

# Becoming a resilient practitioner

Are you taking care?  
**Sally Despenser** explores  
how the recession is impacting  
on the health of counsellors  
and outlines the case for  
good self-care

The ongoing financial crisis has made conditions harsh and unpredictable for many workers.

Restructuring, cutbacks, redundancies, outsourcing, and loss of contracts: all these create a distressed and psychologically insecure environment for the people working within them. Workplace stress and financial strain bring additional pressures to relationships at home.

Unsurprisingly, all this stress has an impact on the work of counsellors and supervisors in organisations. Not only are there raised levels of anxiety around them, but practitioners may also be under pressure to manage a shrinking service, keep on top of the waiting list, meet targets and deliver a quality service with barely adequate resources. There may be a collision of cultural norms and values, in which the needs of the client clash with the needs (or demands) of the organisation. The service itself may be inadequate for the growing number of clients who really need long-term help.

*'...the economic factors... may add to the unhealthy cocktail we experience as practitioners. In this environment, we ignore self-care at our peril'*



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### Listening to therapists

In case material brought to workshops, and in my own work as a counsellor and supervisor, I have noticed a sustained increase in the number of clients with complex mental health needs, who would once have been referred to mental health services, and who are now offered short-term counselling. How are we to deal with our own outrage and helplessness when asked to provide six sessions for a depressed client with a history of abuse, cutting and damaged attachments?

Practitioners too are equally affected by the harshness and insecurity of the current job market. Some counsellors have already lost contracts<sup>1</sup>; others are still in limbo, uncertain about the future of the counselling service they work for and about their livelihood. We are also affected by financial pressures associated with the current recession. There is less disposable income for discretionary spending on therapy. Adding to the overall anxiety, as each cohort of students graduates, the competition for paid work becomes even more intense.

Our profession has its own inherent dangers, such as the loneliness of keeping confidences, the fantasy of unrealistic goals, the burden of seeing too much pain and raw rage, and carrying others' projections. This has always been the case, but the economic factors outlined above may add to the unhealthy cocktail we experience as practitioners. In this environment, we ignore self-care at our peril.

Here I explore some of the recurring concerns that emerge for self-employed counsellors, and offer some practical suggestions for good self-care.

### Juggling a portfolio of work

You may be juggling several different counselling jobs, or you may be combining counselling with another and unrelated paid activity. Is it possible (or desirable) to do nothing but therapy? Is it possible to make a living doing only therapy? Two established practitioners assert that for them, counselling is a part-time activity. Colin Feltham: 'Since it is usually impossible to make a full-time living from seeing individual clients, most realistic practitioners build a portfolio business or career<sup>2</sup>.' Peter Martin: 'It seems to me still that counselling can never be a main occupation unless you are employed by some umbrella organisation<sup>3</sup>.'

If you have a choice, how do you decide how many clients to see in a week? Financial anxiety might make you overwork. After all, 'we have to make enough money to pay our own mortgages and increasing fuel bills<sup>4</sup>.' Is there a danger that you might take on too much work in order to defend against the anxieties of building up your portfolio of work? Is there a danger that you might take on clients who could jeopardise your safety (both psychologically and physically) in order to defend against financial anxiety?

The trouble with relying solely on counselling hours to make a living is that it is feast or famine, flood or drought. This makes it hard to manage the diary because some of the jobs are bits and pieces. Until recently I was doing monthly supervision for an organisation, seeing five groups spread over three days a month. I found it tricky fitting it around my other regular work, but it provided variety, a less isolated environment than therapy sessions, a nice bike ride in daylight to get there, and the money was good. But then the organisation changed the arrangement to fewer groups spread over more days and weeks. I had no employment rights or bargaining power. I eventually decided that the new arrangement would be too messy and so I quit. It involved lot of anguish to risk making this decision. I keep telling myself that in life, you have to believe that another door will open.

You may be juggling several different freelance jobs within a counselling portfolio, maybe in several locations: agency and employee assistance programme (EAP) work, sessional work, coaching, consultancy, training, teaching and supervision. You may also be doing another job not related to counselling ('Don't give up the day job<sup>5</sup>'), or doing some work (eg writing) which is not paid, but is intended to raise your professional profile and count for CPD. As I write, these are the juggling practitioners that I have in mind. I am also one of them. You are probably aware that self-employment does not have much of a safety net if things go wrong. Fretfulness is never far away.

### Therapists and self-care

You are your chief (and only) asset. Have you thought about how you look after yourself? Over the 30 years that I have been counselling, supervising and teaching, I have noticed three things about how we treat ourselves.

- 1 Those of us who work in the caring professions are very good at taking care of the needs of others, and perhaps less good at caring for ourselves both thoughtfully and assertively. Attachment theory might explain this tendency.
- 2 In many training courses, therapist self-care does not feature, and when it does, it is likely to be tucked in briefly at the end, almost as an afterthought. I think this has something to do with an unconscious dynamic associated with professional denial and grandiosity.
- 3 And finally, many therapists think about risk only as it applies to the client. A small piece of research I carried out in 2004<sup>6,7</sup>, explored why the issue of therapist safety was being neglected. The risks include the isolation of the setting; being alone with a stranger; and working for an organisation or agency that may (for various reasons) ignore or deny the existence of risk to the therapist. There is also the risk of being stalked<sup>8</sup>. I will not go into further detail here, but I do want to flag up risks that therapists face (but often deny).

