

“Recession” Woes Have You Thinking of Home-basing Your Psychotherapy Business? The Good, the Bad and the Snuggly of Home Offices for Psychotherapists

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With the current economic crisis, and many clients now unable to pay for services, self-employed therapists and coaches are finding creative solutions. Home-basing your business is one solution.

But is it a good idea for therapists to have a home-based psychotherapy office? It depends. There are several crucial issues to consider. I'm a psychotherapist in private practice in Westside Los Angeles, and over the past 16 years I've worked in agencies, in non-home offices and in my home office. And I sure have a preference. I discuss the considerations below.

THE GOOD: FOR THE THERAPIST AND CLIENT

For the Therapist

Maintaining Peacefulness. Living in LA, we are conscious of how far do we have to drive. I am dedicated to keeping my own stress level down so that I am emotionally available for my clients. So my relief at not having to disrupt myself by jerking myself to go at such a faster pace than I like sure is valuable. At one point, as an intern collecting my required “hours” to be licensed, I had 7 jobs: different agencies, different cities. Driving, driving, driving everywhere. I felt absolutely shredded. Never again I decided. I longed for the days when I had been a practicing painter/sculptor, working in my studio, deeply centered in my own space.

Saving Time and Money.

Therapists can lose productivity time in their out of home offices when a client cancels unexpectedly, or an hour is not filled. In my outer office days, If I had been home with all my “stuff” I could have been painting, cooking, watching Oprah, or washing my hair and feeding Punky-the-cat.

Then, of course, there's the savings in gas money. And with the current gas prices, the savings really do count. More savings: tax write-off at using part of my home. Yet another savings: the time wasted when a client cancels unexpectedly, or an hour is not filled, when if I had been home with all my “stuff” I could have been painting, cooking, watching Oprah, or washing my hair and feeding Punky-the-cat.

The Pleasure of Beauty. I don't know about you, but the beauty of a space is a huge influence on my state of mind. And I am willing to put a lot more effort, time and money into the self-owned, permanent home than business spaces that somebody else owns. So my home office gives me enormous pleasure with every place I look a dependable spot of visual joy.

For the Client

Savings. Since I don't have to pay extra for subletting the office space, I can pass some of that savings on to clients. I'll typically charge 10 a session less for meeting in the home office.

An Experience of Sanctuary. I happen to live on a back lot of the old MGM studios in Culver City. My home office is right on the edge of the lake that was built for the MGM Tarzan films. Ducks, turtles, Koi, all manner of teeming trees and perfuming flowers abound. The lake and brook that branches from it gushes with the comforting sound of running water. Invariably, clients new to the space let out a sigh of relief and express feelings of joy and safety at the site.

A feeling of being trusted by me. I don't see all clients at my home office. I screen people before inviting them to the home office. And since it is the "norm" for clients to be seen at a business office, people often say that it is good for their self esteem to know I trust them to be this close. They have heard stories about therapists who don't want clients to know their addresses, their home phones, or sometimes anything personal about them. That usually makes the clients feel pushed away. It also creates more of a shaming hierarchical relational system since the therapeutic rule is that the client has to divulge everything while the therapist can just hide.

THE BAD: FOR THE THERAPIST AND CLIENT

For the Therapist

Some prospective clients may be lost. Some people have a belief that there's something 'fishy' or unprofessional about even meeting in a home to work. Then, too, the style of the home office itself may be associated with clients' painful relationships. For example, one client told me that as soon as she opened the front door and saw the antiques and art work, she had a thought, "I won't do well here." She later revealed that her mother – who had been domineering and neglectful – had an antique shop and was never home to care for the client.

Concern for therapist safety. Sometimes traumatized or angry clients can be triggered and could cause physical harm if there were no safety system built in. In 15 years of practice, I have never been threatened or hurt, but one client (whom I had pre-screened for violence) began to reveal after our third session how much he hated his mother and would like to kill her. Even scarier, he had never forgiven someone once he was mad at them. He just cut off communication. In our fifth session, we had a misunderstanding which made him very angry with me.

After the session I realized that I had forgotten to close the garage door before he arrived, and that he might see into a non-client area. Since he was new and I didn't have a sense of what to expect, I had a fleeting, but scary image of him creeping into my garage and hiding and coming up the stairs later. He didn't; in fact he was never mean to me and we developed a deeply transforming relationship.

Safety is such a concern to me that I would never have bought this house or made a home office in it if it were not protected by a security gate system in this residential development.

For the Client

Household members must cooperate to protect client confidentiality. And accidents can happen. Once I ran out to do an errand in an hour slot that I had free – or so I thought. When I returned, my blue bath robed husband, told me with great concern that someone had knocked at the door, and he, knowing there was no client scheduled, opened the door to a horrified woman. She had been abused by her stepfather while he had been wearing - you guessed it- a bathrobe. She was too distraught to return.

Some clients have a belief that an office in a home is somehow substandard. This belief may lower the client's ability – at least initially - to appreciate the strength of the therapist. The feeling of safety in the presence of a strong and caring other is a necessary part of real, long term change.

The Standards for a home based psychotherapy office

Managed health care panels in California approve of home offices, and audit them, as long as an important set of standards are followed. Below I list the United Behavioral Health home office auditing questions. The areas of concern are: protecting client confidentiality, safety, and legal issues.

Confidentiality

- Is the office separate from the common areas of the residence?
- Is it set up so that family members cannot enter the office while therapy is in session?
- Is there a waiting area?
- Is the office equipment devoted solely to the office, and are there safeguards to ensure that other family members cannot have access
- Is the office computer password protected?
- Is the office sound proofed?
- Is the office free from personal effects such as family photos, medications, etc.

Patient Safety

- Are clients informed in advance that the therapy office is in a home?
- Is there a separate bathroom for client use only?
- Is that bathroom medication free?
- If the clinician has animals, is the client told in advance?
- Is the home clearly identified with a house number or sign?
- Is the entrance adequately lighted?
- Does the clinician screen for high risk and/or potentially violent clients prior to the first session?
- Does the clinician have a non-home office setting or does he/she provide referrals to clients unable to be seen in the home office?

Legal Issues

- If the city requires a business license, does the clinician have one?
- Does the clinician carry additional insurance to cover liability for running a business in a home?

THE SNUGLY

So with all these things to consider and the requirements involved, is it worth the efforts? For me it's hands down a resounding 'yes!' I get enormous joy at knowing that just by being in my space, clients they are saving money, that they can have a centering experience of sanctuary, and that they know that I trust them enough to be up close and personal – metaphorically snuggly – the place for all deep change. And that's not even including the benefits to me!