

PWT's Risk Assessment Tool for working online as a counsellor or psychotherapist

This Risk Assessment is in three parts. Part 1 relates to more general business risk. Part 2 relates to the practical issues in assessing risk in the online practice. Part 3 relates to clinical issues when working with clients. **Parts 1 and 2 should be reviewed at least annually for your online practice. Part 3 should be completed for each new client. The outcome of Parts 1 and 2 should always be considered when considered the risks involved that arise out of Part 3.**

Please note that this is a "work in progress" document and you should refer to the date in the footer for the latest version. The latest version of this document is listed on the internet at <http://www.pwtraining.com/resources/>.

"Risk is a part of everyday life and you are not expected to eliminate all risks. What you must do is make sure you know about the main risks and the things you need to do to manage them responsibly. Generally, you need to do everything 'reasonably practicable' to protect people from harm. This means balancing the level of risk against the measures needed to control the real risk in terms of money, time or trouble. However, you do not need to take action if it would be grossly disproportionate to the level of risk. Your risk assessment should only include what you could reasonably be expected to know – you are not expected to anticipate unforeseeable risks." (HSE, 2011 p2).

Your name (or your company's name):

Date of risk assessment:

Part 1 Risk Assessment for an Online Counselling Practice: the business aspects

This section is drawn heavily from the HSE's website <http://www.hse.gov.uk/getting-started/index.htm> and has been adapted for a practitioner working from home, mainly on their own, possibly with support secretarial staff. More templates and guideline are available on this website.

Theme	Question	Examples	Action Taken	Date Last Reviewed
Identify Hazards	What physical hazards are there in my workplace: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slips and trips • Manual handling • Work equipment 	Chemicals, electrical wiring to trip over, boxing, plastic sheeting to slide on, machinery including computers and printers, good lighting, safe stairs, no spillages, carrying of parcels and boxes; Gas appliances		
Identify Hazards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health of workers 	Health of staff including bullying, knowing roles, correct computer equipment		
Identify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computers, laptops, shredders and similar 	Staff risk posture problems and		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

Hazards	equipment	<p>pain, discomfort or injuries, eg to their hands/ arms, from overuse or improper use or from poorly designed workstations or work environments. Headaches or sore eyes can also occur, eg if the lighting is poor.</p> <p>Electrical shocks or burns if equipment faulty</p> <p>Injury from moving parts or unbalanced equipment</p>		
Identify Hazards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Computer software security 	<p>Have you got sufficient security on your computer to protect both your computer and data and that of your colleagues and clients?</p> <p>Have you thought about a firewall, virus protection, data and records storage, password implementation, encryption?</p>		
Identify Hazards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fire 	<p>Have you got a fire assessment risk policy?</p>		
	<p>Lone working and visiting: working alone in the office or visiting clients on a one-to-one basis</p>	<p>Staff who are not planning to return to the office after a visit call in to report this.</p> <p>Staff responsible for locking up at night check all areas before leaving.</p> <p>Ensure the person concerned has a mobile and has told someone where they are going</p> <p>Whereabouts of staff 'out of the office' to be monitored by office based staff.</p>		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

		Any incidents to be discussed at team meetings to see if lessons can be learnt.		
	Have you got an accident book?	Do I need one?		
	How often do you clean and tidy?	Sloppiness so often results in for example tripping		
	Who might be harmed by these hazards?	You the employer, employees, clients, visitors, the general public		
Evaluate Hazards	Can I get rid of the hazard altogether? Or, how can I control the risks so that harm is unlikely?	Try a less risky option; Prevent access to the hazards; Organise your work to reduce exposure to the hazard; Issuing protective equipment; Providing welfare facilities such as first aid and washing facilities; Involve & consult workers.		
Record findings / hazards	If you have less than 5 employees not compulsory, but good practice			

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

Part 2 Risk Assessment for an Online Counselling Practice: practical aspects

This part of the assessment related to the specific practical arrangements for working online and should be considered before setting up an online practice, and reviewed annually.

