



 A quick guide to

Growing your own practice

Blogging and website basics

Introduction

Today, there are



on the web

The biggest challenge for counsellors in private practice is to secure a consistent number of new referrals.

Blogging is a simple, cost-effective way for counsellors in private practice to 'stand out' and reach an audience of prospective clients. Blogging allows us to 'set out our stall' of services and communicate who we are and what we can offer.

The origins of blogging (originally known as a web-log) go back to 1994 when student Justin Hall created Links.net, a simple website where he published his writing. His brief postings were a simple link to other content on the web together with his comments on the content he was linking to. Today, there are 600 million blogs on the web and 1.7 billion websites.

The ideal counsellor blogging website has a mix of two types of pages:

- 1.** Static information that doesn't often change, such as your details, about me page, services on offer and your contact information.
- 2.** A blog page, or pages, often titled news, latest or useful articles that can easily be updated with new information; articles, videos, checklists, top-tip guides and graphics.

If you already have a website, check with your provider or web designer to see how you can add a blog page(s). If you don't have a website or your current one doesn't have the facility for a blog, it might be worth considering moving over to one that does. There are many choices for making blogs and websites. I would recommend shopping around for the best fit for you. Use this guide to ensure you consider all the elements you will need. One example of an effective blog and website creator is WordPress; 60% of the websites on the internet are made with WordPress. Ideally you need a creator that has an easy-to-use content management system (CMS) built into its interface, allowing an unlimited number of posts and pages to be added. Over time, even posting a blog as little as once a week your website can grow substantially every year. Adding regular, relevant and engaging content will help you to build trust with prospective clients, increase your credibility and the likelihood that search engines, such as Google, will index your pages and improve your position in their listings.

Choosing a domain name

There is often a debate about whether to use your own name (martinhogg.co.uk) or to create a brand (xyzcounselling.co.uk). Personal branding is covered elsewhere in the Private practice toolkit but the name you choose should be one that you are comfortable with. My tips would be to avoid the word therapist in the title, as, for example, therapistbirmingham.com could easily be misread. You need a domain registrar to secure your name. Examples include 123-reg.co.uk and Go daddy. It's easy to point your chosen domain to the website you set up and as long as you pay the low annual cost, your domain is yours. Beware of any web developer who wants to own your domain name.



Key questions to consider or ask your web developer/provider



As a therapist your website is your shop window and plays a vital role in showcasing your practice and its services, done well it will bring you a constant stream of clients. Whether you are having your existing website updated or starting from scratch with a brand-new website, choosing the right website developer is important. With so many options of web design companies, internationally and more locally, it can become overwhelming determining which one is right for you. The following tips are intended to help you avoid the typical pitfalls and problems. Although comprehensive, it isn't an exhaustive list.

The best approach is to think of choosing a web developer as a recruitment process, as if you were hiring a new staff member. You might start by asking for examples of their previous work and for any client testimonials.

What services do you offer?

A good starting place is to fully understand what your web developer has on offer; will they set up your email me@mywebsite.com, provide hosting for the website, assist with copywriting or will you complete the content yourself?

Can you provide examples of previous websites that you or your company have developed?

Looking at the design style of these sites will give you some ideas. Look at the examples they highlight on your smartphone, a tablet and on a desktop/laptop so you can check the functionality of the website and how it looks on different devices. This will enable you to assess the customer experience your visitors might have.

How will we contract?

Always get a clear timeline of your website design and build, and be clear about what you will have to provide, normally the text, and what the web developer will provide.

Get a clear breakdown that specifically lists all the elements you want included. Use the rest of this article to make a 'shopping list' of what is important for you. It's essential to clarify the financial details, most companies expect a deposit of up to 50%, with the balance paid when the website is live and to your satisfaction.

What pages should my website have?

Essential pages to include on your site are typically Home, About Us, Services, FAQs, Contact Us, Privacy, Accessibility and Terms and Conditions. You might add a blog, sometimes labelled as news, updates or articles, to allow you to post regular updates.

Will my website be GDPR compliant?

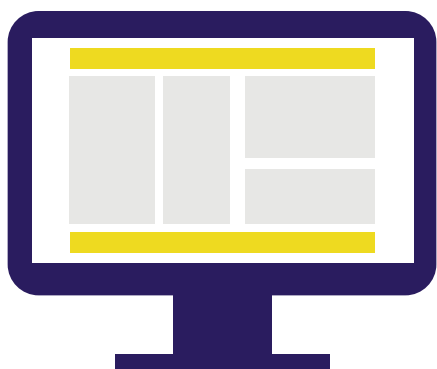
Ask your developer about GDPR compliance.

Referring to the seven data protection principles: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/principles/>.

