



**Practical Insights &  
Resources for Setting Up  
a Private Practice**

Counsellor Toolkit 2024

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# Transitioning into Private Practice: Practical Insights & Resources for Counsellors

Transitioning into private practice as a counsellor can be both thrilling and daunting, requiring careful planning tailored to your unique needs. This fact sheet offers guidance drawn from universal business principles to help you navigate the process effectively. Included are links to templates and additional resources to support you in establishing and managing your practice with confidence. Providing practical insights, it guides you through the steps — from clarifying your vision to understanding market needs and establishing an online presence, to support your journey.

## Legislation

Transitioning into private practice or working within an organisation as a counsellor requires careful attention to the legal and ethical dimensions specific to your state's and or federal legislation.

Here's a breakdown of key legislation and guidelines:

- **Health Practitioner Regulation National Law:** Governs registration, conduct, and ongoing professional development for health practitioners, including counsellors.
- **Australian Consumer Law (ACL):** Regulates consumer rights and business obligations, covering misleading conduct, consumer guarantees, and unfair contract terms.
- **Privacy Act 1988 (Cth):** Regulates the handling of personal information, imposing obligations to safeguard privacy rights.
- **Family Law Act 1975 (Cth):** Governs family law matters, crucial for counsellors dealing with clients in family disputes.
- **Freedom of information (FOI):** It covers government information, including the rights of individuals to request information under the Freedom of Information Act. (Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, n.d.)
- **Mental Health Act:** Varies by state and outlines provisions for the treatment and care of individuals with mental illness.
- **Child Protection Laws:** Vary by state and set requirements for safeguarding children from abuse and neglect.

- **Business and Employment Laws:** Compliance with business and employment laws ensures legal operation as a counsellor in private practice.
- **Advertising and Marketing Regulations:** Compliance with regulations, such as ACCC guidelines, is necessary for ethical advertising practices.
- **Business Structure:** Choosing an appropriate business structure (e.g., sole proprietorship, partnership, company) and registering the business with relevant authorities. (Business.gov.au, n.d)
- **Contracts and Agreements:** Drafting and implementing contracts and agreements with clients, including terms of service, confidentiality agreements, and consent forms" (Business.gov.au, n.d)

In addition to legal requirements, counsellors must also adhere to Australian Counselling Association (ACA) ethical guidelines.

Ethical Guidelines

## Starting Your Own Private Counselling Practice

Embarking on the journey of establishing your own counselling practice is indeed an exciting endeavour. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to launching your counselling career.

### Business Plan for Your Counselling Practice

Determining whether a business plan is necessary for your counselling practice depends on your specific goals and circumstances. However, a well-crafted business plan can offer numerous benefits, particularly for new ventures. It helps articulate your business goals, mission, and vision, forcing you to consider crucial details such as your target market, services offered, and competitive advantage. Crafting such a plan is essential as it serves as a roadmap for achieving your objectives, aids in informed decision-making on vital aspects like marketing strategies and pricing, and effectively communicates your vision to

potential clients and stakeholders. Subsequent sections of the document will offer actionable strategies.

## SWOT Analysis

Conducting a SWOT analysis is also recommended for counsellors commencing a business plan. This analysis helps identify the practice's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, enabling them to leverage strengths, address weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and mitigate threats effectively.

[SWOT Example](#)

## How to Write a Business Plan

For guidance on crafting a comprehensive business plan tailored to your counselling practice, you can refer to the resources provided by Business Victoria.

[Business Victoria](#)

## One-Page Business Action Plan

A one-page action plan is a condensed document that outlines specific goals, action steps, responsibilities, timelines, and progress tracking mechanisms within a single page. It serves as a simplified roadmap to help individuals or teams achieve their objectives efficiently and effectively. You can access a template to create your own one-page action plan through Business Victoria's website.

[Business Victoria](#)

## Risk Register

A risk register is a document used to identify, assess, and manage potential risks that could impact a counsellor's practice in private practice settings. A counsellor in private practice would create a risk register to systematically identify potential threats or hazards to their clients, practice, reputation, and regulatory compliance.