### Burnout is a real risk

The job also brings the risk of burnout. One of the warning signs is when we discover that we are having difficulty dealing with the demands of people who are not our clients. I have heard therapists speak about becoming impatient with friends who have less intense jobs, or who relate at a different (implying 'superficial') level. We may be experienced by partners and families as being more available to our clients than we are to them.

What are the pressures involved in being a therapist? There are pressures from within. 'The principal hazard of our profession is the narcissistic belief that we are special<sup>9</sup>.' We may want to rescue some or all of our clients. We are the recipients of conscious and unconscious projections, and the more stressed we are, the more difficult it becomes to disentangle what is our material, and what is the client's. We may not find it easy to recognise and set limits, to say no, to give up: 'Therapeutic failures are devastating<sup>10</sup>.'

Then there are everyday preoccupations in the life of a therapist. It can be very isolating work and we may not have the support of other people, even if we are working in a multi-purpose setting. There may be nobody with whom we can legitimately (in confidence) 'chew the fat'. It may be difficult to switch off thinking about clients who have got into our heads. There can be a lot of hanging around for phone calls, and this consumes energy. We may get fed up with the impact of cancellations and missed appointments, and resent the energy spent chasing up invoices, travelling to and attending unpaid and/or unproductive meetings. A therapist friend, who is negotiating the business details of some new agency work, said recently: 'All I want to do is get on with seeing clients.'

### Who looks after the therapist?

There is also the issue of support. The opposite of support in this context is starvation. We offer support to our clients, we give them space, often in settings where we struggle to get a suitable room. Who makes space for the therapist's needs? Who looks after the therapist? In the words of Adam Phillips' client: 'Who will look after you if you look after me?<sup>11</sup>'

Are we already getting a bit near the edge if we find ourselves getting furious when organisations apparently do not care about us; for example, when the kitchen facility is closed to part-timers, or the biscuits are stopped? We expect support from supervision, but this too may be problematic: depending on your work setting (or your career stage) it may be hard to get suitable supervision.

We become therapists, and choose our different settings, for diverse conscious and unconscious reasons. Whose needs are we meeting? 'Is it love or is it damage?<sup>12</sup>' What are the dangers for us? Do we actively take steps to look after ourselves both physically and psychologically? Do we apply to ourselves the ideas for healthy living we offer to clients?

### Six suggestions for staying resilient as a practitioner

#### 1 Don't put all your eggs in one basket

It pays to diversify, but it also pays to be a specialist in something. Build a portfolio of interest and contacts, develop your skills, develop a specialty, upgrade your qualifications and training.

#### 2 The work-life balance: start as you mean to go on

'In an ideal world, all psychotherapists would have a garden... Perhaps even more than the body, the spirit, in a job as absorbing and demanding as ours, needs stimulation, change, refreshment, expansion. What is important is that we understand this from our earliest days and set about it actively<sup>13</sup>.'

Make a plan to feed yourself, your body, and your spirit: 'Do not allow your life to be drained away in "merciless giving"<sup>14</sup>.' Working with your hands and being creative, enhances life<sup>15</sup>. I have noticed how many therapists are singers and musicians. Making music gives a voice to the soul, allowing the expression of things which have to be suppressed elsewhere, and it is good physical exercise! And since most therapy is sedentary, find a way of exercising which pleases you.

#### 3 Buy time before you commit to doing something

'There was time when I had a piece of card beside my telephone which reminded me to say: "Give me time to think about it"<sup>16</sup>.'

Even for those of us who are compulsive caregivers (having a streak of grandiosity), can we tell ourselves that it's OK to say 'no', to change our minds or to give up on something and let it go?

#### 4 Pace yourself, take breaks

'For years, I have been trying to solve the problem of how to schedule my clients in order to have some space between them<sup>17</sup>.'

'It is important not to overwork, which is a temptation when earnings are low. If I have only a quarter of an hour between clients I timetable myself at least an hour's break at some point during the working day<sup>18</sup>.'

Wrestle with your diary frequently. Don't let its demands swamp you. Ink in the gaps you want to leave: if you don't do this in advance, something else will creep in to the space. I am still learning this after 30 years! As well as building in breaks in the working day, also build in holidays.

#### 5 Get support

Seek support wherever you can, both from professional networking and a range of personal relationships and activities.

'I find that a network of friends, family and colleagues is an essential part of my life, giving me support, laughter and sometimes a shoulder to cry on<sup>5</sup>.'

#### 6 Discover what works for you

This is my list

- Never use my therapy room for leisure
- Spend time with people (and friends) who are not always troubled
- Sing, cycle and garden
- Be out of doors as much as possible
- Make compost
- Watch the sky and listen to the birds
- Eat an orange every day.

I hope that reading this article leads you to think about how you look after yourself, and to follow it up by taking the necessary practical steps.

*This is a revised version of 'Five tips for a prosperous and healthy life', an article first published in the Winter 2012 edition of Private Practice, the quarterly journal of the BACP Private Practice division.*

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