

Working from Home



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Most therapists in private practice in the UK work from home, a decision usually driven by a combination of economics and practicality. Many who have practices at home do not always work full-time, combining their work with clients with another job outside the home, or with other home-based activities. In Towergate's experience, therapists who are just starting out in practice are uncomfortable about making a commitment to renting consulting rooms outside the home as this often means having to fork out for the cost, regardless of whether or not the clients actually show up.

Towergate understands the complicated factors that support working with clients at home, and we want to support those of you who believe you must work from home to be aware of the potential risks of letting clients into your personal space.

Therapists who work from home need to hold in mind the concept of the therapeutic frame. The 'frame' is more than a room or a physical setting. It is also a set of conventions about how therapy should be conducted. It needs to be a safe enough place for psychotherapeutic work to occur, a place where clients can feel comfortable speaking about things that are too painful or taboo or shameful to speak about elsewhere. However private a garden may feel to the gardener, a client can feel very awkward and exposed when there is no door to close.

We understand that it is not unusual for some therapists to work with their clients in the open air. Sometimes the original contract includes this as an option, as in the case of one counsellor who lives and works near a large river, and who helped her client overcome a fear of bridges by accompanying her on her first attempts to cross one on foot. We know of other practitioners who offer to walk around their garden with a client to

pick a flower as part of a gestalt experiment. Still others sometimes offer to have the therapy session at a table in the garden during a prolonged heatwave. In light of the increase in civil actions against practitioners of talk therapies we think that the first example contains a clear contract to work outside. The second carries more risk as, although contracted as part of a clinical experiment, the 'contract' was spontaneous. The third example concerns us most as it could – and has been – misinterpreted by clients as a gesture of friendship.

The essence of the safety of the therapeutic frame is largely psychological. The client needs to be able to communicate thoughts and feelings – not necessarily verbally – to the therapist, which are held and processed by the therapist and given back in due course in a form that can be held and processed in awareness by the client, leading to integration and change. The point is that the frame should make the therapeutic space that it bounds a suitable place for this kind of psychological work. It should be quiet and as free as possible from the sort of interruptions that are in the therapist's control, such as answering phone calls, text messages or the doorbell. It should not have pictures or other mementoes in view that reveal personal matters or relationships. It should be pleasant and comfortable. It should, as far as possible, remain the same from one session to the next.

This last point was driven home to one practitioner who was complained against for having re-decorated the consulting room without telling the client. The client claimed that the therapist ought to have known that she had traumatic associations with the colour.

When working at home with people who have been neglected or abused or otherwise betrayed, it is wise to remember how fragile clients can

enact envy. These are people whom, to defend themselves against their unbearable feelings, have come to believe that 'everyone else' has something that they haven't got. This defence against feeling so alone may take the form of attacking the therapist's home or even developing fantasies about the therapist's life. These may include the idea that the therapist has a perfect life and a perfect family. Just the noise of children in another room, or the therapist showing affection for a pet in the client's presence, can often evoke envy. For some, the feeling of being 'only a client' is intolerable. We have seen many examples of what could be seen as envy played out in complaints that turned out to be, in part, based on elaborate fantasies about the therapist's private life that had no basis in truth, but did have some basis in chance encounters with others, including clients.

We do not believe it is possible to prevent encounters with others when practising from home but we do have some tips about how to prevent or contain any fallout that may occur:

- Be clear with new clients that the therapy will take place in what is also a private home.
- If there are likely to be other people, such as workmen, in the home when you are working with clients, tell them that this is the case and allow them the option to complain about noise and so on. And be sure to tell the workmen that your home is also your place of business and ask them not to engage your clients in conversation.
- Family members need to be briefed to respect the boundaries of your work. If for some reason a family member is going to be in the house they should wait until your client arrives before leaving, as well as being familiar with the arrival times of your clients, and to avoid

entering the house until the coast is clear. However tempting it may be to see clients when you've got someone at home like a partner or child who might need you because they are ill – think again. It might be better to re-schedule the session.

- The telephone is another possibility for chance encounters. It is best to have a separate line for your clients to call to avoid it being answered by someone other than yourself. If this is not possible do not include the names of your partner or children in the answer-phone message.
- Be clear about how you and the client will manage the boundaries of working in your home. Do you have a waiting room? What provisions, if any, do you make for a client who arrives early? And how early is acceptable? You need to think of the client you're with who does not need to be interrupted by you answering the door to the next client, who also has a right not to run into another client leaving as he or she is arriving. Tight time boundaries are a must, particularly when there is no waiting room or receptionist.