By documenting and analysing risks such as confidentiality breaches, ethical dilemmas, client grievances, or legal liabilities, counsellors can develop strategies to mitigate or address these risks effectively. Ultimately, maintaining a risk register helps counsellors proactively manage uncertainties and safeguard the well-being of their clients and the

integrity of their practice. For the Risk Register and Treatment Plan Template provided by the Victorian Government:

[Visit Here](#)

If you run a face-to-face service on your own, you may face additional risks and responsibilities as a sole practitioner. In addition to the general risks mentioned earlier, here are some specific considerations for managing risks in a solo practice setting:

## Personal Safety

Consider measures to ensure your personal safety, such as having a secure location, establishing protocols for managing challenging or potentially volatile situations with clients, and having a system in place to alert others in case of emergencies.

## Recommended Resources for Small Business Owners

If you're looking to start or expand your small business, consider exploring the wealth of resources available at [business.gov.au](http://business.gov.au), the Australian Government's official website for businesses.

[More Information](#)

From registration and compliance to financing and growth strategies, [business.gov.au](http://business.gov.au) offers comprehensive support to entrepreneurs at every stage. Additionally, [business.gov.au](http://business.gov.au) provides some free training opportunities, offering valuable skills and knowledge to help you succeed in your business endeavours. You may also find useful insights and guidance tailored specifically for small business owners at NAB's Small Business Hub.

[NAB](#)

## Private Practice Income and Expenditures

Drafting a business plan entails considering the practicalities of starting your counselling practice, including estimating the time required for setup and identifying alternative income sources, if necessary. It's crucial to outline the steps involved in launching your practice, allocate realistic timelines for each stage, and explore options for generating income during the initial phases. By addressing these aspects, you can develop a comprehensive plan that not only outlines your business goals but also maps



out a practical path for getting started and sustaining your practice in the long run.

When establishing your private practice, consider your streams of income. These may include:

- Taking on roles such as establishing contracts with Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). EAPs are employer-sponsored programs that provide counselling and support services to employees facing personal or work-related challenges.
- Become a private health fund provider. This involves meeting certain criteria and adhering to the fund's policies and fee schedules.

Each organisation, whether private, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or a health fund, may have distinct requirements regarding qualifications and industry experience.

When considering a part-time job, look for positions that offer flexibility in terms of scheduling and workload. Ideally, choose a job that aligns with your values and interests and allows you to maintain a healthy work-life balance. By strategically incorporating a part-time job into your schedule, you can support the growth of your private practice while ensuring financial stability and personal well-being.

## Volunteer Work

Exploring volunteering opportunities while establishing a private practice offers a chance to gain valuable experience and training. Reputable organizations like Lifeline Australia, Beyond Blue, and the Salvation Army provide diverse roles that allow engagement with clients and the development of crucial skills such as crisis intervention and conflict resolution.

Additionally, volunteering not only enhances cultural competence and adaptability but also provides exposure to complex cases, fostering growth in problem-solving abilities and understanding of human behaviour. The additional supervision provided by volunteer organisations offers valuable feedback and guidance for skill enhancement, contributing to the refinement of clinical judgment essential for effective counselling.

Websites like [GoVolunteer](#), [NSW Volunteering](#) and [Seek Volunteer](#) are examples of sites looking for volunteers roles that potentially align with your personal interests and career goals.

**Professional support:** Seek out professional supervision or consultation to discuss challenging cases, ethical dilemmas, or personal concerns related

to your practice. As a member of ACA, you are required to have supervision to retain your registration.

## Understanding Market Needs: Key Preparations for Launching Your Counselling Practice

Before commencing your counselling practice, it's important to understand the specific requirements within your target market. Conducting thorough research to identify gaps or unmet needs is essential. Factors such as demographics, cultural backgrounds, and prevalent issues within your community should be considered. Tailoring your services to address these needs will not only attract clients but also ensure the relevance and effectiveness of your counselling practice.

### Demographic Analysis

Gathering demographic data about your community, including population size, age distribution, household income, education levels, and cultural diversity. This information can assist in identifying potential client groups and tailoring your services to meet their specific needs.

