SEO Guide for Psychologists

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Most people begin their search for a therapist on Google.

So if you want people to find you, you need to show up in the Google search results. Unfortunately, Google won't show your website if you call them up and ask nicely. You need to convince Google's algorithm that your website is the most relevant website for a particular search. That's where SEO comes in.

SEO stands for search engine optimization. Google's algorithm looks at a huge amount of data to determine the best pages to show for a particular result. SEO refers to all of the things you can do to give Google's algorithm the impression that your site deserves to be included in the results when someone searches for a therapist.

A Metaphor For SEO

You can think of it like this. Let's say you are a tour guide, and your business depends on referrals from the local travel agents. You want the travel agents to send you as many clients as possible.

So what could you do to convince the travel agents that they should send people to your tour?

First, you build a good **reputation** for your tour. If lots of people agree your tour is pretty good, word will get to the travel agents, and they'll be more likely to recommend you.

Second, you want to give the travel information **information about your tours**. For instance, you might send them a brochure that lists all of the tours that you offer, along with prices and locations.

Finally, you want the tour itself to be **as good as possible**, because on occasion undercover employees of the travel agents will visit your tour and report back on the quality.

Making sense so far? Great, then SEO will make sense too.

On a basic level, SEO consists of three factors: Getting a good **reputation** online, giving the search engines lots of **information about your site**, and making your site **as good as possible**. We'll explore each of those factors in turn.

(Of course, beyond the basic level things are much more complex. My goal here is to give you the fundamentals and make them easy to understand, so there's a lot I'm leaving out. If you'd like a more in-depth look, check out the guides from Search Engine Journal, Bruce Clay, and Moz. Anyway, on to the guide!)

Getting a Good Reputation Online

Google figures out your online reputation by looking at the links that other sites send to your site. Google treats each link as an endorsement — if someone is linking to you, it implies that your site is valuable in some way. That means that a big part of your SEO strategy is getting people to link to you. More links, the more votes to your credibility.

However, all links are not created equal. You would trust information on harvard.edu much more than you would trust information on a random blog — and for good reason! Similarly, Google values links differently depending on the credibility of the website they come from. If Harvard links to you, that will increase your credibility in Google's eyes quite a bit. If your Aunt Irma's cat blog links to you, Google probably won't care much. In fact, Google has systems in place to detect attempts to fool its algorithm, so if you ask Aunt Irma to start 50 cat blogs and link them all to you, Google might even penalize your website as punishment. So you want as many votes as possible, from sites that are trustworthy and authoritative as possible.

Also, Google looks at more than just the authority of the website that links to you — it also looks at the relevancy of that website to your website. For instance, even if Aunt Irma had the most popular cat blog in the world, a link from her to your therapy clinic would still not be worth that much, because she has a lot of cat-related authority, but not a lot of therapy-related authority. However, if you launched a new pet food line, then a link from Aunt Irma's cat blog would be very valuable, because her website would have high authority and high relevancy.

So what does this mean when you put it all together? It's simple. Build your clinic's reputation by attracting links from trustworthy, relevant sites. By trustworthy, I mean websites that are reputable and have many other websites linking to them. By relevant, I mean websites that relate to your clinic in some way — such as websites that discuss mental health or websites that talk about your local area (like a newspaper's website).

How do you attract links? Here's five easy ways

- Ask nicely. This works best when you have a connection to the person or organization you're asking. For instance, if you have a colleague with a different specialty than you, the two of you might agree to link to each other's websites. Or if you are on the board of directors for a mental health nonprofit, see if they can link to your website from your bio on their website.
- Guest blog. Does someone run a mental health blog? See if you can write an article for them, and get a link back to your site in return

- Mention someone else on your website. For instance, let's say you read someone's book on mindfulness, and write a positive book review on your clinic's blog. Email the author of the book and let them know — perhaps they would link to your review!
- Submit your website to all relevant directories for your area. Google My Business, Yelp, and your local chamber of commerce are all great ideas.
- Make genuinely useful content that people will want to link to. For instance, let's say you write an article about tips for coping with anxiety. If your article is really helpful, people who find it might choose to link to it of their own accord, without you even needing to ask.

And here's three ways you should never try to get links:

- Never pay for links. There are some skeezy companies out there that will offer to place links for you on various websites if you pay them. That might have worked years ago, but Google is wise to those tricks now, and you'll just be wasting your money.
- Never spam your website on blog comments or forum posts. It's okay to mention your website if it's relevant, but generally Google ignores links in comments or forum posts — and in any case, it looks really unprofessional.
- Never pay to submit your website to any directories. Again, years ago directories were valuable, but nowadays Google generally ignores them. The exception is local directories that people actually use. For instance, if your local chamber of commerce has a directory, by all means, submit your website to it. But these local directories are normally totally free. If you have to pay, steer clear.

