

My Psychotherapy Career: Navigating the challenges of starting a private practice

With UKCP psychotherapist Alessio Rizzo

Jenna:

Hello and welcome to My Psychotherapy Career, a podcast we explore the different therapeutic settings our members work in and how they came into their career. I'm Jenna Rachid, the digital engagement officer at UKCP. Our host Helen Willingham is the head of content and engagement at UKCP, overseeing all our communications to members and the public, as well as our policy and research work. In this episode, Helen speaks to UKCP psychotherapist Alessio Rizzo. Alessio is a UKCP accredited psychotherapist, specialising in working with gender, sexuality and neurodiversity. He is also a lecturer and writer, regularly publishing articles on his website and in the media on topics such as anxiety, anger and relationships. Prior to entering the psychotherapeutic profession, Alessio's background was in education, where he taught math to a variety of students, including neurotypical and neurodivergent young people in public and private settings. In this episode, Alessio talks to Helen about his career in education and how his background has informed and shaped to psychotherapeutic work.

Helen:

Thank you very much for joining me today. It's really great to meet you. And I'm looking forward to hearing some of your answers to our questions and talking to you about your career.

Alessio:

You're very welcome, Helen. Nice to be here with you.

Helen:

Though, I'd like to first ask: why did you become a psychotherapist and what prompted you to begin training?

Alessio:

Okay, I decided, or kind of, I found out I wanted to be a psychotherapist during my first therapy experience. I was back then in Italy, I was studying engineering, and here I am. I'm a psychotherapist and not an engineer. So, I became a psychotherapist because of my own journey into mental health. And during that journey, I found out that I had that profession in me, that I wanted to be my therapist.

Helen:

I was just going to say, did you carry on with your engineering training? And it was just something that was in the back of your mind? Or was it something that you...

Alessio:

I did complete it, and even tried to work in that field, but it was just, it just wasn't for me. And you know, to answer your second bit of the question, what prompted me to begin training, is also interesting because I moved to the UK. I trained as a teacher here, as a math teacher. And during my teacher working career, I found out I could train in this country to become a psychotherapist without having a degree in psychology, which was a requirement in Italy. As a matter of fact, I started studying psychology after my degree in engineering, but it was impossible to do both, working and a degree in psychology. It would have taken five years of that before I accessed the psychotherapy training. Whereas the UK allowed me to go into training. So, what prompted me was this discovery. I was so happy when I realised that I could do that in the UK.

Helen:

Yeah, that's great. And then a question that we have in this podcast is about psychotherapy and counselling heroes. So, I'd like to ask: who is your psychotherapy or counselling hero?

Alessio:

Okay, so I've got two actually. The first one is my first therapist. He is the one who changed my life. He was a gestalt therapist in Rome. That's why I became a gestalt therapist myself. In the early 2000s when I started therapy, he was an openly gay person. Back then in Italy it was quite a thing and for him to bring it to the therapy room and to help me in my coming out. I'm an open LGBT practitioner. I don't think there's any reason for me to hide it. So, for me he's a hero. Now I have studied various types of psychotherapy and there is someone called Richard Schwartz who is the founder of a new type of psychotherapy that I'm practising, who is now currently my new hero. So, I've got two.

Helen:

Yep, we can have two. That's absolutely fine. And what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Alessio:

So, this is something I've grown to appreciate, mainly after training. As I started to compare myself and my expertise with other people, maybe non-UKCP trained, and really saw the difference in depth of the training in how much I learned through those five years. I know that my contribution to the field is very critical and comes from a very good, ethical place. So, it means quite a lot to me. Yes.

Helen:

Yes, thank you for that. And then what led you to setting up in private practice?

Alessio:

So, again, that was always my aspiration. Many people asked me if I work for the NHS. And having worked in education for the government, it wasn't really my desire to continue working those structured situations. I'd always wanted to be my own boss, to set up my practice in the best way possible, to be free to invest in whatever training I wanted, in whatever setting you wanted to provide. So yeah, that's really what led me. I don't know if there is anything more specific you would want me to say about this.

Helen:

I think that's good. Because my next question was about when you're setting up, how did you start to build your clientele and kind of grow your practice, if you'd like? How did you set about doing that?