### Community Needs Assessment

Conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment to identify prevalent mental health issues, barriers to accessing services, and existing resources and support networks. This can be accomplished through surveys, focus groups, interviews, or consultations with community organisations, healthcare providers, and local government agencies. Look for patterns or trends in the data that highlight areas of unmet need or underserved populations.

### Review Existing Data

Utilise existing research, reports, and statistical information from reputable sources such as government health departments, academic institutions, and non-profit organisations. Seek studies or surveys that provide insights into mental health trends, prevalence of specific disorders, and service utilisation rates within your community.

## Consult Stakeholders

Engage with key stakeholders in your community who may have insights into mental health needs and service gaps. This could include community leaders, educators, healthcare professionals, social workers, religious leaders, and advocacy groups. Seek their perspectives on the most pressing mental health issues facing the community and potential strategies for addressing them.

## Conduct Surveys and Interviews

Design and administer surveys or conduct interviews with community members to gather firsthand insights into their perceptions, experiences, and preferences related to mental health services. Analyse the responses to identify common themes and areas for intervention.

## Utilise Online Resources

Explore online platforms and resources that provide data and insights into mental health trends and needs at the national, state, or local level. Websites such as the [Centres for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA), and the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) (ABS) offer valuable information and reports on mental health indicators and trends.

## Engage with Community Events

Attend community events, forums, or workshops related to mental health and well-being to gain firsthand knowledge of local concerns and priorities.

## Collaborate with Local Organisations

Partner with local organisations and service providers that work with vulnerable or marginalised populations. Collaborative efforts can help you access diverse perspectives and reach underserved communities more effectively.

## Analyse Trends and Patterns

Analyse the data and insights gathered from your research to identify trends, patterns, and gaps in mental health services within your community.

By undertaking comprehensive research and analysis, you can gain a deeper understanding of the mental health needs and preferences of your community, allowing you to tailor your counselling services to effectively meet those needs.

## Developing a Strong Brand

Developing a strong brand and identity for your counselling business is crucial for establishing credibility, building trust with clients, and differentiating yourself from other counsellors. Here are steps to guide you through the process:

### Define Your Brand Values and Mission

Start by identifying the core values that guide your counselling practice and the mission that drives your work. Consider what principles and beliefs are most important to you as a counsellor and how you want to make a positive impact on the lives of your clients. Your brand values and mission will serve as the foundation for your brand identity.

### Distinguishing Your Counselling Business: Emphasising Unique Selling Points

**Understand Your Target Audience:** Gain a deep understanding of your target audience—the clients you aim to serve. Consider factors such as demographics, psychographics, needs, challenges, and preferences. Understanding your audience will help you tailor your brand messaging and communication strategies to resonate with them effectively.

### Create a Compelling Brand Story

Craft a compelling narrative that communicates who you are, what you stand for, and why you do what you do. Your brand story should be authentic, relatable, and emotionally engaging. Share personal anecdotes, experiences, or insights that highlight your journey as a counsellor and what sets you apart from others in the field.

## Develop Your Visual Identity

Design a visually appealing and cohesive brand identity that reflects your values, personality, and target audience. This includes elements such as a logo, colour palette, typography, and imagery. Your visual identity should be consistent across all touchpoints, including your website, marketing materials, and office space.

[Learn more about SEO](#)

## Craft Your Brand Messaging

Develop clear and concise messaging that communicates your brand promise, key benefits, and unique value proposition to your target audience. Use language that resonates with your audience and speaks to their needs, aspirations, and emotions. Your brand messaging should be consistent, authentic, and compelling across all communication channels.

You can find examples of steps to develop a strong brand in various places, including:

**Online Resources:** Many websites dedicated to marketing, branding, and business development offer guides and articles outlining steps to build a strong brand. Websites like HubSpot, Forbes, and Entrepreneur often provide detailed guides and examples.

**Books:** Numerous books delve into branding strategies and provide case studies and examples of successful brand development.

**Case Studies:** Business case studies, available in academic journals, business magazines, or online platforms, can be excellent sources of real-world examples of successful brand development processes.

