

## Five Mistakes to Avoid in Conversations about Your Fee

Fees are a perennial source of uncertainty and discomfort for therapists. Our profession has a history of providing services for adjusted and flexible fees. Counseling and therapy services are delivered in a wide range of settings. Clients are rarely familiar with the typical fee range for therapy services. Their expectations may be based on services received decades ago, or their knowledge may extend only to their \$10 insurance co-pay. They may come to us with a history of treatment in an academic setting or nonprofit agency as well as having seen previous therapists in private practice.

The idea of a free first session has circulated widely and the general public sees this as customary by now. This may have started in the 1990s with the advent of managed care; clients often ask about it in their initial inquiry.

To an outside observer we are simply sitting and listening, interjecting occasional comments to clients. Some consider a therapist no more than a "professional friend." From an outsider's perspective, it is reasonable to assume that the service holds only modest value and that insurance may cover the full expense. Clients who have more experience with therapy or are more informed may anticipate fees akin to those of an attorney or physician. So it is not surprising that when people call us there are a wide array of assumptions and understandings about the cost of this kind of service.

It's been said that therapists' explanation of their fees is akin to opening a restaurant and handing out menus to customers that simply state "Food," without a selection of specific choices or prices.

Here are five problem areas therapists tend to encounter about discussions related to their fees, and alternative explanations for how to handle this delicate subject.

### Avoidance

It's normal to feel uncomfortable about stating your private practice fee when you're new to the business. Like many therapists, perhaps you are a person who is a bit shy with strangers. You may have a family or cultural background that causes you particular hesitation about addressing money matters. It's useful to understand the causes of any barriers you experience, yet it is also important to find some strategies that keep you moving forward, so that you're developing this aspect of your practice persona.

Some therapists offer no listing or acknowledgment of specific fees until the client actually arrives at the office to enroll as a participant in therapy. This is a holdover from the days when doctors and other medical professionals thought it crass and distracting to talk about finances directly with patients; they typically had intermediaries like receptionists and office managers on-site to handle money matters. Most therapists have this conversation when the client first calls about services, but that leaves them disclosing fee information in a brief phone conversation before any rapport has been established; a less-than-ideal setting for an often-delicate subject.

You may consider simply posting your actual fees on your website and in any marketing materials; in our field this degree of direct communication is somewhat exceptional but could be a worthwhile experiment.

### Randomness

How have you decided what fee to charge? Do you worry your rate sounds too high, or that you are unqualified to charge this much money? Maybe you're concerned that the client will reject your services or object to the stated fee.

Don't just pick a number for your fee. Do some research using online directories and get a sense of what therapists in your community are charging. You can look for some factors like these: training in a specialization that is in high demand, hours you offer appointments, location that is particularly desirable.

You may be able to charge more if you're working with an underserved population, or if you are confident you can achieve specific results with the majority of your clients.

Your level of experience is less important than you might think. Yes, experienced therapists often have a broad therapeutic repertoire or might arrive at a case formulation more readily than those with less years doing therapy, but newer therapists tend to undervalue their time due to their eagerness to fill their caseload.

### Vagueness

When clients ask about your fees you may hedge a bit, stating you offer a range of fees or a sliding scale. Therapists will sometimes respond, "What do you feel like you can afford?" or "It depends on your resources." You've probably heard jokes about how therapists always answer a question with another question, but in this context it leads to a fuzzy impression of how we value our time and set fees.

The best way to handle this exchange is to take the initiative about the subject of money. Usually this conversation happens on the phone, so you might say something

like “Would this be a good time for me to tell you about my fees?” or “Would you like to hear about how I handle payments?” This keeps you in charge of the conversation, rather than you waiting for the client to ask you a series of important questions.

Don't downplay or evade when talking about your fees. Deliver the information and pause. See what reaction you get before you go to the next step. Clients might find it useful if you acknowledge the scope of work that you anticipate. For example you might say, “Typically people see me for X number of sessions for this kind of issue. Some situations take more time because of...” and then you name two or three factors that you know tend to prolong therapy for their particular problem.

Of course it is ambitious to predict the therapy process before you even meet the client, but these questions are present in the client's mind, so you may as well get the conversation started.

## Apologies

You are a trained professional observer, so think about how you come across when you're having conversations about finances with clients. Is your posture slumped, with shoulders bent over in a protective posture? Do your hand gestures indicate helplessness or resignation? If this conversation is happening on the phone, does your voice sound tentative or regretful?

If your pause is met with silence, you can say, “Is that in the range of what you were expecting?” or, “Have you looked into the cost of this type of service much yet?” That allows you to engage in a back-and-forth conversation, to orient yourself to their initial expectations and any reaction to information you shared.

It is certainly preferable to have the fee agreed upon prior to meeting in person. Occasionally clients have forgotten what you said on the phone, or didn't receive communication you relayed to them prior to the visit, but most often these financial issues are clarified before the client walks in the office.

When discussing these questions in person, speak directly and plainly to the client without any other commentary after you state your fee. Practice this skill. Pause after stating the fee. Resist any urge to follow up with an immediate offer to reduce it.

Sometimes you end up in a conversation about fees or a client asks you to reconsider financial arrangements based on changing circumstances. Communicate in a straightforward manner, looking at the client. Avoid speaking with qualifiers like, “Well, usually...” or “People can sometimes pay based on...” because this gives an impression of uncertainty. Know what is realistic and acceptable for you in negotiations, or simply

say you will need time to give it some thought. If you feel put on the spot you can say, "I want to accommodate your request. I need to look into this with my bookkeeper/ financial advisor. I'll get back to you by X date."

## Spontaneity

If the financial conversation doesn't go as planned, it can create counter-transference for you, or awkwardness between you and your client. Perhaps you get drawn in; out of your honest desire to help, you offer a lower fee than you really feel good about.

When we're unprepared and making things up as we go along, second thoughts or regrets often occur about this kind of exchange. This is why it is helpful to get some guidance about developing your practice, so you can make decisions effectively and not just react in the moment.

It's always best to have some alternate resources ready, so that you can refer the clients who cannot afford your fees to colleagues or nonprofit organizations. If you have this information handy in the moment, or follow through on your commitment to supply the client with resources in a timely way, they're likely to leave your interaction with the positive feeling of being cared for, even if your practice is not the right financial fit for them.

Please contact me if I can support you in achieving clarity about your fees and managing the subject of money in your practice. Just email me at [createyourprivatepractice@gmail.com](mailto:createyourprivatepractice@gmail.com). We'll arrange a free 20 minute Practice Advising session and I'll gladly share some ideas about this common concern.