

My psychotherapy career: Managing a psychotherapeutic service in the private sector

With Charlotte Fox Weber

Jenna:

Hello and welcome to My Psychotherapy Career, a podcast where 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 Charlotte Fox Weber. Training as a psychotherapist, Charlotte worked in private practice as well as the NHS. In 2015, she set up the School of Life Psychotherapy, a service she remained head of for over five years. She continues to work in private practice and has also co-founded Examined Life, a collective of therapists offering their services. Charlotte has been working on her book entitled What We Want, which will be available to purchase in March 2022. In this episode, Helen seeks to find out about Charlotte's work leading a psychotherapy service, and what led her to make a role for herself.

Helen:

How did you start working in the private sector?

Charlotte:

I started working privately when I was still training. So, I was a member of BACP, and I was working towards UKCP accreditation, and I was doing placements and I very slowly began to build my private practice, while being very aware of the limitations of my expertise and training at that point.

Helen:

Did you work with your supervisor at that point in setting up that private practice?

Charlotte:

I worked with my supervisor a bit, I got a private supervisor. I've worked with colleagues as well. And I really just threw a lot at the wall to see what would stick. I didn't have huge expectations. I didn't put too much pressure on myself. Peers at that time felt anxiety about keeping up with numbers and sometimes that still happens, where there's just this pressure to have a full caseload immediately. And I think we have to tolerate a bit of uncertainty and just keep our cool at these moments because it can be very busy, but there can also be time periods where numbers are down and that is okay, it's perfectly alright.

Helen:

Yeah. And it's good to hear. And how did you manage kind of marketing yourself or getting those initial clients and setting up what you wanted in your practice?

Charlotte:

I, first of all, am no model for how to do these things because I was probably too accommodating. I was too accommodating in two very specific ways, financially and when it came to time. It was before I'd had children, so I had more availability. But that doesn't mean it was the best idea. But I would schedule sessions at very odd hours of the day. I say odd, they weren't outside normal hours, but really, I should have picked a morning or an afternoon or an evening. But instead, I would make it work. So, I overly accommodate and self-sacrifice. And I would also offer incredibly reduced rates. I am kind of faux insulting myself, because I am so glad that I did all of that because I learned a great deal and I had wonderful clinical experience. So, I was just really glad to get going. Had I had higher self-esteem and more experience, then I probably would have been more discerning about time and money. But I didn't, so pluses and minuses.

Helen:

You set up and ran a psychotherapy service at the School of Life. Can you tell us about this role?

Charlotte:

Yes, it was very exciting and quite new. I began the service just on my own in the back of the shop in King's Cross. And it was very makeshift and creative in that sense because it was coming up with something new, something that didn't already exist. Again, pluses and minuses for that, because it's not as if there was a job description to come into. So, I was really just finding my own way. And then that developed over time, and the service grew, and demand grew. And I hired other therapists and then we grew to a team of 30 and it was a huge bustling practice by the end [of my time there].

Helen:

Wow. And you did that alongside your private practice as well?

Charlotte:

I did. I really ended up just bringing my private practice there. So, I had private clients who I would then see at the School of Life. And I think one of the things I've definitely learned over time is that having multiple settings can be a lot to make sense of. Being part of different institutions, different organisations, it helps to have a clear, concise system in place, and to think of a caseload overall, even though there, of course, can be different components of that caseload, and different bits. It's a real balance between wanting to have colourful, different experiences as part of working privately, but also wanting to keep things simple and concise and not being spread too thin.

Helen:

And that role meant you were overseeing a team of psychotherapists, and how did you balance that clinical work and the management side?

Charlotte:

Badly and terribly and I'm very happy to speak honestly and openly about that. I think it's really delicate to protect the clinical side of things and still keep track of all of the little details that do matter. And I can be quite fastidious, so the small details felt important to me. And details like making sure that the chairs were right, and dealing with customer issues, if someone had a booking query and wanting to make sure that the therapist felt okay. Looking after those small details felt extremely important to me. And at the same time, I had to make some adjustments when it came to time so that I could protect the clinical side of things. And I say creating meaning clinically creating, like just protecting the integrity of doing psychotherapy work. It's about containment. And that goes for the therapist, too. If I was overly distracted and preoccupied by service issues, I was then getting in the way of my own clinical work.

