

0101 Sliding Scale Therapy

You're listening to the Abundant Practice Podcast. Where we work through the stuck places folks hit while building their private practices. Each week we dive into a practice building through different lenses. You'll get trainings, listen in on mini-consultations and conversations with other consultants. Each month there is a niche deep dive where we flush out a niche from a marketing perspective. Plus every now and then we throw in a "Where are they now" episode, and check in on the clinicians who were on before to see how the advice played out. When relevant, the show notes will include a worksheet for you to bring the content into your practice or life. Because I love you listening, but I want you to take action, too.

This podcast is sponsored by the Abundance Party, where for only \$39 a month you get courses on honing your niche and marketing your practice, scripts for the business side of things, monthly trainings, a chance for a one on one with me, and a much more intimate Facebook group. Where I currently respond to every post. You can check that out at Abundanceparty.com. Alright, onto the show.

If you want to keep your practice organized, Responsive Therapy Notes can help. They are simple, secure, EHR platform that you manage notes, claims and schedules as well as share documents and request signatures. Plus, you get great unlimited customer support for help whenever you need it. To get two months free, visit therapynotes.com, create an account and enter the promo code Abundant.

Welcome back to the Abundant Practice podcast. I'm your host, Allison Puryear of Abundancepracticebuilding.com and abundanceparty.com. and today I have Lisa Isenhardt. Hey Lisa.

Lisa: Hey, Allison.

Allison: So, Lisa is a program director over at Open Path. And, I've talked a lot about Open Path. It is my go-to for sliding scale or reduced fee counseling. It is what I accept as a therapist for my one sliding scale slot that I have. And we're going to talk a little bit about sliding scale in general. We're going to talk some about Open Path. Because I know I get a lot of questions, because I talk about you guys a lot. I do want to start, though, with a story, if you'll indulge me, Lisa.

Lisa: Absolutely.

Allison: So, the very first time that I met Paul, Paul Fugelsang is the executive director of Open Path. And he started it. It was his brain child, right?

Lisa: Yes.

Allison: So, I had just moved here to Asheville, from Seattle and I'd heard about Open Path when I was in Seattle working. And I thought, oh, he lives in the city I'm about to move to. So, like I do, I decided to do some networking. Paul is very calm. He's maybe like the most outwardly chill person I've ever met in my whole life. And I've noticed that when I'm around very calm people, I get more and more excitable. I do not match their energy. I counterbalance it in a way that's pretty obnoxious. So, poor Paul is sitting there, we are sitting at this bakery café down the street. And, I am talking faster and louder and more animatedly and he's just sitting there just chill as can be. And I left there thinking oh, my God. I made such a fool of myself. I was just such an idiot in front of this guy who is so smart and so thoughtful and so calm. And I don't have any of that amount of calm in my soul. I was like, I will never hear from him again, I'm sure. And then, maybe like a month later, he's like hey, would you like to get together with our common friend, Jane Carter. And just like do business breakfast sometimes? And I was like what?

Yes! So, that was my first kind of more formal introduction to Paul in Open Path. And I have really gotten to know how you guys work through our little breakfast that we have. And really respect your mission and how closely you guys keep to it. Because I know that you get tugged by therapists and by clients to do a lot of different things. And you guys really stick to what you set out to do. So, we're going to be talking about what exactly that is in a second.

Lisa: Wow, that's great, Allison. I hadn't heard that exact story before. So, I so appreciate hearing about it. And I second that. Paul is one of the most calm people you will meet.

Allison: yeah, I admire it a lot. And also have no idea what that feels like. Well, let's start talking a little bit about Open Path. And who you guys are and what you guys do.

Lisa: Absolutely. And I just want to thank you, Allison, so much, for inviting me to the podcast. It's going to be wonderful to have this conversation with you. And we just so appreciate how supportive you've been of Open Path over the years. So, thank you for that.

Allison: Absolutely. And I'll throw in there, too, part of the reason I'm really passionate about sliding scale fees is because I honestly believe being a sliding scale client saved my life. So, I was really struggling when I was in my late teens and early 20s. and if I had not had a therapist that I could afford, I honestly probably would not be alive right now. So, I very much appreciate any sort of construct that makes it easier for therapists who are willing to do sliding scale, and clients who are able to pay sliding scale, getting them together.