**Industry Reports:** Market research reports often include sections on branding strategies, where you can find examples of how companies in specific industries have built strong brands.

**Company Websites:** Some companies share their branding strategies and processes on their websites, offering insights into how they developed their brand identity.

## Build a Strong Online Presence

SEO, or Search Engine Optimisation, is the practice of improving a website's visibility and ranking on search engine results pages (SERPs). In simpler terms, it's about making your website more likely to show up when people search for relevant topics on search engines like Google, Bing, or Yahoo. SEO involves

various techniques such as optimising website content, improving website structure and performance, building links from other websites, and targeting specific keywords. The goal of SEO is to attract more organic (unpaid) traffic to your website and improve its online visibility, ultimately leading to more visitors, engagement, and conversions.

## Digital Readiness

To assess your digital readiness and explore tools provided by the Australian Government,

[Use this Tool](#)

This tool helps identify areas for improvement within your business regarding digital presence and readiness.

## Online Presence

Create profiles on various platforms like [Bing Places for Business](#), [Yelp](#), [Facebook Business Page](#), [Healthgrades](#), [Psychology Today](#), [Yellow Pages](#), and local chamber of commerce websites.

These platforms help potential clients find your counselling practice and learn about your services. Maintain accurate profiles to enhance visibility in local search results and attract clients. Additionally, utilise niche directories like [True Local](#), [Hotfrog](#), Australia Counselling, [Health4You](#), and [Whitecoat](#) to reach specific audiences. Leveraging multiple platforms broadens your presence and establishes your counselling practice within the Australian community.

## Cyber Security

While developing your online presence as a counsellor, it is crucial to prioritise cybersecurity. The Australian Government has introduced a Cyber Security Assessment Tool aimed at identifying both the strengths and areas for improvement within your business.

To access the Cyber Security Assessment Tool provided by the Australian Government,

[Visit Here](#)

This tool is designed to assist you in evaluating your business's cybersecurity posture, allowing you to

enhance protection against potential threats and vulnerabilities.

## Provide Exceptional Client Experiences

Deliver exceptional client experiences at every touchpoint of the customer journey. From the initial inquiry to the completion of counselling sessions, prioritise empathy, respect, confidentiality, and professionalism. Create a warm and welcoming atmosphere in your office space and ensure that clients feel heard, understood, and supported throughout their therapeutic journey.

## Seek Feedback

Continuously seek feedback from clients, colleagues, and peers to gauge the effectiveness of your brand and identity. Listen to their perceptions, suggestions, and concerns, and use this feedback to refine and improve your brand strategy over time.

## Stay True to Your Brand Promise

Maintain consistency in your brand messaging, visual identity, and client experiences to build trust and credibility over time. Stay true to your brand promise and uphold the values and principles that define your counselling practice. Consistency breeds familiarity and loyalty among clients and helps reinforce your brand identity in their minds.

By following these steps and investing time and effort into developing your brand and identity, you can create a strong and memorable presence in the marketplace that resonates with your target audience and positions you as a trusted authority in the field of counselling.

## Start-up Costs for Establishing a Counselling Business in Australia

The start-up costs for establishing a counselling business in Australia can vary significantly due to factors like location, business model, and specific requirements.

Areas to consider:

### Finance:

- **Budgeting and Financial Planning:** Developing a budget and financial plan to manage income, expenses, and investments.
- **Accounting Practices:** Implementing accounting practices to track revenue, expenses, and cash flow accurately.
- **Tax Obligations:** Understanding and fulfilling tax obligations, including GST (Goods and Services Tax) if applicable.
- **Financial Records:** Maintaining accurate financial records for compliance and decision-making purposes.
- **Banking:** Establishing business banking accounts and setting up payment processing systems for receiving client payments.

### Billing:

- **Fee Structure:** Establishing a clear fee structure for counselling services and communicating it to clients.
- **Invoicing:** Generating and sending invoices to clients for services rendered, including details of fees, session dates, and payment terms.
- **Payment Collection:** Setting up processes for collecting payments from clients, including payment methods and timelines.
- **Debt Management:** Managing outstanding payments and following up with clients on overdue invoices.