Helen:

What was the kind of split between the management side and the clinical work? Did you find that you had to give up one over the other?

Charlotte:

I think that there is room for both, but in dosage. And again, because it was all new it's not as if I was coming into a set role where there were some kind of clear sense of roles and responsibilities. And actually, one of the things that I learned that I absolutely recommend - to my clients, to therapists, to pretty much anyone in relationship, either professionally or personally - is to continually update roles and responsibilities. So, I would sit down, and I would go through my roles and responsibilities every few months. It's not something that you have to do all the time, but little things creep in. And it was always interesting to see that I was taking responsibility for things outside of my remit, and also that I actually needed to have oversight of issues that someone else was managing. I think making these adjustments goes a very long way.

Helen:

What advice would you give to someone looking to work for an organisation? So, I guess, under another organisation or another brand, setting up working with them, what advice would you give them?

Charlotte:

I think it's really important to be flexible, and at the same time hold on to your own integrity. And that sounds paradoxical because it is. I think there's usually tension between the pressures of an organisation and individual autonomy. And I think the self-care thing can go too far. So, if we're overly obsessed with self-care, it can end up making us less generous than we actually mean to be. And I say be flexible because it's not just about being virtuous for other people, but it's also about inviting in opportunities. And if you're rigidly saying no to things, and kind of overly protecting your own boundaries, you may miss out on a great opportunity. There's so much talk these days about the power of saying no. I'm still a believer in also saying yes to things that might seem wild and might seem kind of out of the blue and at odds with what's sensible, and to have new opportunities and new experiences.

Helen:

You've changed roles throughout your career. So, you actually worked in the NHS and then you moved to the private sector. How do you know when it's time to change things up?

Charlotte:

I think if you are seething with resentment and feeling deprived of the life that you want to be living, take that seriously. It's not that it's necessarily the institution's fault, or your job's fault. I think it's really about taking responsibility for your own existence. So, the other piece of advice I have for anyone working in an institution or organisation is to be realistic about what that organisation is going to do for you. I think it's up to each one of us to find our own joy and fulfilment and not expected to be handed over, and not expect places to take care of us, existentially. So, if there's a sense of misery, and ongoing depletion and a lack of enthusiasm, that's a real problem. And it requires a major change of some sort. And sometimes that change is internal. And it's about mindset and attitude. Sometimes it means actually just leaving. But I think the other area where we get ourselves into trouble is when we have a kind of expectation of certainty. So, when we think that we will have all the data we need to make a decision, and we expect 100% confirmation that we're making the right decision, it's never going to be entirely certain in those ways. So, I think if you have enough to go on, to stay or go, make that choice, rather than kind of endlessly waiting for the choice to be crystal clear.

Helen:

That kind of brings me on to a nice other point is that, I guess, one new challenge is that your first book is due out in 2022. What prompted you to move into writing and starting on your book?

Charlotte:

I had a real desire to start writing. And I didn't know where it would take me, I had no idea if I was any good. I didn't know if I should take it seriously, you know, all of the normal self-doubts. I still have all of those doubts, by the way. But I just wanted to keep going. And I wanted to do something interesting. And I found the work quite interesting. And I began writing, had an idea, and one thing led to another, and I suddenly found myself in this situation of writing a book. So, I think just taking small steps, without knowing where we'll go and without expecting things to be miraculous. I think it's just, again, not waiting for absolute certainty or some guarantee of success. But just proceeding anyway.

Helen:

Just going for it.

Charlotte:

Going for it. And then there's the risk of failure and doing terribly, you can survive that.

Helen:

I'm going to go back a little bit. And I'm going to ask, why did you become a psychotherapist?

Charlotte:

Always such a difficult question to answer, because I feel like I give myself away whatever I say. And I want to be honest, and it's impossible to fully explain it. I think, a real curiosity about other people, and about myself, and a wish to make sense of internal experience and to understand why we do things and why we're so confusing and conflicted. So, a curiosity about our kind of internal worlds.

Helen:

And what were you doing before and what inspired you to start training then?

