Personal safety and the lone therapist

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In 1986, estate agent Suzy Lamplugh, 25, went to meet an unknown client at a vacant property in London. The ex-beautician never returned from her mid-day appointment. The nation was shocked and Suzy’s disappearance became one of the most well-publicised missing person cases in the UK. Her body has never been found, but she is presumed murdered, and was formally declared dead by police in 1994.

This case, though 22 years’ old, highlights the potential dangers faced by lone workers, especially those who meet strangers in an unfamiliar or ‘private’ environment, e.g. estate agents, district nurses, health/social workers... and therapists. Fortunately, the Suzy Lamplough case remains extreme and rare of its kind (perhaps with thanks to the information services provided by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust), but all the same, personal safety is not something that should be taken for granted. Diana Lamplugh, Suzy’s mother, is quite convinced that her daughter would still be alive and well today if she had taken just a few, simple precautions, and had trusted her instincts. If you are a therapist who works alone, then please take the time to read through the following information, and to pass it on to others who you think may benefit.

Advertising your services
One way of avoiding situations that pose a threat to your personal safety is to try and prevent them from happening in the first place. When it comes to advertising your services, be very careful about the ‘image’ you are putting across, and the information you are providing, as both could invite calls and possible bookings from less than desirable clients. Of course, the very word ‘massage’ may be all it takes to trigger unwanted attention, but considering the following points may be of some help:

The wording
It is important that promotional literature and adverts reflect your professionalism. Try to avoid over-familiar or ambiguous wording, such as ‘Let Diana massage your troubles away’, ‘free extra treatment’, or ‘deep/penetrating massage’. This style of writing is one typically used by prostitutes masquerading as therapists, and could therefore invite calls from people who want the sort of ‘services’ that you do not offer. Try to use words such as ‘professional’ or ‘therapeutic’ instead.
Graphics/design
Avoid using illustrations of naked bodies, particularly if these include bare breasts, or have a sensual overtone.

Contact details
Think carefully about putting your home address or phone number on promotional literature, particularly if you are not sure whose hands this will fall into. If possible, use a mobile number which can be turned off or switched to answering service should someone start to pester you. Save your address for genuine clients who have called and booked an appointment, and only if they need your home address, e.g. you work from home.

Before the appointment
If you are a mobile therapist, there are a few ‘safety checks’ you could carry out before the appointment:

- Ring the client to confirm the treatment date and time, thus establishing that the contact number they have given you is genuine. Do not fix an appointment with a client who is not willing to give you a contact number.
- Prior to the appointment, make sure someone knows where you are going and how long you are likely to be. Give them a contact number that you can be reached on. If any of these details change, be sure to inform that person. The idea is that you will then be ‘missed’ if you do not report back at a certain time.
- If you own a mobile phone, take this with you so that you are able to call for help if necessary.

Visiting a client
When you visit a client in an unfamiliar environment (e.g. their home), be extra vigilant and consider the following guidelines:

- Take your FHT membership card with you, or some other form of ID, as your client may ask to see this.
- Be relaxed yet confident in your manner from the very moment you meet your client. This helps to establish a safe, professional boundary.
- Do not enter the house unless the client is there. If a man has made a booking on behalf of his wife, be sure that you see her before you enter the property.
- Allow the client to invite you in to their home, and let them lead you through the house to the treatment area. As harmless as it may seem to take their directions of “Go ahead - its the room just down the hall on the right there”, lone workers are generally advised not to walk through unfamiliar premises with their back to the person being visited.
- Make a mental note of how the client closes the front door, and be sure that you can retrace your steps to make a quick exit if necessary.
- Ensure that the amount of ‘personal space’ between you and the client is maintained at a comfortable level. Do not make unnecessary physical contact with the client. Similarly, if the conversation turns suggestive, end it politely but assertively so that the client knows exactly where they stand.
- Drop it into the conversation that you need to finish the treatment on time as you have arranged to meet someone not long after the appointment.
- Do not spread your belongings out in case you need to make a hasty retreat. (If you feel your personal safety is being threatened, simply grab your essentials, e.g. a bag that contains your keys and phone, and leave - do not start worrying about how you’re going to collapse your couch! If you are home-based, simply terminate the treatment and ask the client to get dressed and go.)
Where possible, try to position your work station so that there is nothing between you and the nearest exit (e.g. have one end of the treatment couch facing the door so that you can leave the room regardless of which side of the client you are working on).

If you are a home-based therapist, make it evident that someone (preferably your partner) is in the house, or is due home soon - even if this isn’t the case.

Some therapists even have an alarm/panic button in the treatment room, with a sign explaining that it is for both the client and the therapist’s safety.

**When travelling to and from appointments**
If you are a mobile therapist, you also need to consider your personal safety as you travel to and from your appointments:

- It would be wise to carry a mobile phone with you, in case your car breaks down. The number of an emergency breakdown service would also be useful.
- If you are visiting a client when it’s dark, try to park somewhere well-lit and preferably busy.

**If you feel threatened or are attacked**
If you feel that a client or a member of the public is about to physically attack you, your number one priority is to get away from that person as quickly as possible. Do not be concerned about leaving your equipment behind - your safety is far more important. Head for your car or a busy area. If, however, someone already has hold of you, try your hardest to break free. This could be helped by the use of a personal alarm which will disorientate and debilitate your attacker for a short period. If you are attacked within possible earshot of someone, shout a command for help, such as “call the police!” - people are far more likely to respond to a command than to a more general “help me!” Your shouting may also be enough to make the attacker back down or run away.

**Remember…**
If your instinct tells you not to enter into a situation, or to get out of one, heed this warning! Do not assume that you are safe just because: you are a male therapist; the appointment is in the middle of the day; or you have seen this client before.

If you are attacked, or even escape an attack, you need to report this to the police. Also tell those who are nearest and dearest to you, as you will probably need their support. Make sure you seek help from a professional if you are hurt or traumatised by the event (e.g. a doctor or counsellor).

**Useful Contacts**

**The Suzy Lamplugh Trust**
The Suzy Lamplugh Trust offers practical advice on personal safety, particularly for lone workers. As well as information booklets, the Trust also provides a range of seminars and training.
Tel: 020 7091 0014
www.suzylamplugh.org

**Victim Support**
This national charity offers help and support to victims of crime. Their number can be found in your local directory, or you can contact them at:
England & Wales: Tel. 0845 30 30 900
Northern Ireland: Tel. 0845 30 30 900
Republic of Ireland: Tel. 1850 211407
Scotland: Tel. 0845 603 9213
www.victimsupport.org.uk