

Aspens Noticeboard

By Susan Mary Benbow

Following broader ideas of who and what Aspens features, I offer these snapshots from my continuing journey. I left my NHS post as old age psychiatrist in 2009 and spent the following 12-18 months writing a PhD thesis alongside carrying out a research project, which involved meeting and talking with people living with a dementia and their families. I had worked as a family therapist in different NHS settings since the mid 1980s and had undertaken a Diploma in Family Therapy at the Family Institute in Cardiff, but had never practised independently. By the time I completed the PhD I was clear that part of my new portfolio career must be family therapy/ systemic practice, however scary that prospect was. I have learned a lot since then.

Where to practise? I looked at a number of possible rooms in the Manchester area (where I live) and the West Midlands (where I often work). Eventually (after one false start) I settled on using rooms in a Psychotherapy Centre where I would be able to meet other therapists. It's quiet and comfortable and feels like a fit. It's more expensive than some other possible venues, but for me the pros outweigh the cons.

What to offer? What length of appointments? How frequently to offer to see people? Daytime or evenings or both? I drew up a client-therapist contract after studying a number of contracts, some used by other people who were willing to share them and others that I found on the internet. This was a valuable exercise as I had to think through practically how I was going to operate. Some of the American contracts were illuminating, including charges for time spent on phone calls and for sending emails. They certainly made me reflect.

How to find clients or to help them find me? Websites seem to be the main source, for me AFT and the UKCP. I've also had contacts through Counselling Directory and I dish out business cards at any available opportunity. In business terms this is marketing but reconciling my self as a therapist with my self as a business person has not been easy. There are lots of other possibilities here but costs have to be considered as well as benefits.

Where to get support? My peer group members are essential in keeping me going (thanks team), and I discovered Aspens, a great source of ongoing nurturing, reflections, education and stimulation (I may have missed a few other things from the list there), plus a way to make wonderful new friends. I have found Skype to be a useful tool.

What about money? Well, you need to lose your inhibitions about money if people are going to pay to see you. Deciding what to charge is a huge dilemma and keeping the books is not my favourite chore, but it's something I've learned (the hard way) to keep on top of.

How to evaluate my work and get feedback from clients? I had bad experience of this: in the NHS clients rarely gave feedback but in independent practice people normally respond generously to my feedback requests.

Finally, is the work the same? Yes and no. Many of the clients, in terms of their distress, could quite appropriately have presented to statutory services but chose not to. I perceive more pressure from clients for quick results and for flexibility, in terms of the timing, length and frequency of sessions. And I'm still learning.

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