



Keeping Safe During Counselling or Psychotherapy

A Guide by Unsafe Spaces

Easy Read Version

If you go for therapy, your therapist is **not** likely to behave badly or abuse you. But if they do, it can cause a great deal of harm to you.

Lots of people in all different walks of life carry out abuse, but there are a few reasons why abuse can happen during therapy. These reasons are:

- Most therapists are registered somewhere, but there is no law saying they have to be.
- People often go to therapy when they are unwell, which can make them easy to influence
- You and the therapist may be alone together, with nobody else around
- People tell therapists their deepest secrets
- Therapists seem like an expert, which can give them power over you

This does not mean you should avoid therapy. But there are things you can do that make it less likely that anything bad might happen to you.

This advice has five parts.

1. Check registration and insurance

You should check that the therapist you go to is registered with a proper register. Also check that they have insurance.

2. Your therapist should not become your friend, business partner or lover

Your therapist should only see you for therapy and no other reason. If they become your friend, business partner or lover this will probably cause huge harm to both you and them. There are a few signs you can look for that might suggest dividing lines are getting less clear.

3. A therapist is not a religious leader

Your therapist should not expect you to worship them, or to think of them as a source of truth. They are not gods, and should not act like one.

This guide is produced by Unsafe Spaces. It is intended to give basic advice and is not a substitute for medical or legal advice. The author gives permission for reprinting and distribution for non-commercial purposes only. For more information go to <http://www.unsafespaces.com>



4. Beware of therapists who seem to be in love with themselves

People who love themselves often like to become therapists, but this doesn't make them good at their jobs. It can make them more keen on their needs than yours.

5. Take action

If something bad does happen, make a complaint. In some cases it might also be a good idea to call the police or your local council. You might be able to sue your therapist. You could also go to the press, but this can be risky.



1. Check Registration and Insurance

Some job titles are called **protected titles**. This means that somebody can only call themselves this if they are registered with an organisation called a **regulator**. “Registered nurse”, “social worker” and “occupational therapist” are examples of protected titles.

“Counsellor” and “psychotherapist” are **not** protected titles. Anyone can call themselves one, even if they have no training.

There are organisations that counsellors and psychotherapists can join to show that they are trained, and also so that if anything bad happens, there is somebody to make a complaint to. These organisations are called **Accredited Registers**.

Before starting therapy with a counsellor or psychotherapist, find out who they are registered with. Then go to this website to check that the organisation is an Accredited Register. <http://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/what-we-do/accredited-registers/find-a-register>

If the organisation is an Accredited Register, then go to the website for that organisation. You should be able to check on the website that they are still registered with them.

Some counsellors and psychotherapists have been kicked out of an Accredited Register, but carried on saying they were registered with them, so always check.

Some people go for therapy to a psychologist rather than a counsellor or psychotherapist. Some job titles for psychologists are protected titles and some are not, so this can get a bit confusing.

These job titles are protected titles. A psychologist can only use them if they are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council.

Practitioner psychologist

Registered psychologist

Clinical psychologist

Counselling psychologist

Educational psychologist

Forensic psychologist

Health psychologist

Occupational psychologist

Sport and exercise psychologist

This guide is produced by Unsafe Spaces. It is intended to give basic advice and is not a substitute for medical or legal advice. The author gives permission for reprinting and distribution for non-commercial purposes only. For more information go to <http://www.unsafespaces.com>



Confusingly, the word “psychologist” on its own is not a protected title. “Consultant psychologist” is also not a protected title, and some psychologists who are not registered have used this title.

Only use a psychologist who is registered with the Health and Care Professions Council.

You can check if they are registered by going here: <http://www.hpc-uk.org/check/>

Some other jobs are also registered with the Health and Care Professions Council, and people with these jobs sometimes offer therapy.

