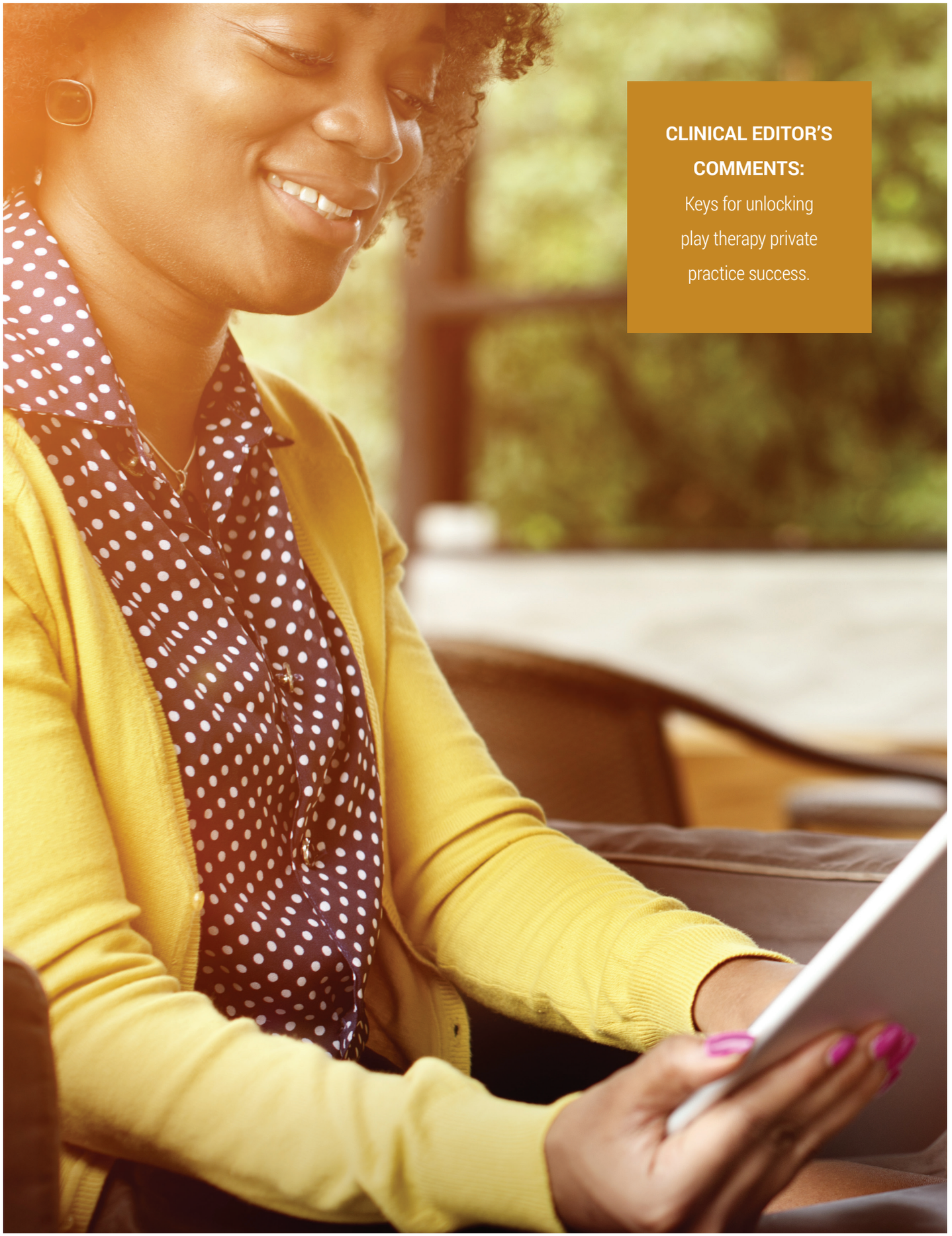

CLINICAL EDITOR'S COMMENTS:

Keys for unlocking play therapy private practice success.

Play More and Stress Less:
Keys for Private Practice

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I was terrified when I left my long-term agency position to begin private practice. Would clients come? Would I be able to afford to pay office rent, much less anything extra? Could I pay myself a proper salary from this venture? Were my clinical skills good enough for me to stand on my own outside of the support, structure, and referrals from the agency?