Giving Search Engines Information About Your Site

Adding Keywords To Your Pages

Let's imagine that Dr. Smith launches a brand new website for his site. On his front page, it says:

"Welcome! I'm glad you stopped by. My name is Dr. Smith, and I'm here to help. My goal is to provide a safe and compassionate place where clients can get encouragement and support as they navigate through the challenges of life. No matter what you're going through, there is hope. Please contact me to set up a session today!"

What's the problem here? Simple. There's nothing in this paragraph that tells Google that Dr. Smith is a therapist. What's more, there's nothing that tells Google what kinds of conditions Dr. Smith treats, or where he's located.

That means that if someone searches for "local anxiety therapist", Dr. Smith is not very likely to show up.

How do we solve this problem? Well, it's pretty simple. We sprinkle some phrases (which are called "keywords" in SEO-talk) into our website. Google can use these keywords to figure out what our site is about. For instance, we might rewrite Dr. Smith's website to say something like this: (changes in bold)

"Welcome! I'm glad you stopped by. My name is Dr. Smith, and I'm here to help. My goal as a **therapist** is to provide a safe and compassionate place where **counseling** clients **from all over Chicago** can get encouragement and support as they navigate through the challenges of life. No matter what you're going through, **whether depression, anxiety, or PTSD**, there is hope. Please contact me to set up a session today!"

See what I did? The overall meaning of the page was still preserved, but we sprinkled in some keywords that will signal to Google that Dr. Smith is a therapist who provides counseling in Chicago, and he treats depression, anxiety and PTSD.

Of course, you don't want to go overboard. If Dr. Smith rewrote his website to say:

"Welcome! I'm glad you stopped by to my Chicago anxiety clinic. My name is Dr Smith, and I'm a Chicago anxiety therapist. My goal as a Chicago anxiety therapist is to provide a safe and compassionate place where anxiety clients in Chicago can get encouragement and support from their local Chicago anxiety therapist as they navigate through the challenges of life as a Chicago anxiety client…."

It would almost certainly backfire. For one thing, Google can detect when someone is doing this (they call it "keyword stuffing.") For another thing, a client who comes to this website will be immediately scared off by Dr. Smith's writing.

The bottom line:

- You should sprinkle some keywords in to your pages, but in moderation. If your writing starts to suffer, it's a sure sign you're adding too many keywords.
- Your keyword should reflect the conditions you treat, and the area that you live in.
- Use a variety of keywords for the same topic. For instance, if you treat eating disorders, you should sometimes use the phrase "eating disorders" and you should sometimes say "anorexia" and you should sometimes say "bulimia." That way your page is relevant no matter how someone searches for eating disorder treatment.

Creating New Pages For Keywords

Ever heard of "jack of all trades, master of none?" That principle applies to SEO as well. If you have a massive homepage that talks about all of the different conditions you treat, it's likely that Google will look at that page as being sort-of relevant for all of those conditions, but not incredibly relevant for any of them.

However, if you have an individual page for each of the conditions that you specialize in, then Google is more likely to decide that your individual pages deserve to be shown when someone searches for those specific conditions.

Don't go overboard on this, though. For this technique to be any good, your pages need to be detailed and well-made, and you should ideally try to get links to your individual pages, which can be a lot of work. It's better to focus on two or three pages for the conditions that you most want to focus on, rather than dilute your effort across every single condition you potentially treat.

Also, make sure that these pages talk about your geographic location. Your clients will usually search for a therapist in their area, so it's important that your individual pages are not about "depression treatment" but "[my city] depression treatment."

For instance, check out this page on men's counseling in Chicago. It has the geographic area right in the title, it has a detailed explanation of the therapy, and as a result, it's one of the top listings for "men's therapy Chicago."

Add Keywords To Your URL

This is an easy trick to give Google more information about your pages (and make your site look classier to boot).

All you need to do is make sure that the URL for a particular page reflects the content of that page. For instance, if you have a contact page, make the URL example.com/contact. Simple right?

You can take this to the level by making the URLs extra descriptive. For instance, let's say you have a page about depression treatment, and you've decided to give it the url

example.com/depression. That's okay, but it would be better to make the url example.com/depression-treatment or example.com/Atlanta-depression-treatment. That way you're signaling to Google that your page isn't just about depression, it's about the treatment of depression (in Atlanta!).

