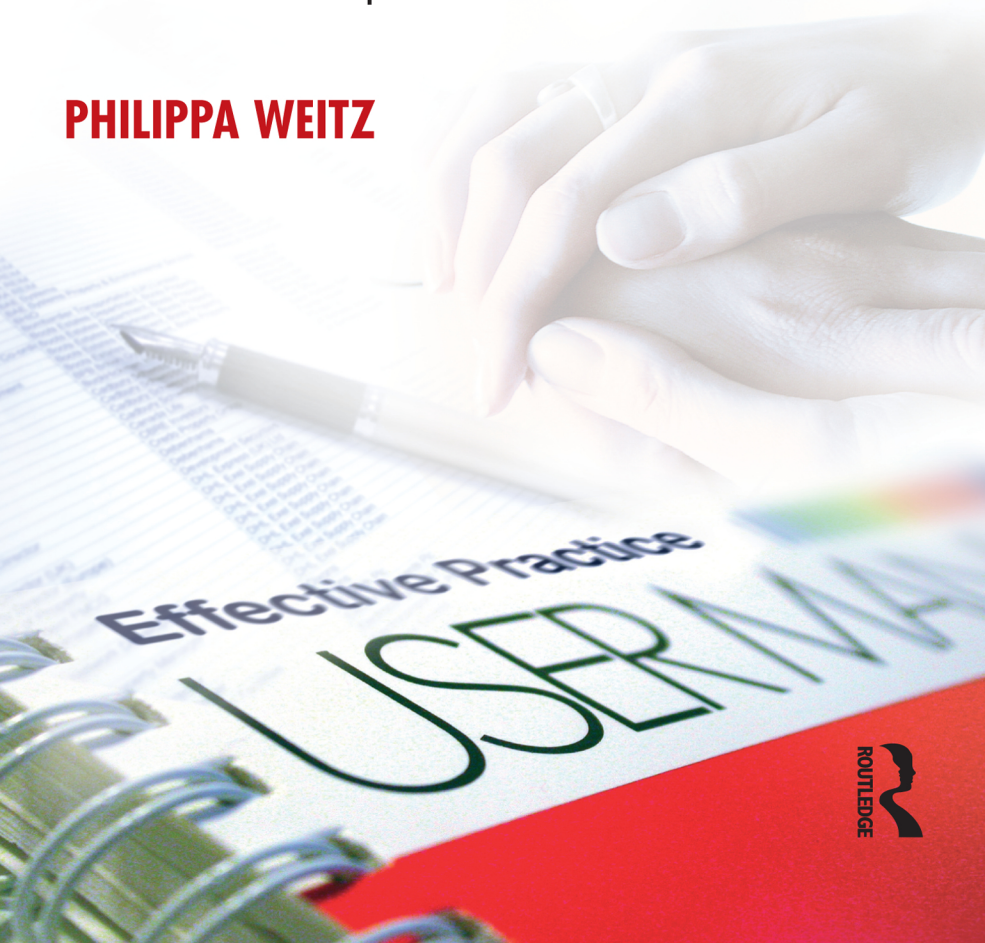


Psychology, Psychotherapy
and Counselling

SETTING UP AND MAINTAINING AN EFFECTIVE PRIVATE PRACTICE

A practical workbook for
mental health practitioners

PHILIPPA WEITZ



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PRIVATE PRACTICE**

Philippa Weitz BEd, MSc

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Use of terminology

I use a number of different ways of describing the therapist in this book—the book is equally suitable for all those developing a psychological therapies private practice—including counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and many others, please do not feel excluded—if you are planning a private practice, or already run one but want to improve what you do—this book is for you.

INTRODUCTION

Training as a counsellor or psychotherapist is rarely a first training. Most of us, for a wide variety of reasons, train as counsellors or psychotherapists as a second career. You may have been in business and therefore already have good business management skills, or you may have been in a wide variety of professions where business skills and knowledge was not so necessary.

This book is aimed at those of you with less business skills and knowledge and aims to provide you with enough competence to develop a thriving private practice.

All business involve risk-taking—this book will help you to work out whether you are cut out for the risks involved in managing a private practice. Throughout the book there will be question and answer sections which are designed for you to analyse your motives for wanting to set up a business, and to assess the skills and knowledge that you have, as well as providing pointers as to where you can go and get more advice and training for certain skills. You wouldn't dream of not continuing your Continuing Professional Development as a therapist, so why

not in the business world as well. And the good news is you can offset it against tax.

Let's move on to our first examples of practitioners launching their own practice. We are going to use Donna and Simon as our examples. Please get to know these characters, think about people you know that Donna or Simon remind you of, and think about these two, Donna and Simon, as you read on through the book and see how what the book teaches could have improved their business success (or failure).