Lisa: Yeah, that's so wonderful. And that echoes what we hear from many of our clients where there's just this deep, deep, sense of gratitude for the service that Open Path offers as far as connecting them to the therapist. And also, the deep gratitude to the therapists that participate who are able to work with clients at a reduced fee in a way that some clients just didn't even know was possible before they found Open Path. So, as you know, and maybe as some of your podcast listeners know, open path helps clients in need access affordable in-office or telehealth, mental health care. And basically, clients are paying a lifetime membership fee of only \$49 when they first sign up with Open Path. And, then after that, they are connected with a therapist of their choice from our site and are able to work with that therapist between the sliding scale range of \$30-\$60 per sessions. That's for individual counseling. Or if its couples or family counseling, the range is \$30-\$80 per session. So, for a lot of people who either don't have health insurance or who have health insurance that doesn't have great mental health benefits, this is really an amazing opportunity for them to access care that they need.

Allison: I want to point out, too, that that range of \$30-\$60 or \$30-\$80, that is determined by the therapist. So, you can say I'm totally willing to do sliding scale for couples. My sliding scale fee will be \$80. It's not up to the client to choose how much they can pay within that. And I like to point that out just because I've had some people say I'm not, like I just can't do \$30. I could do more as a clinician. But I can't afford to do \$30. And I say, well do \$60. You get to choose.

Lisa: Yeah. I think that's a great point to bring up. Because we have therapists in the collective who, there's two different approaches. One is what you're mentioning now, which is someone might have a set rate where they say I can do Open Path, but only if its \$50 per session. And that's what its going to be for anyone that I see. And then, there's also therapists that say, I'm comfortable with it being the range, and I'm going to have that conversation at the beginning in the intake conversation about where I can slide down to, and where can the client slide up to, to find kind of what's comfortable for both

parties in establishing a relationship. So, I think both of those are valid. And we have therapists who approach it in those two ways. And we just like people to be thoughtful about how they approach it.

Allison: So, can we talk a little bit about why a therapist might consider doing a sliding scale? Because I have a soap box about it.

Lisa: I'd love to hear your soap box, first.

Allison: So, my soap box is you do not need to do sliding scale if it is not one of your current values. And there is no judgment about it not being a current value. But if it is just not on your radar right now, and there are some other things you're trying to do in your practice, I do not think you need to do sliding scale. So, I like to put that out there, so that people aren't feeling judged. For me, at every point in my practice, I have had two sliding scale slots when I was full time, and now that I have a part time practice, it's one sliding scale slot. And I do that because of my own experience, because it is a value. And an ethic for me, personally. But sometimes, I'll see people who are like, oh yeah, I'll get on Open Path, so that I can at least \$50 is better than zero dollars. Which, in my opinion is not going to be sustainable for your practice if it's not an ethic. Like, I can see resentment potentially building as you get full of more full-fee clients or higher rate insurance clients. I think that there needs to be kind of a commitment to the model of sliding scale, for it to be sustainable for your practice.

Lisa: Yeah. That makes so much sense, Allison. And I think that we really encourage therapists who may not be interested or able or willing for whatever reason, to do sliding scale themselves, to consider referring clients who need that, to Open Path. So, you can still be a supporter of Open Path, as a therapist, even if you're not able to sign up and offer a sliding scale slot yourself. And we know therapists who do that. And I think that is a wonderful way to participate in our organization and our mission. So, I really encouraged therapists to consider that if they are not able to participate in Open Path as a provider, that they can always refer clients to Open Path who need it. So, I think that is one thing I just want to share with the listeners, that I think is important. And then, absolutely, we really do want therapists who understand and agree with the mission of Open Path, to be on board. So, if someone's not quite on board with the mission, then maybe it just isn't the right fit for them. And that's okay.