Theme	Question	Examples	Action Taken	Date Last Considered
Company type	Do I have the right type of business structure to take into account the level of risk posed by my clients	Working internationally may lead to additional risk factors, would having a limited company help or be suitable?		
Good Practice	How do I deal with / refer on unsuitable clients (see part 3 for more information)	Clients who are psychotic, or suicidal (different therapists will have different views about those suitable/unsuitable according to their training and limits of competence)		
Hazards	What issues are there for using my home address	Do I use my home address? Does this put me and my family at risk? Could I use a different address? (e.g. accommodation address or PO Box number)		
Hazards	What legal jurisdiction am I working under? <i>Working internationally brings its own dangers, including breaking the law of other countries</i>	Have I fully investigated the laws of the country where my client is based? (eg via home country or overseas professional associations, internet search, seeking professional guidance)		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

		from insurer)		
Hazards	Identify where I am resident	Check with my insurer that I am covered to work from where I live		
Hazards	Have I got suitable professional indemnity insurance <i>(Note not all insurers do automatically cover to work online)</i>	Talk to my insurer before starting out in working online to ensure they cover working online, working internationally, and to cover where you live.		
Good Practice	Have I got a suitable social media policy	How do you use Facebook? How do you use LinkedIn? How do you use Twitter? What level of privacy do you need to protect you and your family? What's out there about you already? What can you do about this? What do you expect of your clients in respecting your privacy? How will you implement your social media policy?		
Good Practice	How will I work online with my clients securely? Ensure that your choice is fully encrypted and acceptable by ISO27001:2013	Consider online portals, email systems, live chat systems etc are suitable for working online How will you check that		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

	and ICO.	the system you use is encrypted and up to the required standard for your circumstances?		
Good Practice	How and where is my data saved?	Is the data saved in a secure way? If server or cloud-based, do you know where?		
Good Practice	Working online is very different. Have you prepared a Client Information Pack that covers all the information your client may need? You will want to cover the points that usually worry clients and help educate them about working online, technological breakdowns, protecting their computers and files, how you might work.	Have you looked at different Client Information Packs that are available on various therapists' websites? Have you thought this out for your own circumstances?		
Good Practice	Linked with the Client Information Pack, have you prepared a Client Initial Form?	Have you looked at different Client Initial Forms that are available on various therapists' websites? Have you thought this out for your own circumstances?		
Good Practice	Linked with the Client Information Pack, have you prepared a Client Agreement / Contract. It is essential to have a written client agreement / contract in place for each	Have you looked at different Client Initial Forms that are available on various therapists' websites? Have you thought this out for your own		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

	client when working online	circumstances?		
Good Practice	Have you included information in your Client Information Pack and elsewhere to cover technology breakdowns and what to do in these cases	Technology breakdown is one of the biggest issues in working online. Thinking about back up plans is vital, including alternative email system, or mobile phone number, texting etc.		
Risk Assessment	What will you do if you or your client has poor internet band width?	Have you included this in your back-up plan?		
Risk Assessment	Are the systems that you put into place commensurate with the level of risk? How will you assess the level of risk?	Feedback from clients that they can't use safe-mail (eg), or have trouble receiving your emails may be examples of risk management gone too far		
Risk Assessment	In addition to computer software security issues raised in Part 1, how will you implement sufficient security within an online practice?	Have you thought about your client's level of knowledge? Have you thought about legal issues about the storage of medical records (an issue for some countries)		
Risk Assessment	Have you thought about your office and security?	Who else accessed your office and your computer? Is your computer visible		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

		<p>from a door or window?</p> <p>What about the IT specialist who comes to mend your computer?</p>		
Risk Assessment	<p>What happens is your computer is not compatible with your client's computer?</p>	<p>Have you thought out alternative methods e.g. The issues sometimes between Apple and Microsoft.</p>		
Good Practice	<p>Have you thought who might need access to any financial aspect of your work?</p>	<p>How will you supply your accounts to your accountant which respecting confidentiality?</p> <p>What about banking?</p> <p>What about payments online?</p> <p>What do you put on invoices/receipts?</p>		
Good Practice	<p>When am I required to release my notes?</p>	<p>What notes do you keep?</p> <p>Whose property are they?</p> <p>Why might you have to release them?</p> <p>What policy do you have about this in your Client Information Pack?</p>		
Good Practice	<p>What can I do to reduce my risks?</p>	<p>Think about some specialist training, CPD, mentoring.</p> <p>Do you have a supervisor specialised in working</p>		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

		online?		
Good Practice	<p>What systems do you find easiest and hardest to use?</p> <p><i>It's really important that you do not use a method of communication that you are not comfortable with.</i></p>	<p>Do you need to get some help in updating some skills?</p> <p>Do you lack confidence regarding any of the technology?</p>		
Financial	<p>Money is usually part of the process. Have you worked out how you are going to do the financial part of the work so that you don't get in a muddle?</p>	<p>What forms of payment can you take?</p> <p>What happens if a client wants to pay you through a channel that you can't accept?</p> <p>Do you send invoices? What do you put on them? Do you ask the client what they want on them? Some clients may be able to claim the expenses</p>		

Part 3 Risk Assessment for an Online Counselling Practice: clinical aspects

This part of the assessment related to the clinical practice, and should be completed and reviewed for each client.