Example 1—Donna

Donna was a Chief Inspector in the Police Force. She took early retirement and did a Masters in Psychotherapy. The course was an excellent course on the theory, research and practice of counselling, but it did not prepare her for the real world of work. Once qualified, she realised her options were limited in getting paid work and she combined with three of her course colleagues, Jane (formerly a nurse), Susan (formerly a probation officer) and John (formerly a prison officer) to form a new practice. They had all graduated at the same time and none of them had any experience of running a business. In addition, none of them did a business start-up course. With little advice they formed a partnership, hired an office suite in the West End of London with a 5-year lease, paying a rent of £30,000 a year, exclusive of all costs such as business rates and utilities. They opened a bank account with one of the Big Four and used that bank's very excellent business CD to go on and prepare a very comprehensive business plan for their practice. They made one serious mistake: they had been over-ambitious on the number of clients they would get in the first year. Susan decided to drop out after 6 months because the stress of the worry made her ill, leaving the others "holding the baby".

Nine months later the other three realised that they were not going to make it—they were left with debts totalling £18,000 each and a very sour taste of failure in their mouths.

Donna found this particularly difficult to accept since she had never been in this position before, either financially or professionally, and completely gave up counselling as a result.

Example 2—Simon

Simon qualified as a counsellor whilst continuing to teach part-time. After completing his 4-year generic training he took an additional course specialising in working with children. Once qualified, he decided to continue teaching whilst starting a private practice. He had an office at home at the bottom of the garden that he used for some tutoring and it was easy for him to adapt this to a counselling room. Within 3 months he had five clients, which he felt was enough for him at that stage. Alone five clients would not have paid all his living expenses but was a useful source of income. Spreading his financial risk meant that he could pursue his counselling work slowly and develop his private practice. His teaching took a lot of his time and did not leave him with much mental or physical capacity to develop a new business. At some stage he would need to make some decisions about the directions he might want to move in if he ever wanted to do more than sit on the fringe of the counselling profession.

I want to start by being brutal: counsellors often have a difficulty in developing a business plan because they are caring individuals (this is often what has drawn you to counselling in the first place)—and don't like seeing what they do as the same as

selling widgets—please bear with me while I expand this theme in this book and demonstrate how important business planning is—even for a part-time private practice.

It is very common for those of us in the counselling world to have more than one job—counselling work is not always easy to get and is rarely full time. Indeed, many of us will always have to split our working lives between counselling and another profession. This can create many tensions for us, and certainly reduces the amount of time that we have available—as two part-time jobs usually seem to create more work than one full-time job. This can have an effect on our families, our personal life and how much we can give to each job and even our ability to be effective.

Good counselling and psychotherapy courses struggle to get everything into a course in an attempt to provide their students with the necessary theory, research and practical skills to practise competently after graduation. Few courses delve deeply into how you are to practise afterwards or even provide you with the necessary training. However, when you ask most students how they are thinking of using their training afterwards a sizeable majority usually think they will do some private work—to do some private work is to run a practice, in other words, a business, with all the responsibilities that this involves—even for one client!

This book will not answer every question, and cannot deal with every situation. Continuously changing law and policy changes mean that you must check points of information and law and how they refer to your situation.

My aim is to provide a framework for those who are starting out and may choose to work either full- or part-time in private practice. This book should try to help you avoid some of the pitfalls that I fell into—and a few more.

It seems so easy to start a private practice—you pick up a couple of private clients, see them at home in the evening, take their payments, keep a few notes and, *voilà*, you have a private practice. Such an unthought-out beginning is fraught with potential problems and is not good enough.

Going on a course on setting up a private practice, or getting someone to mentor you and advise you will always be a much better solution than reading my two-dimensional words—but these options are not open to everyone.

This book is not the definitive book on setting up a private counselling or psychotherapy practice—a business—you will find many “Setting up a business” books in the bookshops, but at least 50% of what is written in them is irrelevant to you as a counsellor or psychotherapist—the problem for you is knowing which 50%! This book will give you the essentials—if you want more you will need to research further.

This book will be out of date as soon as it appears—the law is constantly changing. I cannot take responsibility for your actions as a result of reading this book and I urge you to always take professional advice—it is never wasted.

Finally, choosing a good training, engaging in your own personal development and reflection, belonging to a reputable professional organization, adhering to the necessary codes of ethics, engaging in serious and competent supervision for the context you are working in, undertaking continuing professional development are all different aspects of the profession you have chosen: caring for the psychological welfare of the general public. In private practice where you will be less well supported, and far more isolated, it is very important to ensure that you always aim for the highest levels of competence and care.