Art psychotherapists

Art therapists

Dramatherapists

Music therapists

Occupational therapists

Social workers

These are all protected titles. As with psychologists, you can check they are registered by going to <http://www.hpc-uk.org/check/>

Some **registered mental health nurses** offer therapy. This is a protected title, and they have to be registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council. You can check they are registered here: <https://www.nmc.org.uk/registration/search-the-register/>

Psychiatrists have to be registered with the General Medical Council. You can check they are registered here. <http://www.gmc-uk.org/doctors/register/LRMP.asp>

Whichever profession you use, if you can't find them on the online register, don't use them.

Sometimes therapists say they are members of other organisations. These may have very impressive-sounding names, such as “Institute of such-and-such” or “Register of so-and-so” but don't be fooled by the names. Sometimes it doesn't mean anything. If you haven't heard of the organisation, check if they are an Accredited Register.

If a therapist is not registered with the Health and Care Professions Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the General Medical Council or an Accredited Register, don't use them.

As well as being registered, a therapist should also have insurance. This is called **indemnity insurance**. The reason for this insurance is so that if they cause you harm and you sue them, there is money to pay you compensation.

This guide is produced by Unsafe Spaces. It is intended to give basic advice and is not a substitute for medical or legal advice. The author gives permission for reprinting and distribution for non-commercial purposes only. For more information go to <http://www.unsafespaces.com>



Always check if a therapist is insured. If they aren't insured, don't use them.

This isn't just about the money. If a therapist doesn't have insurance, that tells you they're a bad therapist who you should avoid.

Checking they are registered and insured doesn't make completely sure that a therapist won't do anything they shouldn't, but it does mean there is somebody to complain to and money to sue for if something goes wrong.

DO

- Make sure your therapist is with an Accredited Register, the Health and Care Professions Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council or the General Medical Council.
- Check their registration online.
- Ask about their indemnity insurance.

DON'T

- Use therapists who are not registered.
- Use a psychologist who is not registered with the Health and Care Professions Council.
- Be fooled by flashy-sounding organisation names such as "Institute of..." or "Register of..." unless they're also an Accredited Register.
- Use a professional who isn't insured.



2. Your therapist should not become your friend, business partner or lover

Your therapist should not meet with you for reasons that do not have anything to do with the therapy. In particular, they should not become any of the following:

- Your friend
- Your business partner
- Your lover or sexual partner

If they become any of these, it will probably cause a great deal of harm to you, and possibly also to the therapist.

Any sexual contact between a therapist and their client is a very serious matter. If they are seeing you to treat a mental illness, they may be committing a crime.

The rules are less clear for sexual contact between a therapist and a former client who is no longer under their care. However, this would often be misconduct. This would especially be the case if:

- they were in a position of power over you
- you were unwell or vulnerable at the time of the therapy
- they tried to start the relationship during the therapy
- the therapy ended only recently.

There are warning signs you can look for that suggest the boundaries are getting blurred in therapy. If your therapist does any of these actions, they may be part of what is sometimes called “the slippery slope” or “grooming”.

- telling you things about their own personal life
- giving or accepting social invitations
- turning up at your house without an appointment
- seeing you outside normal working hours for no good reason
- not following normal appointment booking procedures
- always giving you the last appointment of the day for no good reason
- letters, phone calls or emails that have nothing to do with therapy

If your therapist starts doing any of these, tell them not to. If they then keep doing it, change to a different therapist.



It's possible that you might find yourself in a situation where you're sexually attracted yourself to your counsellor or psychotherapist. A good therapist will handle this properly and ensure that nothing sexual happens to you.

If you trust your therapist, it may well be okay to talk about your feelings in therapy and a good therapist will allow you to talk about these feelings without acting upon them or making you feel any shame. **However, they should not make any attempt to pursue a sexual relationship.**

People who have been abused in therapy often say that they wish they had trusted their gut feelings. They often ignore any feelings of unease about the therapist because the therapist is the "expert" and they might not trust their own feelings. If you have a gut feeling that something is wrong, it probably is.

