"How To" on Marketing a TeleMental Health Practice

(with Shelly Smith)

WORKBOOK

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“How To” on Marketing a TeleMental Health Practice (with Shelly Smith)

Shelly does counseling work for therapists, families, couples, and individuals in Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Milwaukee. Learn more about Shelly and her practice by going to the United Counseling and Wellness Blog at tryucw.com or by e-mailing her at shelly@unitedwellness.com or jennifer@unitedwellness.com.

It all started when Shelly and her partner had to part ways because she and her partner needed to make out-of-state moves. They had to think about how to shut down their private practice.

Then, they thought of a different solution and decided to take their practice online instead!

Natural Fear of Moving to a Virtual Practice

- It’s natural to feel scared and unsure of how things will work out. Shelly wondered if the energy would be the same online as it was in person with clients.

- Shelly never pictured herself as being virtual and was very biased towards NOT being virtual when she first started researching it. If you feel that way, you aren’t alone!

- You don’t know what you don’t know, so it’s important to do your research to decide whether a virtual setup would work for you. It can be very valuable to take the time to figure things out and avoid obstacles down the road.

Resources Shelly Checked Out When She Started Planning

- Melvin’s podcast with Clay Cockerell.

- Online Counseling Podcast by Clay Cockerell, then tracked resources in his podcast.
Clay’s Online Counseling Directory (a resource for people interested in finding virtual counselors to find them).

Spoke with other clinicians who were doing online therapy already.

Joined an online case consultation group that had case consultation from around the country. The head of the group works virtually.

**Big Questions (Q&A)**

**Q: How do I do this ethically and legally?**

A: Check into what state statutes are, look at your malpractice insurance coverage, and national organizations for virtual clinicians to see what they are doing.

**Q: How do I transfer these skills to online practice?**

A: Shelly said her clients were much more comfortable with it than she was initially but she figured out how things would work as she went along. She made the mental shift she needed to make in practice. This experience might be slightly different for everyone. The important thing is to try it once or twice and see how it goes.

**Q: What is the thing you were most surprised by? (Question from Melvin to Shelly)**

A: Having a virtual practice was SO much easier than I thought it would be. The pretend barriers I built up didn’t exist.

**Q: What is the best and most confidential program to use for online counseling?**
A: Doxy.me is a good one. It’s HIPAA compliant and clients don’t have to download anything and they don’t have to login. It opens in a web browser. You can also download the free app as well. Zoom is also a good one, but it’s a paid version.

Q: Who do you contact to ask permission to provide services for clients abroad?

A: Shelly is trying to figure that out now. She could only answer this one on a broad level. She suggests contacting the primary / leading mental health organization for that country and you get a faster response.

Q: How do you market to the entire state?

A: The online counseling directory and Psychology Today (locations near yours) were helpful resources. In Psychology Today, Shelly put in large cities that are some miles away in her profile criteria. Facebook and social media ads that are location targeted are also good. You can also target a specific population instead like rural communities, churches of a certain denomination, etc. Think about who the clients are and where they hang out. You can find micro niches or micro populations.

**What to Know About HIPAA Compliance**

Facetime and Skype platforms are not okay. They are too easily hacked and they are not encrypted.

- HIPAA compliance systems provide you with a BAA, which provides therapists with protection in case of any breach.
Liability Insurance

- CPH is a good resource that Shelly uses. They had the policy for online clients all set up in their system and she was already covered and didn’t even know it! It’s a reliable resource. CPH has a check-off to make sure you have all coverage you need.

- CPH has add-on policies for additional coverages for things like website and e-mail client protection in case someone hacks a therapists systems. CPH would cover all electronics and whatever else is part of it.

- The professional liability insurance should cover everything that relates to telemental work.

Client Screening & Filters

- Offer a 10 to 15 minute consultation. Talk with the client before you start online to make sure it’s a good medium for them.

  - You want the session to be brief because it doesn’t make sense to have a full session only to figure out someone is not a good fit.

  - You want to find out if they can access the technology appropriately and are a good fit to be virtual. The client has to be in a confidential and private space during sessions.

  - Are they suicidal or homicidal or significantly mentally ill? An online situation might not be appropriate.

  - If it’s not appropriate, they help the patient find someone else who is local.

  - Cover Fees and insurance coverage if needed. Shelly’s experience is that this is all covered on their website before the conversation to start therapy.
Developing an online presence with basic information is very helpful in screening because it answers a ton of questions up front for the patient.

- Have a Q&A section on your website that can address the big things they need to know.
  - Technology patients need to have.
  - Fees.
  - Patient Privacy – how you ensure that.

- Find out if you are legally allowed to help the patient.
  - Most states say a client has to reside in the state where you have your license. That doesn’t mean they have to be there at the time. So, if they are traveling for work and you want to do an online session, is it appropriate? Most states allow it right now, but this could change in the future. Some states have specific requirements.
  - One example: Indiana has a law that says something like you can only do 10 sessions with one person who is out of state in a year and they can’t be consecutive.

**Shelly’s Experience with Who the Online Audience Is**

- **Therapists & Healthcare Providers** – Therapists & healthcare providers or other people who value privacy. They tend to not want to do therapy locally where they might bump into someone they know if they are in a small town or well connected.

- **Professionals with High-Level Positions / Busy Careers** — Professionals who are interested in privacy and are also very busy.
People in Rural Areas without Good Therapeutic Options

People in Large Cities Where the Commute Can be Costly and Time Consuming – Virtual therapy eliminates travel and parking costs as well as time.

People Seeking Couples Therapy & Families – Families have to sit physically closer together to join. This puts a little more ownership of the therapy on them because you interact in a different way. The therapist is pulled out just enough for them to take ownership of the relationship. It’s a different dynamic Shelly finds interesting and unexpected.

Ways to Market an Online Practice

Develop a strong online presence.
- A great website.
- Be present & appropriate in forums and directories.
- Use traditional media in an online presence like publicizes magazines and articles. Use them in blog posts and online pieces to establish creditability.
- Start a Blog. Shelly uses this pretty significantly on a consistent basis.

Be real, do what you love, and do it with heart.

Direct Referrals.

Shelly and her partner use a co-working space.
- That is very helpful in making connections as you randomly meet people there. It’s also been helpful in getting to interact with the community.
Networking.

- This is more about developing relationships and being in the world versus targeting people. Set up a coffee date or events that you attend for heart-based reasons.

- Don’t do it alone! Have a partner or accountability friend who can help support you. A buddy system can be helpful on multiple levels. It helps with isolation and growth.