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American Counseling Association

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5999 Stevenson Ave. Alexandria, VA 22304 / 800.347.6647 / 800.473.2329 (fax)

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Starting a Private Practice

“As a service to members, the American Counseling Association has partnered with Walsh and Dasenbrook, consultants in counseling practice management, to offer a series of bulletins on various private practice topics. This series includes timely information on starting/expanding/ending a private practice, informed consent, HIPAA requirements, managed care and insurance companies, and strategies for enrolling on provider panels and responding to claim denials.”

Walsh and Dasenbrook have co-authored, *The Complete Guide to Private Practice for Licensed Mental Health Professionals 3rd edition*. Their Guide contains the latest information on marketing, advertising, office procedures, dealing with managed healthcare and insurance billing. It also contains a CD-Rom with all the forms necessary for your practice. The Guide can be purchased through their web site at Counseling-PrivatePractice.com. For more information you can contact the authors at 3703 N. Main St. Suite 100 Rockford, IL. 61103 815.877.0399

START UP

This section is designed for the mental health professional just starting out, or those who want to expand a small practice. Trial, error and success have given me this plan. Following the steps should enable a licensed mental health professional to begin a limited, small practice in relatively short time.

Your first step is to put on your entrepreneur hat. The confidence it takes to put on this hat comes from your desire to not only help people, but also to make money. Once your confident entrepreneur hat is set squarely on your head, you can plan to begin your practice.

Your second step is to find office space. We've discovered creative ways to find low-cost office space. One way is to contact existing practitioners in your area and sublet space from them. Most private practitioners have open times in their offices where, for a fee, you may be able to use the office when they do not. The difficulty with this plan is that you are at the mercy of their schedules.

Another creative way to obtain office space is by contacting your local pediatricians, general practitioners, gynecologists, or other doctors and offering a service to them in exchange for space in their office when they are not using it. You would be willing to do parenting groups, marriage enrichment groups, weight loss help, divorce recovery, or stress management, all in exchange for office space. The idea here is that even a busy doctor's office has times where it is not in use. Also, a pediatrician may relish the thought of having a licensed mental health professional in the office, available to see his/her patients. Having a parenting group or a marriage communication group in the office waiting room on Wednesday evening or Saturday afternoon is an attractive service addition to his practice.

As you begin to see, there are many options with which to negotiate. If the doctor or the office manager seems interested, but suggests some payment for office space,

and if the cost is reasonable, you may ask to have your name put on the door with the other professionals. The cost of using the office is offset by the invaluable publicity and credibility of having your name in high traffic, professional building where hundreds of potential clients pass daily.

If you follow this plan, it is best to target a doctor's office that fits your niche. That is, if you work with children and families, a pediatrician is your best bet. A general practitioner's office is good if you wish to do weight loss, divorce recovery, or general kinds of mental health work. A gynecologist's office is best if you would like to do women's groups.

Approaching a physician may seem like a daunting task. But remember, on your head is firmly set your entrepreneur hat so you'll have the confidence to realize that the worst thing that they could say in answer to your offer is no.

Finally, there's always the possibility of finding a small office in your target area that may fit your budget. Sharing office space holds down cost. Another mental health professional, a friend, may be interested in opening an office and all expenses would be shared.

Now you're ready for the third step. This step and the next two will prepare you to begin seeing clients. This "A-B-C" idea allows you to move into your practice in stages.

The stages work like this:

- A. You offer a two or three hour seminar on a particular topic.
- B. This leads to a six to eight week class/group on that subject
- C. This leads to clients reserving appointment times for individual services.

The third step is to decide on a seminar topic. Go with what you feel most comfortable, or explore packaged programs offered in counseling, psychology, and

social work catalogs. Order a packaged program or develop a curriculum of your own designed for group work. There are several very good packaged programs used to work with clients in groups. For parenting groups, there is Systematic Training for Effective Parenting or STEP group by American Guidance Services. For marriage enrichment there is TIME or Training in Marriage Enrichment by Dr. Jon Carlson available through Impact Press. Excellent programs come from American Guidance Service and Impact Publishers. Their catalogs are available by writing to:

Impact Publishers
www.impactpublishers.com
AGS
4201 Woodland Road
P. O. box 99
Circle Pines Minnesota, 55014 - 1796.
www.ag.com
1 - 800 - 328 - 2560.

