

# A question of congruence

**Catherine O’Riordan** and **James O’Riordan** explore some underlying issues that inhibit therapists, consciously or unconsciously, from setting up in private practice and making a living from their training

**A**re you a therapist in training or newly qualified? Perhaps you’ve been working as a therapist for many years. If so, what are your views about setting up and developing a private practice? Do you want to make a living as a therapist and, if so, how much will you need to earn? If you train as a teacher, there is a natural progression between studying theory, developing practice-based skills, applying for a job and becoming employed. Although the transition from student to practitioner isn’t always seamless, most professionals expect to be able to make a living wage after they are qualified.

From the perspective of making money, what makes counsellors and psychotherapists different from other professionals, like plumbers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, chiropractors etc? Why is it that therapists often struggle to make a living and have problems around charging for their service? In our work providing CPD for counsellors and psychotherapists, we started noticing that many therapists want to work privately but have complex and only partially examined beliefs that affect their behaviour and success in becoming or surviving as private practitioners.

## Underlying problems

Not every therapist wants to work in private practice and there are many valuable reasons why some want to be employed or remain as a volunteer. However, setting up in private practice is something many trainees aspire to do, but there is a general shortage of training around what this entails and what demands this type of work might put on the individual therapist. It is common practice for trainees to get clinical experience by working voluntarily in a counselling organisation. This makes good sense and is an invaluable support to therapists finding

their feet clinically. The problem is that, for most newly qualified therapists, there is no clear transition to working as a paid therapist and even less support around setting up in private practice. More recently we have become aware of a number of good workshops looking to address this gap but the focus of these seems to be on practical matters, such as ethics, risk assessment, legal issues, insurance, policies, contracts, marketing etc. Little training seems to address the more subjective and personal side of what is needed to run your own private therapy practice. By subjective and personal, I’m referring to the attitude of the person wanting to work as a private practitioner, their underlying values, beliefs, sense of identity, past experiences of working alone and other such issues.

On the whole human beings are better able to make choices and achieve their goals if they consciously bring to mind as many of their unconsciously held presuppositions and beliefs as possible. As a rule we are more effective if what we set out to do is congruent with our underlying philosophy of life. In this instance ‘congruence’ can be defined as having our underlying subjective beliefs, values and identity aligned with our intended outcomes and our verbal communication aligned with our non-verbal communication. What we implicitly feel and believe impacts on our behaviour and on our ability to bring about our intended outcomes. Unless we make a conscious effort to make explicit what is implicit, our underlying values, beliefs and identity operate on a subliminal level. Insofar as we fail to consciously ‘own’ our underlying beliefs and values, these unconsciously held views tend to get acted out without our being aware of how impactful they are in life. If we intend to work as a private practitioner, it makes sense to be as congruent as we can and that might mean taking time to evoke, examine and understand our underlying views. This way we get all our resources pulling in

the same direction and reduce the risk of undermining ourselves. The following fictitious stories illustrate this point.

## Bill’s story

Bill decides the time has come to start working privately as a therapist. Up until this point he has kept his day job and has continued to volunteer at the local counselling service. He sets about looking into what policies he needs to run an ethical and legal private counselling practice and comes to the stage where he has in place a website, local advertising and cards. However, on an unconscious level, Bill has great ambivalence over charging clients, whom he sees as victims of life’s tragedy. On an equally unconscious level, he thinks that in this economic climate no one has extra money to pay for long-term therapy and because he hasn’t been trained to work in a short-term intensive way with clients he feels out of his depth.

How might these underlying beliefs and feelings affect Bill’s effectiveness to market himself as a private practitioner? How will these underlying views and attitudes affect his congruence around charging, asking for money and responding to clients when there are questions about payment and fees?

## Jenny’s story

In contrast, Jenny is a newly qualified therapist and has looked at the therapy market in her area and feels that she has a ‘product’ that could help

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people. She sets about making sure that her practice is well thought through, ethical and consistent with her training philosophy. She thinks about the ‘customer journey’ and contracts with an experienced supervisor who is able to support her transition to private practice. Jenny begins to market her service by letting people know what she is doing and by giving out her card as opportunity arises. She figures that, if people are able to pay for leisure activities, they can make the decision to invest in therapy. She believes that the therapeutic relationship can bring about profound and lasting results and this allows her to set her fees confidently and to deal with the many issues that surround running and developing her private practice. She has a strong personal sense of being good enough as a therapist and believes she has everything in place to support her professional accountability.

How do you think Bill and Jenny will fair comparatively? What types of attitudes, authentically held, support private practice? What types of thoughts, attitudes and feelings are likely to create barriers to setting up and developing a private practice?

## Some remedies

We believe that counsellors and psychotherapists are best placed to develop their private practice if they consciously think through their underlying beliefs, values and emotions. We also believe in proactively setting goals in a vivid and

imaginative way. This belief is based on the premise that, if we create a clearly defined outcome for our private practice, we will be more empowered to move towards it. Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) provides a solution-focused approach to goal setting and helps people harness their resources and create momentum towards their chosen goal. By identifying underlying beliefs and clearly defining and visualising what you want your private practice to look like, you are more likely to deliver a congruent, ethical and effective service.

With this in mind Jenny decided to consult an NLP practitioner and learned to look at her goals in a new and powerful way. She was asked to verbalise what she wanted in clear, positive terms and to make it as specific as she could. The message sent to Jenny’s unconscious mind was one that helped her to be motivated and action-oriented, and encouraged her to look for and identify the internal and external resources she would need for success. This was the first time that she had really seen the importance of setting goals in a systematic way. There were also other elements to the process that cemented the outcomes Jenny was looking for. She was asked to vividly imagine what she saw, heard and felt when she had reached her goal and to see herself from different perspectives (eg looking through her own eyes and seeing herself from an outside perspective).

She was also introduced to hypnotherapy and learnt to run a ‘mental video’ of her success as a private practitioner. The idea was again to communicate with her unconscious so that all her energies were aligned and congruent. Anything vividly imagined or fantasised is seen as ‘real’ by the mind, and she was taught how to capitalise on this naturally occurring facet. These vividly imagined images of her being a successful private therapist would help unleash the huge power of her unconscious. This process, alongside making sure that what she wanted was ecological

and that existing benefits that she cherished were preserved, gave her confidence in knowing that she could and would be successful in building an ethical and successful private practice. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine O’Riordan runs a private practice as an integrative practitioner; James O’Riordan is an NLP/hypnotherapy practitioner in private practice. Together they run NLP Vision, which delivers CPD workshops and certified trainings for counsellors and psychotherapists, two of which have been BACP endorsed. ‘Working in Private Practice: a question of congruence?’ is a one-day CPD workshop. [www.nlpvision.co.uk](http://www.nlpvision.co.uk)

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