If your website is going to retain customer details from contact forms, allow comments (often retaining the email address) or extract customer details in exchange for free reports, you will need to state in your privacy policy how you manage customer data. In addition, if you are using tracking software, such as Google Analytics, you will need to review what notification of 'cookies' you may need to advise visitors of. Full information can be found at <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-pecr/cookies-and-similar-technologies/>.

How accessible will my website be?

"Accessibility in web design means creating web pages that everyone can use, regardless of hardware, software, or any sensory or physical impairment" (Wordpress.org Website). This includes those who cannot see or use a mouse, deaf users who use sign language, visitors whose primary language is not your language, people using special assistive software or hardware, and people who are colour blind or can't see low colour contrast. Many adaptive features are automatically built into WordPress so check with your web designer how you can make your website as fully accessible as possible.



At Birmingham
Counselling Services,



60% of all website visits are
viewed from a mobile device.

What happens if I don't like the initial design?

Your contract should state that you can choose from a number of different design options or suggest websites that you like the look and functionality of as a guide. If your website appears to be going off track get in touch with the web developer as soon as possible. It's quite reasonable to allow some revisions but it would be unreasonable for your web developer to change the whole design days before going live if you have approved everything up to then.

Can you create a logo and favicon for my website?

Logo design can be a costly item so be clear whether this is covered in the project or not. A favicon is the tiny square logo or image that is typically displayed in the address bar of a browser next to your web address. Favicons look very professional and can be produced quickly and cheaply once a logo or image is chosen.

What are the rules regarding images for my website?

It's important to know the origins of the images you are using on your website so there are no concerns over copyright infringement. Ask your web developer whether they have access to public domain images, or if you need to pay licensing or royalty fees for the images used. Get this in writing so if there is a dispute in the future you are clear you are allowed to use the images. If you want something unique you can always provide your own images. If your own images include people in them, ensure they have signed a model release allowing you to use their image.

Will my website be compatible with smartphones, tablets and other mobile devices?

Websites that display well on mobile devices are a must. At Birmingham Counselling Services, 60% of all website visits are viewed from a mobile device. There are two main approaches to making websites show on mobile devices; with the first, a responsive design, the website automatically reconfigures itself to accommodate the device your web visitor is using. The second is a separate mobile site that runs parallel to the main site. With this approach the website detects the web visitor is on a mobile device and serves up the mobile version. For brand consistency I prefer the former, responsive option.

Do you build search engine optimization (SEO) into websites?

As a standard, websites should be created with SEO in mind. For counselling we know that in nearly all cases the most searched keyword is 'counselling in <my location>' e.g. Counselling In Birmingham or, increasingly, a more localised version 'Counselling In Edgbaston'. Having the right keywords on each page of your site is an essential SEO marketing component. Ask your developer how they will help you achieve this.

How will my website be hosted?

Your website developer should give you some options for hosting your website. Typical hosting costs can be £25-£100 a year. A website hosted in the UK will give you the peace of mind to know that your data are all held in the UK. There is a trend to use secure socket layer (SSL) hosting. This can give you the padlock and the green security overlay in your browser denoting the website is secure.

What happens if something goes wrong with my website?

Your contract should cover the cost of any website maintenance services and if they are provided on an as-needed, ongoing, or retainer arrangement. Find out what the prices are to update content and make minor and major edits. Ask your web developer about regular website offsite back-ups in case your website has a glitch, goes offline and needs to be restored.

Will you integrate social media into my web design?

Linking social networking sites to your website is now part of the norm in website design. Find out if the web designer will do this and at what cost.

How can I measure my website's traffic and results after the site goes live?

Your web developer should add Google's free analytics suite, or an equivalent, to your website in a few minutes, so it shouldn't cost much. Most developers will direct you to some free 'how to' resources to help you interpret the results when you need to access them.



How to Blog



Who is your audience?

The key to an engaging and effective blog is to regularly add new content that you think your visitors will be interested in. This is much easier to do if you have a specific audience in mind or counselling niche you offer. A great example of a world- beating blog with a specific niche is Mums.net, you can quickly determine what the site is all about. If you have a wide range of clients this is still achievable by categorising each blog so that there are sub-streams. To see an example of this, visit my own blog CitizenCoaching.com and notice how the blog articles are categorised into anger management, stress management, relationships etc. As your body of content grows, each sub-stream/category will be populated.

There are two distinct theme types of content that you should add; evergreen content and time-limited content.

A good piece of evergreen content will be read by visitors for years to come. It's evergreen because it stays relevant and readable. Good examples of evergreen content are 'tips based' such as 'five ways to improve your relationship' or 'how to keep your cool'. Seasonal-based content, such as that themed around 'Valentine's Day 4 Communication tips for couples', 'How to conquer exam stress' or 'Surviving Christmas with your extended family', draw in readers year after year. They are truly evergreen.