Other packaged programs include one developed by John Gray. He offers training and a kit for “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.” Of course you can design your own group or program customized to your needs and that of the niche or office where you are using space.

At this point, is very important for you to think about telephone, answering machine, and/or a pager. More information about pagers can be found in this section. I would just like to say here that in all my experience, a pager by a company that allows voicemail as well as a callback feature is the best. For less than \$100 a year I have a phone number that accesses my pager. It also notifies me immediately of a call. A message or a phone number is available when I access the pager myself, and I can call the client immediately. Few messages are missed with a pager, and the practitioner appears very professional and responsive.

Your fourth step is to plan a seminar that will lead to your six-to-eight-week class.

Remember, the main idea for you seminar is to promote your class, which

ultimately leads to individual clients. The packaged programs mentioned above all have marketing materials (Appendix A) clearly explained and detailed for advertising your seminar and group. For example, the STEP program offers flyers, newspaper ad copy, brochures, and a convenient timeline to be used in conjunction with your first group. Marketing may be as simple as attaching your business card or using a professional looking stamp to personalize the flyer or brochure.

Finding space for 20 or 30, even up to 100 people, will not be that difficult. We have used community centers, libraries, church halls, hospital classrooms, and school auditoriums. We've been pleasantly surprised that, in some cases, there is no charge for these facilities. If your seminar is free, low-cost or a public service to your community, there are public agencies that offer free space. You want to make sure that it's appropriate to circulate your marketing materials, so get an okay from them first. Promote your seminar well in advance to newspapers, church bulletins, and in store windows. Surprisingly, local newspapers may be very happy to do a promotional piece on your seminar, especially if it has public interest, such as parenting, communication in marriage, employment issues, and the like. An opportunity for news coverage like that is very valuable; you may get them to include information about your private practice.

Your promotion is now finished, and its time for your seminar. The seminar should be from one to three hours. Good planning and professional materials are a must. Your personality, your expertise, and your style will lead you to the next step.

Your fifth step is to market your class or group in the seminar. Every seminar we have ever done has ended with people staying afterward and asking questions. These are the people who you target for your class. This exercise is fun and easy. You have materials that explain your four-to-six-week classes. These professional looking materials are in the form of handouts (Appendix A). At the table with these handouts is a sign up sheet, and there are places on the sheet for names and phone numbers. Stress to those interested that there are limited spaces for participants.

Typically 10 to 20 percent of the people at a seminar register for your class. Additionally, people who are reluctant to be in a group or class setting may ask to see you individually in the office.

You now have a basic pool of names with which to start your class. Make sure that your pager number or your office answering service number is on all of your printed material including your flyers and cards.

Planning for your class is not that much different than planning for your seminar. Churches, libraries, schools and lawyers' offices are all places to market. Plan well in advance and utilize the materials available from the packaged programs mentioned earlier. Remember, you are starting out small. Do not feel bad if your group is small. An intimate group often leads to clients.

Plan your start date, distribute your promotional materials, secure any media notices, call the local newspaper and ask advertising rates. We have included several examples of our advertisements in the appendix section, which may help you to develop some of your own. As potential group members call for information, costs, or location, you'll respond to these pages or messages promptly. Remember you are building a client base. Have a master list of every person you talk with, to be used later for marketing mailings. People who call for information about a group still maintain your phone number, and in any conversation you'll want to include information about your regular practice, and that you see people for mental health services in your office.

First night jitters are inevitable. Your meeting room should be bright, comfortable, and it's a good idea to have light refreshments, coffee, soft drinks, and bottled water. Follow the guidelines set forth in the materials included with the packaged program you've purchased. Run the group with fun and enthusiasm. You may stick closely to the directions of the printed materials included with your packaged program, or you may design the group to your clients' needs. Remember that the more valuable

your group is to the owner of the office space the better.