Fast forward five years. A colleague and I created a child-centered, family-friendly space where we could each run our individual child practices. The goal for the space was for it to feel inviting to all, and for children to know they could be themselves, even if that meant being loud or messy. We decided that autonomy is important, and it carries less liability, so other therapists run their own practices in this space. Two other child therapists rented extra office spaces. With no employee/employer hierarchy, therapists structured their practices how they felt best for them. We offered in-house business consults, professional support, and encouragement to any therapist renting our space who desired it. As the practice grew, four other independent therapists created their own practices in our space. When the practice expanded into the unit next door, we purchased both buildings.

The practice now receives more referrals than the eight therapists can manage, and potential clients with urgent needs are referred to other community resources. In 2018, the practice expanded to create a co-op space for mental health and other complementary health practitioners who want to launch a new practice or to practice part-time with minimal financial commitment. Our growth was accidental and organic, but we learned a lot along the way. These suggestions are our keys to creating play therapy private practice success, which may be helpful to therapists considering launching private practices of their own.

Make Informed Decisions

The upside of private practice is the flexibility, minimal bureaucracy, few formal rules to follow, therapist choice in client populations, and therapist autonomy – being one's own boss. The downside is potential isolation if supports are not built into place; the lack of paid sick or vacation days; the absence of a fixed system for procuring insurance benefits; and that the private practice owner is the only one responsible for clinical and business decisions. That can be daunting when beginning, and probably has kept many play therapists from starting their own private practices (Newman, 2017).

To ensure therapists make informed decisions when beginning a play therapy practice, they may interview other therapists to learn about all aspects of practice. Other potential information outlets include networking with friends and colleagues to learn how they grant themselves leave time or how they balance their time between seeing clients and performing administrative duties; joining a mental health private practitioners' group on social media; and searching for information online. A play therapy private practice is about much more than providing play sessions, and making informed decisions eliminates this surprise.

Maintain Firm Boundaries

Boundaries often become more important for private practitioners than they may be for therapists in agency positions. The lack of structure, accountability, and distance between the clinical and business sides of private practice make setting clear boundaries a necessary and important part of the work (Herlihy & Gorley, 2015). When beginning a practice, it may be tempting for a therapist to see any client who wants therapeutic services, even when if the requested services fall outside of the therapist's scope of practice, or when clients insist that they can only come on a day when the therapist does not offer sessions, or when the therapy would create a dual relationship.

Creating and maintaining boundaries around what is appropriate for the business and what is best practice helps the therapist create a good clinical structure, enforces a practice of self-care, and models appropriate boundaries for clients (Association for Play Therapy, APT, 2016). Defining what boundaries are appropriate for a specific setting (e.g., rural, urban, academic), and then maintaining those boundaries once set, will be an important part of making a private practice run smoothly and under the best possible conditions for clients and therapists. When therapists allow boundaries to soften, the work has a higher likelihood of getting messy; and the therapist in private practice is the only one responsible for managing and alleviating the hardships created.

Delegate Tedious Tasks and Stressful Exercises

Delegating certain tasks may help clinicians fulfill the difficult business tasks that fall outside of their areas of expertise. Play therapists know play therapy, but not tax law. They know attachment, but not limited liability companies (LLC). They know enough to know that they may need to hire experts who can advise and collaborate with them. Once those tasks are managed, they can focus more on clients and less on filing paperwork with the state.

Just like therapists, other professionals with small business expertise turn out to be well worth their expense, and they are the reason I have a growing IRA account and know to pay my taxes quarterly! Clinicians must decide what manageable missions they can undertake in their practice, and then become comfortable delegating other aspects. For example, billing, scheduling, taxes, maintaining HIPAA compliance, decorating (Smith, 2003), and cleaning can all be done by the therapist as a small business owner, but, when delegated to competent professionals, these tasks allow therapists to better use their time and energy. Delegating may be achieved by hiring additional staff, hiring virtual staff, or using an electronic records system that allows clients to schedule their own appointments. Putting these and other professional supports in place allows therapists to concentrate on the work that drives their passion and improves their clinical practice.

Develop a Strong Professional Support System

It is important that clinicians have other professionals with whom they may regularly consult, commiserate, and celebrate to combat the stressors of the work (Herlihy & Corey, 2015). At some agencies, therapists receive regular supervision for the duration of their employment, whether they are not-yet-licensed or whether they have been practicing clinically for decades. The expectation that everyone needs the support and accountability that supervision offers is inherent in agency work, and many therapists are grateful for the structure it provides. In private practice, that structure is not inherently present, but all the ethical, legal, and emotional pitfalls of working with other humans still exist.