Theme	Question	Examples	Action Taken	Date Last Considered
Hazard	<p>What is my client's knowledge and competence on line?</p> <p>Do I need to give them additional information about technology before we begin?</p>	<p>Using a secure email system</p> <p>Encrypting files</p>		
Hazard	<p>How comfortable is my client with his online relationships / presence?</p> <p><i>This is important as it may</i></p>	<p>Is your client at ease online?</p>		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

	<i>reflect in the therapeutic relationship you do or don't develop with your client.</i>			
Hazard	<p>How well suited is the client for working online?</p> <p><i>Some people are strongly orally, and some with the written word.</i></p>	<p>Is there educational level going to challenge their ability to do live text, or emails?</p> <p>How's their typing?</p>		
Hazard	<p>What are my client's home circumstances?</p>	<p>Is there a risk that others may see their computer</p>		
Hazard	<p>Does my client understand that he or she needs to be alone for their sessions?</p> <p>Does my client understand the need for privacy for the work we are about to do?</p>	<p>Checking the circumstances of your client's life, ensuing they understand the need for privacy for this work</p>		
Good Practice	<p>Have you assessed what way your client might communicate best?</p>	<p>Is this included in your client information pack or it is something you like to pick up on in the initial exchange of emails prior to the work beginning?</p>		
Hazard	<p>Have I made my system too secure for my client so that they might give up</p>	<p>If safe-mail (or other) is too difficult for your client, think about encrypting a Word document.</p>		
Hazard	<p>What if a client comes forward who, for you, is unsuitable?</p> <p>This may be because of your own issues, your limits of</p>	<p>How will you manage the client who you are accept for counselling?</p> <p>Do you have a referral network?</p>		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

	competence, etc.	<p>What interim support can you provide them with?</p> <p>Have you thought through particular issues you would find it hard to work with?</p>		
Good Practice	Have you checked whether your client is receiving other psychological or / and medical help?	<p>Are you comfortable to work with a client who is receiving help from more than one source?</p> <p>Do you need to lay down any ground rules?</p> <p>What do you think about your client receiving support from different source e.g. an online support platform such as BigWhiteWall?</p>		
Hazard	<p>Risk to self or other of the client: suicide</p> <p>(Thanks to OLT for this section)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • history of attempted suicide • evidence of suicidal intent • lack of support in social circle • excessive alcohol or drug use • other reasons for concern 		
Hazard	<p>Risk to self or other of the client: violence</p> <p>(Thanks to OLT for this section)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • history of violence • specific threats to others • reports of current 		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

		violent behaviour <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • violent fantasies • evidence of restlessness 		
Hazard	Risk to self or other of the client: serious self-neglect (Thanks to OLT for this section)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a history of self-neglect • reluctance to seek help from others • social isolation • lack of motivation 		
Hazard	Risk to self or other of the client: abuse (Thanks to OLT for this section)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mention of physical injuries • mention of neglect from those in a carer's role • mention of denied access to other social contact • evidence of self-harm • mention of sexual abuse 		
Good Practice	The first session – do you have a trial session or do you book a series?	There are advantages both ways, have you worked out what works best for your practice?		
Clinical	How might you approach previous treatment with this client?	If the client has had therapy before, they may have a set of expectations.		
Clinical	Do you think personality type	Do you need to think		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

	is important for online counselling	about how personality types for with the type of work you like or are comfortable doing?		
Clinical	Is a pre-existing or initial diagnosis useful?	You may want to draw on some of your F2F work here, but would your answers be any different?		
Diversity	What about physical disability or issues?	<p>Are there any disability issues to think about re sight, hearing, speech, mobility or ongoing medical condition?</p> <p>Might these determine the best form of therapy method for the client?</p>		
Diversity	How does diversity fit into this mix?	Do you need to think about language and cultural difference?		
Diversity	How might your or you client's culture, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class etc. impact on your work?	<p>Have you thought through these issues?</p> <p>Is there any work you need to do to enable you to think about how they might specifically impact online?</p>		

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com

References

- Health and Safety Executive (2011) Five steps to risk assessment. Available from
<<http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk/fivesteps.htm>> [accessed 14th August 2014]
- Health and Safety Executive (2014) *Psychotherapy 2.0: Where Psychotherapy and Technology Meet*. Karnac Books
Weitz, P (2014) (London) and <<http://pwtraining.com/resources-for-working-online/setting-up-an-online-practice/>> Accessed 31st August 2014.

PWT, 83 Downsway, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4WE



01273 700 911



info@PWTraining.com



www.PWTraining.com