I remember one evening, as our group was laughing about various parenting issues, the head pediatrician entered the waiting room where we were meeting. He had stopped by the office after hours for some supplies. Before he left he sat in the group and shared some of his own family stories to his enjoyment of both and that of the group members; after all, most of the members were his patients. Later the doctor asked when the next group was going to start because he knew many others who would join the group. Another time, the same doctor, who was very influential in the community, asked a newspaper reporter to do a short feature article on our group. It is amazing what can happen; you just need to get started.

Your sixth step is to market your private practice to the group members. Your group will become comfortable and several members will ask you during breaks, or after class, about your practice. You professional looking brochure or business card will be close at hand. Also nearby is your appointment book. It is inevitable that you will be making appointments for people who need more help with their marriage or with their parenting. The S.T.E.P. class, T.I.M.E. marriage enrichment program, or other packaged program is slowly but surely helping you build a nice, limited practice. Use the word limited to describe your practice; it sounds more professional than part-time.

The seventh step is to conduct your practice in a professional and profitable manner. We have included in the appendix of our Office Procedure section many of the forms that we use in our practices. Be sure to review the ones on informed consent, intake, client payment information, as well as other pertinent forms. The issue of payments is very important. See our section on office procedure about fee information. Be sure the client understands that payment is made at the time of the appointment, and that any insurance consideration will be worked out in advance. In most cases, at this point in your young practice, managed care may not be an issue. See our section on managed care for extensive information on that subject.

Accepting payment for your services may make you uncomfortable at first. Do not be. You are a valuable professional who is licensed, and remember: you are solid, knowledgeable, and effective.

The choice of setting and decoration in your fledgling practice may be limited. My first office space had an examining table in the corner, which I pushed out of the way as much as I could, but the clients did not seem to mind. No comments were made. One office had an examining table with stirrups that did bring a comment or two. These make for great memories later, when you have your own office decorated tastefully and comfortably.

At this point you may be working five hours a week. This is, of course, in addition to some other full-time employment. It's hard but rewarding work. Your "limited practice" is a source of personal pride. As small as it is, you are earning income and helping people. Being able to make a difference in your community is a wonderful thing. This, we feel, was our goal.

By now, your practice has all of the three elements described above. You are doing seminars, conducting classes, and, most importantly, treating clients in your office. As your income grows, you can upgrade your answering system, hire an excellent secretary, acquire an accountant for quarterly tax payments or incorporation, and of course explore avenues to renting your own space. It may be a good idea to begin looking into getting contracts with managed care companies, insurance companies, EAP's, and unions. Review our section on managed care.

Your eighth step is to go back to step three and start all over again. Expand, flourish and help people.

Comprehensive examples for marketing all of these steps can be found in chapter three of our book The Complete Guide to Private Practice for Mental Health

Professionals, by Walsh and Dasenbrook.

Flowchart for Startup

First Step

Get your confidence/entrepreneur hat set squarely on your head.

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Second Step

Find office space

Option 1

Sublet office from established professional

Option 2

Contact M.D. (pediatrician,OB/Gyn. G.P.) about using office space

Option 3

Rent your own space

Option 4

Home

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Third Step

Order seminar/group materials (i.e. S.T.E.P. systematic training for effective parenting, T.I.M.E. training in marriage enrichment, etc.) Acquire telephone number

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Fourth Step

Plan, promote and conduct

**your one-day seminar,
interest people in your class**



Fifth Step

**Plan and promote and conduct
your six-to-eight-week class
that you introduced in your
one-day seminar,
interest people in individual
office appointments**



Sixth Step

**Schedule your class members
for appointments**



Seventh Step

**Beginning your private practice
(payment issues, managed care decisions,
upgrade of office, and other practice expanding ideas)**



Eighth Step

**Go back to step 3 and start all over again,
expand and prosper**

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