

## Making sense of counselling fees and cancellation policy

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### A rental system

The fee which you pay to your therapist goes towards the provision of a psychotherapeutic service *and* the rental of a weekly time slot during which this service is provided. This rental system guarantees you the exclusive use of a weekly time slot, which becomes yours for the whole duration of your therapy. Within this system, appointments with new clients are rejected where the desired slots are already taken. Sometimes, you may be unable to attend a session. However, as with any other rental system, in principle payment is still due, as your time slot is under your responsibility. Freud, the founding father of modern psychotherapy, clearly highlighted this: “As to time, I follow the principle of payment for a fixed hour exclusively. A given hour is assigned to each patient, and that hour is his (hers) and he (she) is responsible for it even if he (she) does not make use of it.”

### Conditions within which renting is temporarily suspended

While some counsellors follow Freud’s position by requesting from their clients that all sessions should be paid for, other counsellors, like myself, choose to introduce a cancellation policy which, under certain conditions, allow clients to interrupt their rental contract for an agreed period of time, usually only one or two sessions at a time, on an exceptional basis. The decision to put in place a cancellation policy is a discretionary gesture from therapists who acknowledge that, for many clients, involvement in therapy represents a significant financial commitment and wish to make a special gesture as a sign of appreciation of this commitment. The cancellation policy which applies to my practice is available on my website under the heading *Terms & Conditions*. It goes as follows:

You are expected to give **at least 1 week notice for any scheduled holidays or breaks**. Cancellations and rebooking are allowed but should be kept to a minimum as continuity and regularity are part of the counselling process. In case a cancellation or rebooking is necessary, please give as much notice as possible. **If a cancellation or rebooking takes place under 48 hours before your actual time of appointment, the full fee is payable; under 1 week, half the fee is payable.**

The rules which define my cancellation policy are based on the consideration of what works best for the management of my counselling practice. To ensure ethical practice, these rules are applied without exception.

### What does the BACP say?

The BACP is the main professional body for counsellors and psychotherapists in the UK. In its ethical framework, the BACP remains silent concerning the payment of missed sessions. However, the American Psychological Association (APA) code of ethics, a worldwide reference used in the psychological professions, stipulates that “It is ethical for the psychiatrist (or psychotherapist) to make a charge for a missed appointment when this falls within the terms of the specific contractual agreement with the patient.”

### What is the common practice in counselling?

The most common practice in counselling and psychotherapy is to request between 48 hours and one week advance for the cancellation of a session and to apply the usual fee where clients fail to respect these delays. Some counsellors only require 24 hours while others request that all sessions should be paid for, irrespective of the fact that they have been attended or cancelled. The “no exception” rule is also frequently used to ensure ethical practice.

## **What is the common practice in other professions?**

Nowadays, similar missed-appointment fees exist in many professions, both medical and non-medical. Usually, the rationale in these other settings is that another patient, client, or customer cannot immediately fill the place of a no-show. The main consideration in these contexts is that the time and resources of the doctor or business have been wasted. This consideration also applies to counselling. However, in counselling the situation is more complex, as clients are involved in a course of therapy, with regular meetings over a long period of time.