

Sarah Morton

Freelance Eating Disorders Dietitian



My route into mental health/eating disorders/learning disabilities

My passion for nutrition and health has always been deeply rooted. Growing up with parents who were both farmers and green grocers, I gained a first-hand understanding of the journey from field to fork. This early exposure significantly shaped my food choices and nutritional values. At the same time, I recognise that not everyone has the same relationship with food, and I pride myself on my ability to meet individuals where they are. My journey into dietetics was somewhat unconventional. After completing a BSc in Applied Physiology and an MSc in Human Nutrition, I took a year out to travel. This time away gave me valuable space to reflect on my skills, interests, and long-term aspirations. It became clear that dietetics was the right path for me, and I applied to postgraduate courses while living in Australia. The saying "third time's a charm" certainly held true!

A closer look at my current role

My typical working week is a dynamic blend of NHS commitments and freelance work, each offering its own challenges and rewards. I work two days a week within the Tier 3 Adult Eating Disorders service in Belfast, where the pace is consistently demanding. My caseload includes individuals with restrictive eating patterns, binge eating, and complex presentations. I often participate in joint clinician appointments alongside other therapists, particularly for high-risk cases or situations where progress may be stalled.

The pace and nature of my freelance work can vary greatly. I see clients on a weekly, fortnightly, or ad hoc basis, depending on their needs. Alongside client consultations, I manage a steady flow of emails, new enquiries, and requests, which keeps my workload diverse and engaging. I've been working on expanding my freelance presence through marketing efforts, including my website and social media platforms. While marketing isn't my natural strength, I recognise the significant opportunities it creates for dietitians in the freelance space. This includes individual client work as well as partnerships with businesses and organisations. I also have a strong interest in corporate and community nutrition and have delivered talks to various audiences, including companies, schools, sporting organisations, and charities. These opportunities are particularly rewarding as they allow me to connect with diverse groups and apply my expertise in broader contexts.

Professional development and networking is important. I am a member of various BDA specialist groups and recently completed a two-year term as treasurer for the Specialist Freelance Group. Additionally, I facilitate several BDA courses throughout the year. Co-facilitating these courses with colleagues from across the UK is an invaluable experience. Whilst it pushes me out of my comfort zone, I enjoy the challenge it brings and appreciate the opportunity to engage with others in the field. Plus, the BDA ensures the course is well-catered - lunch is always a highlight!

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How does working within private practice compare to a role within the NHS?

Private practice differs significantly from working within the NHS. As a freelance practitioner, you are essentially self-sufficient, managing every aspect of your work, including IT Equipment, CPD, supervision, insurance, marketing and promotion. This independence can be a steep learning curve and, at times, isolating. It's crucial to build a support network—a "village" of contacts and colleagues—who can provide guidance, collaboration, and encouragement.

Freelance work is entirely self-directed. This means you are responsible for generating your own referrals and creating a sustainable caseload. From a financial perspective, freelance dietitians must manage all aspects of their business including paying into a pension, setting up as PAYE or a limited company, managing tax returns and invoicing for your services, whether from individuals or insurance companies

Despite these differences, there are often similarities between freelance and NHS work. Many freelance dietitians continue to see clients with conditions like their NHS caseloads. Some choose to specialize further in a niche area, while others offer more general nutrition advice. Additionally, freelance dietitians often create their own MDTs by collaborating with therapists, consultants, psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and other professionals to provide holistic care.

Freelance work also allows for greater flexibility, which is particularly beneficial for those with family or caring responsibilities. Whilst working hours can mirror NHS roles, the ability to adapt schedules to suit personal commitments is a significant advantage.

For me, freelance practice has been an invaluable opportunity to integrate the skills and experiences from my NHS career into an environment better suited to my current life stage as a parent of young children. It has provided the work-life balance I've been striving for, without sacrificing the quality or satisfaction of my work.

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What are you most proud of within your role?

I am proud that the area I was most passionate about as a student has become the cornerstone of my career. Eating disorders and mental health have always fascinated me, and this interest has remained steadfast for over 14 years. This ongoing curiosity and dedication drive me to continually learn, develop, and refine my practice. Working within this field is not without its challenges or frustrations. However, the moments when an individual engages, follows advice, and achieves their health goals are truly magical. Witnessing someone reclaim their life outside of their eating disorder is both awe-inspiring and powerful. To play even a small part in such a transformation is deeply rewarding—and reminds me why I do this work.

What advice would you offer to someone considering a role in private practice?

Before venturing into freelance practice, ensure you have a solid base of experience and knowledge. I worked in private hospitals alongside my full-time NHS role for many years before committing to consistent freelance practice. This allowed me to develop advanced clinical skills, gain confidence, and build a professional network. Freelance work also often means competing with highly experienced dietitians who have years of advanced clinical practice. Jumping into freelancing as a newly qualified dietitian may not be the most productive approach. Think carefully about why you want to go freelance. Weigh up the pros and cons to ensure this path aligns with your goals, lifestyle, and financial needs. Referral numbers can fluctuate. It is essential to account for this variability when planning your finances. Make sure you can cover essential expenses even during quieter periods. Many dietitians choose to combine locum or part-time roles with freelance work before fully committing to private practice. This approach provides financial stability while allowing you to explore the demands and opportunities of freelance work.

Remember, as you are responsible for ensuring your tax contributions are up to date and that HMRC are aware of your freelancing work, it is worth thinking about independent financial advice regarding pension contributions etc.


Building a professional network is vital for gaining referrals and support. It takes time and patience to establish your presence in the freelance space. Consider joining support groups on social media, Chambers of Commerce, or even Women in Business networks. Additionally, many free resources are available online, and seeking advice from business mentors—or investing in their services—might be something you want to explore.

Not every referral you receive will align with your skillset. It's crucial to assess your competencies honestly and refer clients to other professionals when their needs exceed your expertise. This is fundamental to good practice and helps maintain professional integrity.

Certain client groups, such as those with eating disorders, can present with significant risks. Be mindful of your ability to manage these cases safely. Working with these singularly is both unsafe and unethical particularly when it comes to the medical but also the psychiatric management. I have often declined high-risk clients, instead directing them to NHS services instead.

Supervision is a non-negotiable element of safe, ethical, and effective practice. Regular supervision—possibly from multiple professionals—is essential to guide your work. Personally, I receive monthly supervision from both a highly specialist dietitian and a clinical psychologist. This not only supports my practice but ensures I maintain professional standards.

Building a successful freelance practice takes time, effort, and patience. Focus on developing your reputation, learning from experience, and maintaining high standards of care.



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