DO

- Expect your counsellor or psychotherapist to maintain a clear boundary between their professional and personal or social life.
- Act quickly if the boundaries seem to be getting blurred.
- Trust your own feelings or intuitions. If it feels wrong then it probably is.

DON'T

- Ignore any blurring of boundaries, however small.
- Agree to sex with your counsellor or psychotherapist, though if you do have feelings towards them it may be helpful to talk about this in therapy.

Further Reading

Clear Sexual Boundaries Between Healthcare Professionals and Patients: Information for Patients and Carers

<http://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/publications/policy-advice/clear-sexual-boundaries-information-for-patients-and-carers.pdf?sfvrsn=6>



3. A therapist is not a religious leader

Some therapists have behaved badly because they seemed to act like they were some sort of religious leader, or believed they were a source of truth. This can sometimes happen when they bring religion or mystical ideas into the therapy.

Therapists are not gods, and the truth does not come from them. A good therapist helps you to talk about **your** needs, **your** thoughts, **your** truth, not theirs.

This isn't to say that you can't discuss religion in therapy. If, for example, you're a practising Christian, and attending a Christian counselling service, it may be okay to do Bible study with your counsellor. However, that should only happen if it's something that **you** want to do, rather than simply because your counsellor wants you to do it.

Just as your therapist shouldn't act like a religious leader, they shouldn't act in any other way where they expect you to believe their truth rather than yours, or expect you to worship them. This might happen if, say, they start to behave like a controlling parent rather than a therapist.

If that's happening, you have to ask whose needs are being served – yours or theirs?

DO

- Expect your therapist to help you to find your truth, not theirs.
- Talk about religion in therapy if you find it helpful, but only on your own terms.

DON'T

- Keep seeing a therapist who acts like a religious leader or controlling parent. They should be neither.



4. Beware of therapists who seem to be in love with themselves

When people have been abused by a therapist, the therapist has often been a particular type of person, who seems to be in love with themselves. Signs that they may be this type of person include:

- Although they seem to love themselves, when you get to know them better this self-love often turns out to be very fragile
- Often very good at reading people, but they don't seem to really care about them
- May at first seem very charming, but turn out to be very dishonest behind the charm
- Thinks they are special or important, and only wants to talk to important people
- Seems to expect others to admire him or her
- Willing to make other people feel bad to make themselves feel good
- Easily bored
- Quick to become angry
- Tells lies
- Lack of guilt or regret if they cause harm to others

These types of people are sometimes called **narcissists**.

Narcissists often like to become therapists, because it gives them power over people. But it doesn't make them good at their jobs. Because they often don't really care about people, they sometimes abuse their clients.

Narcissists can be hard to spot at first, because they can be so charming and good at lying. When people first meet them, they often think they're talking to the greatest person on Earth. It's only later on that they see who these people really are. This can lead to strong feelings of guilt and shame from people realising they've been hoodwinked. Don't blame yourself if it happens to you – you won't be the first or the last.

Not all cases of a therapist doing something they shouldn't involves a narcissist. In some cases the therapist seemed like a very sad person who really doesn't like themselves. These therapists are sometimes called wounded healers. And of course, there are some therapists who mean well but are just not very good at their jobs.

Whatever the reason, if your therapist is acting in a way that makes you feel bad, tell them so. They should treat you with respect when you tell them this. If they do not, you might want to find a different therapist and/or make a complaint.



DO

- Be careful if your therapist starts acting like a narcissist.
- Tell your therapist if they are acting in ways that make you feel bad. If they do not treat you with respect when you tell them this, you might want to find a different therapist and/or make a complaint.

DON'T

- Allow yourself to feel guilty or ashamed about being fooled by a narcissist. Many people have before you, and many more will be after you.



5. Take action

If your therapist has done something they should not have done, there are a number of ways you can take action. People often think they will not be believed, but this is not usually the case. Taking action can be scary, but there are people who will listen to and believe you.