### Insurance:

- **Professional Indemnity Insurance:** Obtaining professional indemnity insurance to protect against claims of professional negligence or misconduct.
- **Public Liability Insurance:** Securing public liability insurance to cover risks associated with injury or property damage to clients or third parties on the business premises.
- **Personal Insurance:** Considering personal insurance coverage for income protection, disability, and health insurance to safeguard personal finances and well-being.

Careful consideration and comprehensive planning are essential to accurately estimate and manage these start-up costs. For more information and assistance in calculating start-up costs for your business,

[Visit Here](#)



## Wellbeing

Navigating the landscape of a private practice can often feel solitary, but there are various strategies to counteract feelings of loneliness and foster a sense of connection and support.

### Supervision and Mentorship

Discuss setting up your counselling practice with your supervisor for guidance and/or mentorship or from other experienced counsellors or clinical supervisors. These relationships provide valuable guidance, feedback, and support as you navigate your career path.

### Continuing Education

As part of your business planning, identify where your gaps in knowledge are and undertake appropriate training to ensure you have the necessary business skills to effectively manage your practice. This may include financial, accounting or marketing skills.

### Specialised Training Programs

Explore specialised training programs or certification courses in areas such as trauma-informed care, addiction counselling, or family therapy. These programs can enhance your expertise and broaden your career opportunities.

### Research and Writing

Engage in research projects or writing opportunities related to counselling topics of interest. This can help you deepen your understanding of the field.

### Networking and Professional Development

Attend conferences, workshops, or networking events within the counselling community to connect with other professionals, share ideas, and stay updated on industry trends and best practices.

### Peer Support Groups

Participate in peer support groups or professional networks for counsellors, where you can connect with other professionals, share resources, and exchange ideas. Attend your local Chapter meeting.

## Forms Used in a Private Practice

- Australian Government's Style Manual
- Client Engagement Letter/Contract
- Privacy Policy template
- Consent to Share
- Clinical Supervision and Agreement Template

### Style Manual

The Australian government's Style Manual is an invaluable resource for anyone involved in developing documentation, including counsellors setting up a private practice. It offers a comprehensive guide on language use, formatting, accessibility, and other aspects of writing and designing documents. By referring to the Style Manual, counsellors can ensure that their documentation is clear, consistent, and easily understood by their audience. This can help communicate important information about their practice, services, and policies to clients and other stakeholders.

[More Information](#)

### Client Engagement Letter

The introduction of a letter serves as the initial communication between parties, where the purpose of engagement is clearly stated, and both parties' needs are addressed. It may include the names of the counsellor or counselling practice and the client, as well as any relevant background information.

- **Goals and Objectives:** The engagement letter may articulate the goals and objectives of the counselling relationship. This could include desired outcomes, behavioural changes, or emotional insights that the client hopes to achieve through the counselling process.
- **Scope of Services:** This section outlines the specific services that the counsellor will provide to the client. It clarifies the focus of the counselling sessions, such as individual therapy, couples counselling, family therapy, or group therapy. It may also specify any limitations or exclusions regarding the services offered.
- **Responsibilities of Both Parties:** Each party's responsibilities are clearly delineated in the engagement letter. For example, the counsellor may outline their commitment to maintaining confidentiality, providing a safe and supportive environment, and adhering to ethical standards. The client's responsibilities may include attending

scheduled sessions, actively participating in therapy, and communicating openly with the counsellor.