In private practice, this support system may include continuing to seek individual supervision, sharing resources with other professionals in online forums, or consulting on casework with other play therapists in a formal or spontaneous peer supervision group format (APT, 2016). Sometimes that support could be processing a triggering client with a colleague between sessions, or meeting for dinner and agreeing not to discuss work at all. It also may include building a network of other competent professionals that can serve as referral sources to and from the play therapy practice, mutually benefiting both parties and clients, alike.

Network, Network, Network

The importance of networking cannot be overstated. When I first started in private practice, I was the only play therapist in my town. I pounded the pavement like my livelihood depended on it – because it did! Networking with doctors, attorneys, pediatricians, child protective service workers, other therapists, and school counselors (Truffo, 2007) put the practice in the forefront of their minds and gave them a local referral source for their child clients. There are several ways to network that will make your practice and your expertise stand out in the community.

Offering to speak at local events and meetings about play therapy and other services provided by the practice will give community members a good idea of the therapist's areas of expertise and scope of practice. Being creative in distributing business cards makes the practice or the therapist more memorable. I passed out cards stapled to cheap seed packets with a note that said, "Thanks for helping my practice grow." I delivered baskets of chocolates to pediatricians' offices and included cards for the nurses thanking them for their hard work, with my cards in the bottom of the basket. Neither of these were expensive ideas to implement, but hopefully they made my cards memorable, even if people did not remember me. Beyond offering to be a referral source for others, networking often allows therapists to make appropriate referrals to other professionals, and builds collaborative relationships to provide the best possible care to families in the area.

Find Some Balance

Achieving balance in providing services and developing business practices is a skill set that demands therapist attention and energy. When beginning a private practice, it may be exciting to juggle multiple roles and tasks; but, over time, having many roles may become overwhelming. Role diversification may help alleviate tendencies toward burnout in any one area, but the risk of taking on so many roles is that the therapist becomes overwhelmed by performing all of them.

During periods when fewer clients are scheduled, the therapist can focus more on developing the practice, improving the building, or promoting other aspects of the business. This involves the acquired skill of saying "No" to things that would not be not a good fit, that would require too much of the therapist's time, or that would consume too many financial or energy resources. It also means learning to say "Yes!" to self-care activities that may not feel like an efficient use of time when there is a busy practice to run. Finding personal balance will give the therapist the energy to create a peaceful work environment that sustains the therapist, the clients, and the work, itself.

Choose Colleagues Wisely

Choosing one's colleagues wisely is important for creating a peaceful work environment wherein the therapist feels comfortable (Grodzky, 2015), and it can also impact the client's therapy experience. When I first started private practice, I rented a space from another therapist who had extra offices. Some of the other therapists renting there worked with adults and, although we all got along well, the combination was not a good fit for our clients sometimes. The other therapists needed a quiet and peaceful setting, yet they shared a wall with my occasionally loud and intense playroom. Sometimes they would ask in jest, "Were you playing basketball in there?" I would respond with an emphatic, "YES!"

When therapists can choose their own space, it is important to choose wisely the colleagues with whom they wish to work. In our practice, we do not require that our colleagues work with kids, but we do want them to know that a meltdown in the waiting room or a loud basketball-playing

session is par for the course in a play therapy practice!

Be Passionate About the Work

When people love what they do, others can tell. It comes across to clients. It comes across to friends. Colleagues take note, and they will refer clients and want to do case consultations with passionate therapists. When therapists are enthusiastic about their work, they pursue an understanding of best practices, and others can be confident in the value of the services provided. Clients want to come to therapy practices where they know and feel that the therapists enjoy their work.

Conclusion

The benefits of creating a playful atmosphere are evident within the walls of the playroom and, yet, sometimes therapists are dreadfully serious when it comes to cultivating their business practices. HIPAA compliance, insurance authorizations, and the administrative tasks of running a small business can be a lot to juggle when clinicians try to do it all alone. It is okay to take on team members to perform the tedious tasks, such as scheduling, billing, and taxes. This will allow therapists to continue doing the manageable missions themselves, such as networking and liaising with professionals and community members. Play therapists are absolutely capable of creating and growing their practice while enjoying the work they are doing! Just as we encourage our clients to do, we therapists should not forget to have fun in growing and promoting our practices!

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