Alessio:

Yeah, so I'm going to bring my diversity here, because I think it played a big role. As you can hear from my accent and as I said earlier, I am not originally from the UK. So, throughout my training, all my UK colleagues, the ones who had lived here for a long time, they had the ties with the community already, they knew that GP for a long time, and they would say, you know, as soon as they hire the room or they had the practice, they would have people come their way through recommendation and word of mouth. And that didn't really apply to me. As a matter of fact, only Italian people contacted me in the beginning. It was kind of a difficult beginning, to be honest. And then I kind of started to nurture my like for writing. So, I started to advertise my services on various directories and some of them offered the possibility to publish some little articles in their directories. And I wrote a little piece on anxiety. I just wrote it, like, in half an hour, sent it to them, they published it and the feedback was amazingly good. My friends who read it were quite amazed. It was just 500 words, and a few people started to come my way. So, I started to nurture my interest in anxiety, and they found out that people responded well to that. Clients would find me because of the intersection of what I represented, so I presented myself as a non-British person, not native speaker, LGBT member, with an interest in anxiety. And that started to create some momentum in my practice. And the biggest factor here was that because I wasn't receiving naturally people's recommendations, I invested a lot in my online presence. I didn't do social media. I'm actually quite allergic to big media. But I come from a technical background. I could design my website, I paid someone to have a very nice website, I was able to migrate it to another platform because of my technical knowledge. And slowly I started to stop writing articles for directories because they would maintain the copyrights of them and started to publish on my own blog, just because I loved it. And because there was something that I didn't want to give out when writing for a directory. So long story short, I invested a lot of time and money in the design of my website, in creating content that was unique. And then I, a few years ago, three, four years ago, I encountered this new form of psychotherapy called IFS, internal family systems, which merged perfectly well with gestalt. And I can, and I said, 'okay, I want to do this.' So, I've quickly trained to the higher level there and I started to create content inspired by this form of therapy. The pandemic hit, so all of a sudden, from being a disadvantage, and you know, having to entice people to come to my practice, through advertising and writing articles, all of a sudden, my online presence became an advantage. Because instead of searching for therapists through their postcode, they would search through their content or their profiles. And I've been very lucky somehow because a lot of attention is now coming towards IFS. And I have many requests coming because of people accessing my articles. And I've got people from Australia, from all over the world, commenting on my blog and saying how clear it is, and how nice it is to have good quality content online. As you know, as the head of content, there is a lot of content available out there. And people, more often than ever, access information on mental health and types of therapy and different forms of diagnosis through the internet. They don't always check who is writing. So, there's something about the quality of what's written and there's obviously a difference between someone coming from a thorough training, like the UKCP one, compared to someone who is, you know, has read a couple of books, went to a couple of seminars and writes an article. And I think it's important that people become more aware of checking where the information is coming from and who's writing it.

Helen:

I guess on that, do you have any advice on, for our listeners, on how they might approach that writing and making sure that they can, I guess, put themselves above that? So really demonstrate the high quality of training and the accreditation and what that means?

Alessio:

Yes, I wish I had an easy answer to that.

Helen:

It's quite a big ask of a question.

Alessio:

It's okay. It's a very good question. Because I think it's important to write and to acknowledge the quality. And I think something that happens throughout the training is that we get so used to self-reflect and almost self-criticise that we don't appreciate the things that we learn and how our critical point of view, in a good way, let's not just believe the surface of what's being said, let's really look into it. Last year, I was a trainer and I wish I could tell my students and all the students to really trust themselves and what they're learning and what they can bring to the profession. Yes.

Helen:

You've now been doing some training, but I want to go back to your prior experience of teaching as well. How, if it has, how has this kind of helped with your psychotherapeutic career?

Alessio:

Yes. So, there are two main teaching experiences. The first one, the long one, was as a math teacher in school settings either/or in private settings. And the other one is teaching as a lecturer for gestalt psychotherapy. They both helped me. I would say, actually, the psychotherapy helped a lot in the teaching actually, because the more I studied psychotherapy, the more I could engage and understand my students more, in the teaching career. Now, the other way around is also true. I learned a lot about the psyche through teaching, mainly one-to-one sessions. I had amazing experiences teaching people with neurodiversity. It really helped me to understand how to deal on a one-to-one basis with clients who might come into my office, into my practice. It makes a tremendous impact that I wouldn't have got through a lecturer, though a training, from my training centre. So yeah, that's my mathematics teaching. And the thing that's really been the biggest one, I think, my psychotherapy teaching has also helped me to understand what students might need in terms of boundaries and helped me understand how the boundaries are extremely helpful as a practitioner, so yeah.

Helen:

Thank you for that. And we've talked a bit about different elements of your work. So, your writing, you've got your client work and lecturing, how do you balance those different aspects?

Alessio:

It's work in progress. I go back to the ethical commitment I have to my clients, and I know what I need to self-care to be able to care for my clients. And therefore, I have always put boundaries in place. I never take on too much client work. I know my limits, I know how many clients I can see in one day, for example. One of my days is to write a book, actually. And I'm kind of get quite serious about it, and I now will have to reduce my practice. So, my answer is very practical. It's about really being aware of how I am, and know my limits, and know that if I want to do many things, I've got to give something up. One of the reasons why I'm not teaching this year is because I wanted to dedicate more time in creating media. I have this project of writing a book.