Charlotte:

Psychotherapy is really my first career. I studied English and Philosophy at university. I was going to study Psychology, but I don't have a particularly scientific mind. And I then had a very brief moment of going into publishing or thinking I might go into publishing, that didn't go anywhere. And so, I started studying psychotherapy in my early 20s and really went from there. In a way I knew absolutely nothing about life. So, I was blissfully unaware of certain issues. And that made me unqualified in certain ways and in other ways, I was able to immerse myself completely and throw myself into this profession.

Helen:

And this is a question that I ask everybody on this podcast is, what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Charlotte:

It means rigour, it means credibility and it means professionalism. I'm a huge snob about you UKCP, because I just feel terrified for people going to see therapists who aren't proper. So, it is a distinction that absolutely matters, but I feel like UKCP protects some kind of legitimacy. It's not that you can ever have some guarantee of professionalism, but it gives gravitas, and we desperately need that.

Helen:

Thank you. Now I'm going to talk a little bit about training as well. And reflecting back, is there anything you wish you knew before you started psychotherapeutic training?

Charlotte:

I wish that I knew that there's no such thing as a perfect training and I think that we can get overly attached to our trainings. The same thing happens with school. It's really that wish to belong to a group and a way of doing things. I don't think we should feel beholden to where we were trained and think that that's the only way to do things, the only way to see things. I kept thinking that there was going to be a perfect approach to psychotherapy, that I would be taught by masters and then I would find my pathway. And actually, I think it's a constant work in progress and we're always learning. Learning never ends, ideally. So, I wish that I had slightly lowered my expectations of what training means.

Helen:

You made a good point there when you said learning never ends. Can you elaborate on that a bit? How do you think you continue to learn through being a psychotherapist?

Charlotte:

I think that we learn every single day from clients directly. And it's really important to always have that openness, and again, flexibility. I get myself into trouble if I sit down with a client and I think 'oh I've heard this before,' or 'I know where this is going.' I think allowing for surprise is where we begin to open something and learn something because it's the willingness to see something in a new way. And we're always encouraging that with clients, and we need to practice it ourselves. If you feel like you aren't learning anything from your work as a psychotherapist, I would say that's an indicator that something is stagnant, something isn't working in an optimal way.

Helen:

And what advice would you give to someone considering training as a psychotherapist or psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Charlotte:

To remain curious, and to remain astonished, and to also maybe appreciate the joys of life and not only insist on the darkness. I think that's something that I've struggled with personally. I'm so comfortable with the darkness of human beings and actually, there's also light and joy and pleasure. And that matters, too. It takes a different type of courage.

Helen:

And when you say about that joy, and that joyful side, and the pleasure, do you see that in your clinical work as well?

Charlotte

Absolutely. I'm doing a service to my clients when I'm really delighted for them, when something goes well. And sometimes we can be professionally cynical. We're somewhat encouraged to be cynical about things going well, for human beings, I think. I'm sure positive psychologists would disagree with me. But I think when I can be open and encouraging and excited for people, clinically, it's a great feeling. There's actually a term for it, compersion, which is when you're happy for someone else's success.

Helen:

Yeah, it's a good one, I'm going to remember them. How has training changed you?

Charlotte:

Oh, gosh, it's probably changed me in getting me to think about things from different viewpoints, to not just be entrenched in my own perspective, but also to think about my own viewpoint as well. To factor that in. I can be a bit of a people pleaser, I'm somewhat conflicted between people pleasing and assertiveness. And I think my training pushed me to question people pleasing. It's especially hard if you're half people pleaser, half assertive and opinionated, being that mixed. I actually hid a lot of my people pleasing because I thought of myself as someone who was assertive and confident and had strong views. But that doesn't mean I wasn't also trying to win someone's approval. It was just a bit more camouflaged.

Helen:

And I think it does come up a few times in our conversation about balance and it seems to be getting that balance right is the key.

Charlotte:

Thank you.

Helen:

It's been really great to talk to you, Charlotte.

Charlotte:

Wonderful talking with you and wonderful questions.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Charlotte Fox Weber 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 feedback you'd like to share with us on this episode or any from 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.