- **Duration of Engagement:** The letter specifies the anticipated duration of the counselling engagement, including the frequency and duration of sessions. It may also address any provisions for extending or terminating the counselling relationship.
- **Fees or Pricing Structure:** This section outlines the financial terms of the engagement, including the counsellor's fees, payment schedule, accepted forms of payment, and any cancellation or late fees. It may also include information about insurance coverage or sliding scale fees for clients with financial need.
- **Confidentiality and Privacy:** Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the counselling relationship, and the engagement letter typically includes a statement affirming the counsellor's commitment to protecting the client's privacy. It may outline the limits of confidentiality, such as situations where the counsellor is legally obligated to disclose information (e.g., if the client poses a danger to themselves or others).
- **Informed Consent:** The engagement letter may include a section on informed consent, where the client acknowledges their understanding of the counselling process, including the risks, benefits, and alternatives. This ensures that the client is fully informed and consents to participate in counselling voluntarily.
- **Legal and Ethical Considerations:** The letter may include language addressing legal and ethical considerations, such as the counsellor's licensure and professional obligations. It may also include information about the client's rights, including their right to access their records and file complaints if they believe their rights have been violated.
- **Signatures and Date:** Finally, the engagement letter is typically signed and dated by both the counsellor and the client, indicating their agreement to the terms outlined in the document. This formalizes the counselling relationship and serves as a record of the agreed-upon terms.
- This resource offers general information and guidance, not professional advice, practitioners need to ensure compliance with relevant laws.

Use this Resource

## Privacy Policy Template

A counsellor should have a privacy policy to outline how they handle client information, ensuring transparency, trust, and compliance with privacy laws and ethical standards. Australian Privacy Principles (APPs) are contained in the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) (the Privacy Act). Your policy needs to align with the Privacy Act and inform clients about how you collect, use, store, and protect their personal information, helping to establish clear boundaries and expectations regarding confidentiality and privacy. Additionally, your privacy policy demonstrates the counsellor's commitment to safeguarding client privacy and provides recourse for clients in case of concerns or breaches of confidentiality. Overall, having a privacy policy promotes client confidence, fosters ethical practice, and reduces the risk of legal and reputational issues.

Example

## Consent to Share

When crafting your own consent form, it's crucial to incorporate essential components, as exemplified in resources like the one provided by the Victorian government. Your document should clearly outline the purpose of information sharing, parties involved, types of information shared, and conditions of consent. Language clarity is essential, emphasising the client's autonomy in decision-making regarding their information. Ensure confidentiality, clarify procedures for clients revoking consent, and provide contact information for inquiries. Also, remember to document in your notes if verbal consent has been provided.

More Information

## Clinical Supervision

Clinical supervision is a structured professional relationship in which a more experienced or qualified practitioner (the supervisor) provides guidance, support, and feedback to a less experienced practitioner (the supervisee) to enhance their clinical practice. The purpose of clinical supervision is to ensure the quality of client care, promote professional development, and address any ethical or competency issues that may arise.

Before offering Supervision as part of your private practice, it is important to ensure that you have undertaken an ACA Recognised Supervision Training

Course and are a member of the ACA College of Supervisors.

Having a document outlining the terms and expectations of clinical supervision is important for several reasons:

**Clarity:** A written document provides clarity on the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of both the supervisor and supervisee during the supervision process. This helps to avoid misunderstandings and ensures that both parties are on the same page.

**Accountability:** A supervision document serves as a formal agreement between the supervisor and supervisee, outlining their respective commitments to the supervision process. This promotes accountability and ensures that both parties fulfill their obligations.

**Ethical and Legal Compliance:** A written document can help ensure that clinical supervision adheres to ethical guidelines and legal requirements governing

professional practice. It can address issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, and boundaries in the supervisory relationship.

**Quality Assurance:** By documenting the goals, objectives, and outcomes of clinical supervision sessions, practitioners can track progress over time and assess the effectiveness of the supervision process. This supports ongoing quality improvement and professional development.

#### **Clinical Supervision Agreement Template:**

- [Clinical Supervision Agreement Template](#)
- [Victorian Allied Health Clinical Supervision Framework](#)

Please note that as part of your counselling registration, participation in regular supervision is required.

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Note: The document was generated with assistance from ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI.

Disclaimer: While the information provided in this fact sheet is current as of the date written, it is essential for counsellors to stay updated with the latest regulations, resources, and practices specific to their state within Australia. It is the responsibility of the counsellor to ensure compliance and effectiveness in their work. Seeking guidance from a supervisor is advised to navigate regional requirements. This disclaimer underscores the counsellor's responsibility to stay informed and adhere to relevant standards and guidelines.



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