

Charging Fees & Holding the Frame

The Impact of Missed Appointments on Income and the Therapeutic Work

Did You Know?

- ❖ Clients often assume therapists are salaried.
- ❖ The way you discuss cancellations can *increase* cancellations.
- ❖ Telling clients you don't charge when they're sick results in lots of sick people.
- ❖ Routinely waiving fees can decrease efficacy in session.

Let's take a closer look...

Surely You're Salaried!

Many professionals are salaried. Why wouldn't you be? Beginning with intake, you can counter misconceptions without awkward conversation about your compensation arrangement.

Jesse Hazel, LCSW: If you miss an appointment without letting me know or cancel without 24 hours notice, unfortunately I'll need to charge you. That's not meant to be punitive, that's to protect my time.

It's okay for clients to know they're capable of impacting therapists. One of the most direct impacts we have on each other is financially and may also be one of the first opportunities to model boundaries and self advocacy.

Hannah Svedlow, LPC: You aren't responsible for my finances, but I am.

More Cancellations?

Usually with the goal of setting clear expectations, we might sound like we're giving an allotment of absences.

- ❖ Example: "I usually waive the fee for the first late cancel or missed appointment."
The client may hear: *I have a free pass next time I can't make it. And possibly... I wonder if I'll really get charged next time...*
- ❖ Example: "If you miss more than 2-3 times, that's a signal that we should pause and process what's happening."
A client may hear: *I have 2 or 3 excused absences.*

Lauren Stanley, LCSW: Our appointments are times dedicated to you. My commitment is to be available during these times and my request is that you make that commitment as well. This allows our time to be as meaningful and beneficial as possible.

What Message Are You Sending?

Some therapists, regardless of experience, feel uncomfortable about the rates clients pay, which creates reluctance to charge fees. Waiving fees for clients with higher rates, however, can actually exacerbate the insecurity therapists feel.

- ❖ A client who hasn't met their deductible pays \$130 out of pocket.
"They're paying a lot for this session, I better make this good→ Maybe I'm not worth \$130."
- ❖ The same client cancels 30 minutes before the next appointment. You're already working on filling the space you think \$130 should occupy. What message does it send to you about your abilities when you discount a \$75 fee to \$0.00?

We all waive fees, and it's holding the context in mind that's important. What is the impact on the client? What is the impact on you? Be careful about devaluing yourself; it usually shows up in the room.

Income Lost

Even with \$75 as consolation, missed appointments decrease earnings by up to 45%. The real deficit arises, however, when inconsistency becomes routine. Established patterns are difficult to shift and rescheduling run amok is almost guaranteed to result in resentment.

- ❖ How do unspoken concerns and feelings that are left tucked away impact the work when it's the therapist that's left holding onto them?

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Holding the Frame

The therapeutic frame, oversimplified, is the consistent professional structure that creates a container for the work. It includes numerous factors and many depend on theoretical orientation, but they usually include duration and frequency of sessions, office environment, boundaries, and relational factors between client and therapist.

- ❖ **What is holding the frame?** It's what allows sessions to be a containing environment. Maintenance of the frame, in its structure and predictability, allows clients to feel and express emotions inside the room and within the therapeutic relationship, among many other things. Without holding the frame, there isn't enough space to observe and interpret inevitable deviations.

The day after a session, a client calls to cancel the next appointment. In a message, they say, "I'll need to get back to you about the next time I can come in."

This is either meaningful or not so meaningful. If they have a habit of moving sessions around and following up who knows when, it would be hard to interpret. (Unless it's "Your investment in therapy seems variable at best.")

Alternatively, if the client has been meeting weekly with hardly an absence, it becomes possible to explore. What transpired during the last session? Was there a misstep, empathic failure, did a rupture occur... or perhaps something extratherapeutic with coincidental timing?

- ❖ **In practice:** Holding the frame means observing boundaries, tending to boundary crossings; noticing and processing relational factors (the here and now); exploring requests for deviations; discussing attendance, starting and ending appointments on time, maintaining a consistent office environment, avoiding meeting outside of usual office hours, etc.

In Summary

Our interactions communicate important information to clients.

Do we return a late night call? Will we answer a personal question? Do we allow one more reschedule?

It depends. We aim to make decisions with awareness rather than avoidance. Just as there is benefit from structure, there is benefit from flexibility. We show clients that we can bend when needed. We encounter opportunities for modeling all the time.

Ashley Shaw, LPC: Communication is key. I can be flexible when I know what's happening.

We can also draw on the concept of the microcosm. Many times we find parallels between dynamics in therapy and other facets of clients' lives.

Thanks for hanging in there while we talked through that, I like our plan to try a new time. As we were talking, I saw similarities between our discussion and what we've been talking about with your partner- it sounds like you have good intentions to show up yet overestimate your ability to follow through. What do you think?

Money is a symbol:

- ❖ Your time is valuable.
- ❖ It took education and training to get here.
- ❖ You can't get therapy from a friend or family member.