Get Support

There are two organisations that provide support to people in the UK who want to complain about a therapist.

The Clinic for Boundaries Studies at <http://www.professionalboundaries.org.uk/witness-support/>

Catalyst Counselling at <http://www.catalystcounselling.org.uk/>

Complaints to employers

Many counsellors and psychotherapists work for themselves, but if they work for, say, an NHS trust or a charity, this may well be the quickest and easiest way to complain. Because of employment law, you might not be able to find out the result of your complaint.

Complaints to professional bodies

If your therapist is registered with an Accredited Register, the General Medical, Nursing and Midwifery Council, or the Health and Care Professions Council then you should be able to find details of their complaints procedure on the website for that organisation.

For therapists registered with other organisations, complaints procedures can vary wildly. In some cases the complaints procedures are so bad they might as well not be there at all. This is why we recommend you **always** check a counsellor or psychotherapist's registration before you start therapy (see the section: Check Registration and Insurance).

Complaints to the police

If a therapist has done anything sexual with somebody who they were treating for a mental illness, this is a crime, so call the police if this happens.

Also call the police if you fear for your safety in any way.

Reporting safeguarding risk

If there is an ongoing risk to a child or a vulnerable adult, contact the child protection or adult safeguarding services of your local authority. Check the website of the local authority for your area to find out how to do this.



Suing your therapist

In some cases, you might be able to sue your therapist. If you live in England or Wales, the law firm we recommend is Switalskis Solicitors. They can talk to you about what happened, and sometimes might be able to help you on a “no win, no fee” basis.

For more information contact Victoria Thackstone at their Doncaster office on 01302 297570 or go to: <https://www.switalskis.com/about-us/our-lawyers/victoria-thackstone/>

There are time limits for making a claim and so if this is something you are interested in you should act quickly.

Suing your therapist may enable you to claim money to pay for a refund of your therapy fees, the cost of any therapy to put right what the therapist did wrong and other money you may have lost as a result of what happen.

Suing can also give the client a sense of being “heard”.

Going to the press

If you speak to a journalist, be careful. You may find that how they tell the story is not how you wanted them to tell it.

Of course, if the media aren’t interested, or if you don’t feel you can trust them, you could just go straight to blogs or Twitter and tell your story direct, but as with journalists you need to be careful about doing this.

If you say something on a blog or Twitter that you can’t prove, you might get sued for libel. This could cost you a huge amount of money and if it went to court, they would expect you to prove that what you said is true, rather than expect them to prove it’s not true. If in doubt, talk to a libel lawyer before putting your story online.

Also don’t talk to the press or put your story online if you’re still suing your therapist or a complaint is still going on. The other side might be able to use this against you and get the case thrown out.

DO

- Seek support from the Clinic for Boundaries Studies or Catalyst Counselling.
- Make complaints to employers and/or the therapist’s professional body
- Call the police if there has been sexual contact between a therapist and somebody who was under their care for a mental illness, or if you fear for your safety.
- Report safeguarding risks to the local authority.

This guide is produced by Unsafe Spaces. It is intended to give basic advice and is not a substitute for medical or legal advice. The author gives permission for reprinting and distribution for non-commercial purposes only. For more information go to <http://www.unsafespaces.com>



- Contact a lawyer who specialises in claims of this nature if you are thinking about suing.
- Be careful when talking to journalists. They may not tell the story how you want them to tell it.

DON'T

- Say things you can't prove on social media. You could get sued for libel.
- Try to get publicity for your case if complaints and/or lawsuits are ongoing. The other side might use this against you.

Author

Phil Doré RMN

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the following for their feedback, advice and suggestions in preparing this report.

Amanda Williamson Reg MBACP (Accred)

Dawn Devereux PhD of the Clinic for Boundaries Studies

Emma Thompson Registered Member MBACP

Jon Bolton

Hope C

Patrick Killeen

Howard Martin

Tina Childs