Allison: Yeah. I'll see sometimes, people will say on, in the big Facebook group, they'll say something like, oh, I haven't gotten any clients from Open Path yet because they had this expectation that Open Path was, part of their role was to fill their practice. And I think, I'll just be blatantly clear, because I think I can say it in a stronger way than maybe would be appropriate for you to. But it's not Open Path's job to fill our practice. There are a million different ways to fill your practice. If you need help with that, join the Abundance Party. We got you covered there. Open Path is there to link you with clients who may be a good fit. Who need a sliding scale.

Lisa: Yes. I think that is a really good way of putting it, is we do have many sliding scale clients coming in to Open Path. But we are a nation-wide organization. And we're not providing referrals at the rate that would fill up every single therapist practice. And also, that wouldn't really be appropriate. We're not asking our member therapists to take on a full caseload of sliding scale clients. We're really asking our members to consider even just one sliding scale slot in their caseload. And that actually does make a really big difference when you have more and more therapists doing just that one sliding scale slot. And what's important for people to remember is, as we're growing, we're giving clients who might not otherwise have a lot of options, we're giving them the same choice that full-fee and insurance-based

clients would have. And I think that's what's really important about Open Path is in terms of addressing inequity in the mental health field, often lower fee clients do not have the same choices that other people have. And they might not be getting the same care that other people would get, who have more resources. So even just one slot in the caseload with so many people participating, that can really make a big difference.

Allison: Absolutely. And you guys are really out there. There are a lot of potential clients who have signed up for you guys for that lifetime access. A lot.

Lisa: Yes. We hit the landmark of over 17,000 clients since we started connecting clients in 2013. And actually 40% of those clients, the total number, 40% of those signed up for Open Path in 2018. So that's absolutely our biggest year to date. We had a huge growth spurt, so to speak, last year. So, it was a really big year for us. Many, many clients are looking for this service.

Allison: Absolutely. And I think that maybe clinicians initially bristle of like, you want me to take sliding scale? And do I have to pay for this? And all that. So, I also want to clarify, and you said it earlier, that it's the client who pays the one time, lifetime fee. But the clinicians don't have to pay anything to join Open Path.

Lisa: No, and actually, we try to reward our member therapists as much as possible. We understand people are coming onboard because they align with our mission, but we also want to give back to our members as much as possible. So, as you know, we redesigned our website last year. And we launched that in October. So, if you look at the therapist's profiles on our site, they are fresh, they are modern, clean, very inviting and professional. That's a huge asset to someone's practice. so, you get that for free. Signing up is free for therapists. And we also offer free advertising. So, we're bringing clients to the site and getting them to view clinicians' profiles and all of that is free to our members.

Allison: So, I know that you guys do some light screening. Can you talk us through how you screen potential clients?

Lisa: Yes. Absolutely. So, we have, the first thing that we do is we have colleagues of ours who are available via live chat, email, and telephone to clients. So, we do have clients who are just calling, live chatting, emailing us with questions. And often we get into those eligibility questions with them. So, doing kind of that initial conversation as people are reaching out to us. We also have a fair amount of information on our new site to help clients understand, is Open Path right for me? How do I understand if this is the right fit? So, we have all of that on there. But then, also, when someone signs up for Open Path, they have to fill out our confidential registration form. So, we have a fair amount of information on there, including financials, to help give us and clinicians, kind of a good picture of what's going on with someone financially, and with their insurance situation. And additionally, as I was telling you earlier, we have a new question that we ask, where we really want clients to explain why they are seeking to use Open Path service. And we read every single client registration form that comes in. and we look specifically at those financials and at the reason behind why they want to use Open Path. And if there's any concern or question about eligibility, we reach out to that client about it, to work that out before they start the relationship with the therapist.

Allison: Got it. And then I feel like there's a certain amount of screening that a clinician might want or need to do. Right?