I'm organising some training in Italian for professionals in Italy who want to learn this new form of psychotherapy that I've talked about earlier called IFS that doesn't have any Italian materials, so I would want to bring that modality in Italy. And I had to kind of do the math and realise that I didn't have time to be teaching, the client work, writing a book and bringing these things to Italy. So, the answer is about balancing and making sure I am supported.

Helen:

Looking back now, is there anything you wish you knew before you started training?

Alessio:

Yeah, although probably someone told me and I didn't hear or didn't listen. I would have wanted to know how tough it would be to go through all the growing commitments required. Because from... year one's quite nice and gentle, and then you start seeing clients, and then you start seeing your supervisor, and then you need to go to the placement, and you need to do your assignments, and you need to do your readings. So, all of a sudden, what seems to be either like a weekend demand or one evening a week, which on paper looks contained, actually, it requires much more time. And that's something I had to juggle with. And then I'm lucky enough not to have the expenses of having to maintain kids or family. So, I could easily adjust. But I imagine people who might have family commitments much more intense than the ones I have might really struggle to plan for a long training.

Helen:

And you've kind of touched on my next question, which was about how do you manage the logistics of training, the cost, the time to train. And I guess from our conversations of kind of, I'm making the assumption here, but you can correct me, that you actually did your training whilst you were teaching as well.

Alessio:

Yeah.

Helen:

So how did you kind of manage all of those aspects?

Alessio:

Well, yeah, it was through understanding what the next academic year would look like that I started to search for a part-time job, part-time teaching as much as possible. When it wasn't possible, I started to do private tuition, which allowed me to work weekends, because you know at some point you need two placements, one is not enough, because you need your hours. And placements usually don't easily give you clients on a weekend. So, it was a bit of a juggle, it was about doing some teaching to have constant flux of income, and then integrating it with private tuition. It wasn't the easiest thing of all. I remember having friends who had like a much more well-paid job and going on holidays, and I couldn't go on holiday because of my commitment to my clients, and also because I had to pay for my therapy, for my supervision, for the course, for the books. You know, there wasn't like a great flow of money, let's say, but I managed

Helen:

Yeah, and here you are.

Alessio:

Yeah.

Helen:

That's good. And then what advice would you give to someone who's considering training as a psychotherapist or a psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Alessio:

I would tell them to speak to someone who's gone through the training. I have a couple of friends who have talked to me and they found extremely helpful to have an overview of the length, the commitment, all the things that you don't read when you're searching for a psychotherapy training, because you might be more focused on the type of therapy, on the training organisation you want to train with, because that's what you look for at the beginning. So, I would suggest to speak to someone who has gone through the training. Someone who can give you a sense of the level of commitment, and an overview of the amount of time and money that's needed. That would be my first point of advice. And the second one, this is more for someone who has started the training - and that's what I told my students last year - it was to make the training your own training. There is obviously a curriculum, there is a syllabus, and there is huge amount of flexibility and customisation. It's very important that during the training people follow their interests, their passion. You know mental health is a huge field, there are specialisations. You know, choosing the right placements, like for example I did my placement in LGBT placement, or writing essays on specific topics will help tremendously to open a private practice afterwards.

Helen:

Yeah, that's great. Thank you, Alessio. And my final question, how is training changed you?

Alessio:

Oh, how do I quantify that. I am a very different person to who I was when I started training. The training itself is the journey that it's worth doing, regardless of whatever title you take at the end, whether you complete it, where you do just a fraction of it, whether you then take your title and open your practice. Regardless, it's a tremendous journey of self-discovery, simply because you've got to be in therapy throughout the whole duration. And you have not just the means to face whatever emerges in you because you're in therapy, because you've got your peer support group, you've got your books, you've got your supervisor, you've got your teacher, you are in a community that can really support you in facing your own growth. In addition to the curriculum, to the assignment, and the, you know, more tick box inside of it, the personal growth that you achieve through this training is what ultimately makes one therapist different from another. And that's what I think is the magic and the biggest gift of this training. You don't just learn the profession, but you also learn about yourself and how you can bring yourself to this profession, which is beautiful.

Helen:

Yeah. The magic of it, as you put it, and I think that's a really great note to end on as well. So just thank you for joining me today, Alessio.

Alessio:

Thank you, Helen.

Helen:

It's been great talking to you and finding out about your career and all the different aspects and things that you're working on.

Alessio:

Thank you for having me.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Alessio Rizzo speaking to Helen Willingham, our head of content and engagement. If you're interested in exploring training, then you can visit our psychotherapy training page, where you can find information on psychotherapy as a career, as well as the different training pathways available to you. Just go to www.psychotherapy.org.uk/psychotherapy-training. All episodes of my psychotherapy career are available on our website psychotherapy.org.uk. You can also subscribe to our channel UKCP on your favourite streaming platform. Do you have any feedback you'd like to share with us on this episode or any for our series? Get in touch with us at communications@ukcp.org.uk. Join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.