Add Your Address

This one is pretty straightforward. Put your address and phone number on every page, either in your header or your footer. That gives Google a very clear signal that you are located at a particular address, which means it will be more likely to show your website to clients who are near you.

If your website design really doesn't allow you to add your address and phone number to every page, at least put your full address on your contact page. But every page is preferred.

Get Listed on Google My Business

Google My Business is Google's own directory for local businesses. Google uses the information in that directory whenever anyone does a search for a local business (like a local therapist!)

A Google My Business listing allows you to add a description of your business and photos of your business. Having an updated Google My Business listing will make it more likely that your business shows up in Google Maps results and in Google search results.

When you create your Google My Business page, try to include some high-quality photos of the clinic, and use a detailed description that includes specific keywords that relate to your business. For instance, "Acme counseling center provides compassionate therapy to individuals suffering from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Our therapists and counselors are all trained at the master's or doctoral level, and we have been in the local area for over ten years."

You can sign up here: Google My Business

Make Your Site As Good As Possible

Ok, what does it mean to make your site as good as possible?

Simple. Your website needs to have quality, helpful content that goes beyond just trying to book sessions.

Think of it like this. There's two bike shops in your city. One bike shop is staffed by employees who will sell you a bike and do nothing else. The other bike shop is staffed by employees who are happy to answer your questions about biking, teach you the best bike routes around town, and generally share lots of information with you — even if you don't make a purchase.

Which bike shop would you rather go to? The second one, obviously. The first bike shop just exists to sell bikes, whereas the second one is genuinely helpful.

Your website should be like the second bike shop. It's great for your website to list the services that you offer and give information on your professional background. But you should go beyond that. Write content that would be genuinely helpful to people, even if they never book a session with you.

For instance, you might write an article about what to look for in a therapist, or an article about how mindfulness can help with social anxiety. You might write some book reviews of your favorite books on depression, or record some videos where you take people through a virtual relaxation exercise. These are just a few examples — I'm sure you can think of more.

The key with this content is to make it truly valuable. Take the time to make your writing as good as it can be. And make sure your articles have some meat to them — try to have each of your articles be 600-900 words long.

Also, try to make it unique. Many other websites already describe the symptoms of depression, so you're not adding anything new if you also write about the symptoms of depression. But what if you write about depression amongst an underserved population? Or what if you write about a less-well known disorder? That will increase the chances that your content is truly unique.

Having this valuable content boosts your SEO efforts in two ways. First, people might reference your content on their websites, which gives you more links. Second, quality content makes your website stand out to Google, and increases their confidence that you are a relevant result for their searchers.

If you want to put this in practice, I recommend choosing a topic that you can write 5-10 articles about. It's not ideal to write lots of blog posts on random topics. Instead, choose one topic that you can really explore in-depth. For instance, write five articles on managing anxiety, with each article covering something different (using mindfulness to combat anxiety, seeking therapy for anxiety, different kinds of anxiety, medication for anxiety, etc). That way, you'll come across as an authority about anxiety and that

means Google is much more likely to send people who want anxiety therapy to your website.

Of course, not everyone enjoys writing. If you want to add content to your website but you don't want to write it yourself, consider hiring a ghostwriter. I recommend my friend Kyler who runs WritingForTherapists.org. He's a graduate student in clinical psychology (like me!), so he's knowledgeable about therapy. And he's very affordable compared to professional ghostwriters.

Oh, one more thing. The best content in the world doesn't do you any good if your website takes forever to load. A good goal is to make sure your website loads in three seconds or less. Test your page load speed at www.gtmetrix.com. Google's algorithm uses page load time to determine if your site is quality or not and (more importantly) your visitors will leave your site if it loads too slowly. If you're using WordPress, consider switching to WPEngine, since they will optimize your site for fast load times.

Summary

Ok, I know this is a lot of information — but it will start making sense as you put it into practice.

Just remember the tour guide metaphor. You want a good reputation. You want to give tour guides a lot of information about your tours. And you want your tours to be as good as possible.

Apply that to SEO. You get a good reputation by having other quality sites link to you. You give tour guides information by including relevant keywords in your pages, by including your address on your website, and by signing up for directories like Google My Business. And you make your tours as good as possible by writing lengthy, high-quality articles on valuable topics.

As you do these things, your site will become higher-quality in Google's eyes, and you'll start to get more and more traffic from search engines.