Lisa: I've been working at Open Path for almost three years now. And, it amazes me how nuance some of these situations can be. One example is someone might seem to be making a little bit more money than you might expect for sliding scale. But they might have crushing medical debt. And so, you have to look at, well okay, what's going on here with this person? Like oh, I'm not sure, should they be here? then, you read the explanation, and it might be, okay, I'm paying off this major medical expense, like a surgery or something like that. And just temporarily I might need to do sliding scale while I'm going through this really challenging time. And don't have a lot of resources. So that might be just one example where the clinician might have some questions maybe seeing the salary range, but then, if they have a further conversation they might determine, okay, I am comfortable with this. This person does need this right now. Maybe that would change in the future, but right now, it's a good fit. That's just one example that comes to mind. But also, some therapists might have a conversation with a client and uncover that they don't think it's a good fit with Open Path. That happens pretty rarely, but whenever therapists bring that, or the client will bring that to us, then we have that conversation and help determine if they actually should be using Open Path. So, we try to stay on top of that, and it's really great whenever people reach out with those questions. You know, we're happy to work through those as they come up.

Allison: I think of it kind of, and this is kind of a weird analogy, because we're talking about therapy. But it reminds me a little bit like a dating site. In that like, you're connecting people, but it's not your job to make sure, it's not eHarmony's job to make sure, that people are communicating beautifully. It's not Tender's job to make sure you're having great sex. You're just putting people together to see how that fits and how that goes.

Lisa: Yes. Absolutely. I think that's so true. And we want to have the best fit possible between the clients and the therapists they choose. But there is a process. There's a certain level of trying things out, checking it out. Especially clients who are brand new to therapy. It can be so daunting to look at the listing and to try and determine well, who's going to work for me. So yeah, I think we try to encourage clients to have an open mind about that. About it being a process. I think generally, people come to understand that as they start going through it.

Allison: Absolutely. Is there anything else we should know about Open Path? About some of the work that you guys do that would benefit the folks listening?

Lisa: You know, we're still a somewhat new organization. Although we're not really a startup anymore now that we've been running for 5 or 6 years. But I think the important thing is, given the moment in history in which we find ourselves here in the US, there's just a huge amount of client demand for this service. And I think over the last year or so, especially, we're just seeing our client numbers really going up and up. And it's wonderful in some ways to know that we're helping so many people. But it's also, of course it's really difficult, because we're trying to provide this safety net, in a way, of people who are falling through other types of healthcare. And, so I think the challenge for us is really looking to bring in more therapists who are on board with the mission who can help us keep up with this client demand moving forward. Because it doesn't seem like that's going to be changing in the immediate future.

Allison: At least for the next couple of years.

Lisa: Yeah. It really does feel like this is in our shared history, this is what's happening right now. The immediacy of the work we're doing feels really significant to me.

Allison: I so agree with that. And I know that there are probably some people out there who have been curious or maybe meaning to sign up, and maybe some people who have never heard of you guys until just now. Can you tell the people listening how they can sign up and create a profile in Open Path?

Lisa: Yes. Absolutely. So, our website URL is a little bit on the long side, but....

Allison: That's alright, mine is, too.

Lisa: But if you go to openpathcollective.org we have, just from our home page alone, in the top menu we have a therapist tab. Once you go there, there is so much helpful information. You can go right to the application from there if you're like yes, I am ready to go. Sign me up right now. You could go right to the application. Which takes less than 10 minutes to fill out. If you want more information, we also have our most commonly asked questions are in an FAQ. We also just have kind of a general information page that walks you through everything. If you're someone who really likes to get all the nuts and bolts kind of information before you get started. So, that information is all accessible from our home page. We try to be accessible and responsive as possible to therapists. So, if you're the kind of therapist that really likes to have a conversation before you commit to something, you can give us a call. You can live chat with our staff. We're very open to communicating with therapists and clients alike.

Allison: Awesome. Thank you so much, Lisa. I really appreciate it.

Lisa: Thank you Allison.

Allison: And we'll make sure that the link for that is in the show notes to make it easy for people who are listening on their phones.

Lisa: That sounds great.

Allison: Awesome. Well, have a great, rainy day. And I'll talk to you later.

Lisa: Thanks Allison. Bye bye.

If you are looking for an EHR with great unlimited customer support, get two free months of therapy notes by visiting therapynotes.com. Create an account and enter the promo code Abundant.

Thanks for joining us on the Abundance Practice Podcast. Check out this week's show notes for relevant links, resources and homework. If you're new to private practice, check out the free checklist you need to get started at Abundancepracticebuilding.com/checklist. And if you need more support, check out the Abundance Party at abundanceparty.com. See you next week!