Time-limited content has a shelf life. These kinds of blog posts can be used to promote events and workshops or to comment on current issues in the news or in the moment. They tend to be relevant in the 'here and now' and not in the years to come. One word of caution though, never remove blog posts, they are intended to stay put. If you are blogging regularly, they will just drop down the list as new content is added. The search engines are deterred by websites that remove content they held previously. You will also be surprised at the number of people who read about a previous workshop and make contact to see if it's going to be run again.

Writing an article



A written blog article should be around 350-500 words with headings, sub-headings and paragraphs. The title should draw the reader in to read the article e.g. 'Ten top tips for a good night's sleep'. The biggest challenge for counsellors is not to use academic writing style, unless academics are your audience, and use a lighter, accessible, and engaging style more akin to *Cosmopolitan* or *Men's Health* magazine. Why not buy a copy of each and notice how the style of writing and headline could be used in your blog. Ensure your blog has an image. [Canva.com](https://www.canva.com) images are fully licensed and the size can be easily changed or text added with little technical knowledge.

Other types of blogging content

Videos

With the improvements in mobile phone cameras, 4G/5G access and faster internet speeds, video views are growing exponentially. A short one-minute video can be recorded on your phone, uploaded to youtube or vimeo.com and then embedded in your blog in minutes. A word of caution is sound quality, microphones on mobile phones haven't evolved at the same rate as the cameras. When recording ensure you are in an area with minimal background noise.

Infographics

Infographics (Information Graphics) are graphic visual representations of information, data, or knowledge intended to present information quickly and clearly. They are a great way to make a good blog post quickly. [Canva.com](https://www.canva.com) has hundreds of templates that can be quickly adapted with no technical knowledge.

Case studies

Sharing a client's journey or your own can make for a powerful, engaging blog. You will need the client's permission and anonymise them.

You should consider:

- Could sharing their story publicly be detrimental to the client? Has the client considered all the potential consequences and provided their consent with these in mind? Ethical Framework, good practice points: 10, 12 (p17)
- How might existing/prospective clients feel at seeing the case study? Could this give them concerns about confidentiality or worry that there is an expectation that they will also share their story? Even anonymised case studies are at some level a chipping away at the boundary of confidentiality, which has ethical implications
- How would you ensure that this information is not disseminated inappropriately?

You never know, you could be the next Irvin Yalom (*author: Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*).



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Ten ideas for making engaging blog content

- 1 Top Ten List** – Sometimes known as 'listicles', these simple lists are quick to produce and loved by readers. They normally consist of an introductory paragraph, a list of tips and then a summary and a call to action, something like 'if you have enjoyed these tips and are interested in seeing how counselling can work for you give a call on XXXXX'.

- 2 How to...** With a similar structure to the Top Ten list, the 'how to' guide tends to have longer sentences and paragraphs rather than just a list.

- 3 Counselling in the news** – keep a track of counselling announcements that could be relevant to your audience. You could write an article around the growing need for counselling in the post-pandemic era or research some tips on how counselling could help those effected by long COVID.

- 4 National Events** – build a calendar with a blog post for every month; January could be a blog themed on new starts or on how to keep new year's resolutions alive, February could be Valentines themed on relationship tips, March on motherhood etc.

- 5 Local Events** – keep an eye out for local events relevant to your audience. These could be mental health initiatives, charity events such as fun runs or fundraisers. You could also maybe take part in these events such as hosting a Macmillan coffee morning.

- 6 Year in review** – these types of articles review what has already happened and make comments with useful information and your reflections to engage your readers.

- 7 Take a controversial opinion** – proceed with caution here and ensure what you write is consistent with BACP's Ethical Framework. You could put both sides of the debate to your audience and ask them to comment.

Continued >

8 Re-purpose existing content – could a previous piece of content be re-purposed into an infographic or video? If you wrote essays or a dissertation, could it spawn several blog-friendly pieces that your audience would be interested in?

9 Share something about your life – there is always a balance here between privacy and visibility, so this won't be for everyone. If you enjoy hiking with your dog, playing sports or practising yoga, you could share this with your audience, giving them a glimpse into your life and making you relatable.

10 Finally, there is a way of getting your blogging content out without having a blogging website. If there is a blog in your niche, local area or on a platform you already subscribe to, see if you can guest blog, effectively offering them your content in exchange for attribution and a link to your site or your contact details.

Further information

BACP Private practice toolkit

www.bacp.co.uk/pptoolkit

Private Practice divisional information:

Full membership subscription £20 a year; free for journal access.

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-divisions/bacp-private-practice/>

Further reading



GPiA 004 CAQ Working in private practice within the counselling professions

GPiA 100 FS Practical guidance in setting up counselling and psychotherapy services, section 5.6, pp13-14

GPiA 040 CAQ Social media, digital technology and the counselling professions

All Good Practice in Action resources are available at:

www.bacp.co.uk/gpia

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