

0122 Filling Your Practice & Creating Your Own Therapy Model with Shauna Zotalis

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Hey guys. I am here with Shauna Zotalis at Mended-Families.com. Shauna, thanks for being here.

Shauna: Thank you for having me.

Allison: Yeah! So, how can I help?

Shauna: I'm in this sort of, I just launched a private practice, sooner than I would have expected. And I have a lot of things on my plate and a million directions that I want to go. And sort of figuring out what is the most important. And how I should prioritize I feel like is the most prevalent for me.

Allison: Okay. So, what's on the list? I got my pen.

Shauna: So, what's on the list. I am not fully licensed yet, and I know that is a big thing on the checklist. It's the number one thing on your checklist, so I'm very self-conscious of that.

Allison: Okay.

Shauna: Even though in my state in Minnesota, there are lots of people who actually are unlicensed and have private practices. It's still something I'm self-conscious about and I am a little bit behind on because I had a baby. So, I just need to take the exam.

Allison: Oh, you've got your hours. You just need the exam.

Shauna: I'll have some more hours, but I'll be close. So, I just have to take the exam and I'll be almost there.

Allison: Okay, cool.

Shauna: So, there's that. So, there's that piece. It seems like clients don't mind, but maybe other therapists do. And maybe I do. So, there's that piece. And then, what I am really passionate about is starting my own type of therapy, which also sounds a little crazy, since I am a younger therapist. But my niche is working with blended families and people going through divorce and remarriage. So, what I want to do is create like a premarital therapy, but for blending. So, its 8-10 sessions of like what to do before you blend. In hopes of creating more successful outcomes for remarriages, since they have an even higher divorce rate than first marriages.

Allison: Awesome.

Shauna: So, I want it to be evidence based. And I also, since its brand new, I'm still looking for these families. Like, I need to find them before they blend. They come to me after the fact and they are like, wow, everything's terrible. And I'm like yes.

Allison: So, it's like a prepare and rich but for families that are about to blend instead of people who are engaged?

Shauna: Right.

Allison: Awesome.

Shauna: Right. So, it would be a mixture of sessions with the couple and also as a family and then maybe just the siblings and just a mixture of all the different components of the family. And would be aiming a lot of psycho education, but also kind of helping prepare for, well, like the beginning of the new sense of we. Like where's this family going? What's the vision? To try to bring more cohesion down the road.

Allison: That sounds awesome. And needed.

Shauna: Thanks. I'm excited. But I also feel like where do I start? And is this the priority? I just still need to fill my practice. that's like number one thing, obviously.

Allison: Yeah. So, fill your practice. we'll put that up top. Because you don't need to be fully licensed to fill your practice. And you are right, clients don't care. People often ask me about that, how do I, can I do this as a provisionally licensed person? Like, if your state and licensing board says you can, of course you can! Yeah! Our clients don't know what those letters mean. They don't care. They just care about getting good care. And just because you're licensed doesn't mean you're better at it than somebody who is not. So, yeah. in terms of filling your practice. let's look at the steps for that. where are you now and where do you want to be?

Shauna: So, I am seeing about 10 clients, it just bumped up a little bit to maybe 12 a week.

Allison: Awesome.

Shauna: And I am offering a sliding scale, so I am definitely offering lower fees than I would hope to. But I am also just wanting that mode of, I just want the clients, I want the referrals from clients. So, I would, if I'm still in that range, then I would want to get up to at least 20

clients a week. but my hope would then be that I could drop down to like 15 once I am at full pay, if that makes sense.

Allison: Yeah. yeah. So, 15 full pay or 20 with sliding scales.

Shauna: Yeah.

Allison: okay.

Shauna: I think that seems about right.

Allison: Yeah. and how long do your clients tend to stay with you? I'm thinking about the sliding scale folks, and as you get more full, how to ride that wave and bring in more full fee people when they graduate.

Shauna: it seems like they stay at least a year.

Allison: Okay. So, because they are long term, I'm going to strongly suggest you come up with a cap at how many sliding scale people you work with. Because otherwise, you're going to end up with probably far more than 20 clients and much less money that you would be making if you had 15 full fee people. And that, I totally get that sliding scale is better than zero dollars. But, because your clients are long term, you know if they were like 8-10 sessions, then I'd be like, yeah, okay. But, because they are long term my fear is that at some point when you get more and more calls of people who are willing to pay your full fee, you're going to be in that uncomfortable place of what do I do with these folks who are paying as much as they can. Because you can also increase the sliding scale fee through conversation with people. And if some people can go up, they can go up. But if some people can't, and you've got people knocking on your door and you're full, it just puts everybody in a weird situation.

Shauna: Yes. I've been worried about that.

Allison: Yeah. So, I wonder maybe capping your limit of a sliding scale now and can take private pay going on.

Shauna: yeah. okay. And then, I just hope that the full pay clients arrive?

Allison: yeah. if you're marketing, they will arrive. They'll arrive. If you're marketing clearly to them, you've got a well-defined niche. So, it's just getting in front of the people who can get them to you.

Shauna: Yeah. So, I've found that networking seems to be the best for me. The online directories are pretty much not very helpful except from Open Pass. Apparently, people love to find me on Open Pass. And they are really a good fit, too. But, yeah, there's only so many spots that I want to fill for that area.

Allison: Yeah.

Shauna: But I've been really disappointed with the online directories.

Allison: So, you haven't gotten anybody from the online directories at all?

Shauna: Very few. And if they do, it's like, oh I thought maybe you took insurance. And I'm like nope, I don't. or its an inappropriate phone call or something like that.

Allison: That's happened to me, too, unfortunately. I always feel worse for the sex therapists when that, they just tend to get even more of those than just the average therapist.

Shauna: Yes. So, definitely seems to be word of mouth through my colleagues and networking with like divorce lawyers and other people like that. I'm trying to think, maybe I'm going to downgrade some of my directory listings.

Allison: Yeah. and I would say, usually, even just one client will pay for a year's worth. If you just see them a few times. But if there are some that you've signed up for that you haven't gotten any clients through the door, how long have you been on them?

Shauna: You know, only since November.

Allison: Yeah, I usually say give it 6 months and that's 6 months. So yeah. if you've gotten zero from it, then you can just kind of cut that out.

Shauna: Okay.

Allison: There are other ways. Or it might be tweaking your profile, that might be another thing to consider. And that might look like saying kind of early instead of like just using the checkbox of private pay, or out of network, to actually say in your blurb that you are not accepting insurance. And there's no guarantee anybody is going to read the whole blurb. Because they also didn't read the checkboxes, which I totally understand. Its mind numbing to go on a lot of those directories and try to find a therapist. And you'll still have some folks calling who are wanting to use insurance and can't afford private pay. It's going to happen no matter what. But at least we can maybe reduce the number of people. So, I would maybe stay on one. Keep your Open Path and toggle the little thing to say you're not accepting anyone new. Maybe one directory that you've gotten calls from. I mean not the inappropriate calls, but the ones who haven't been great fits. Unless you just need a little spice in your day, I don't know.

Shauna: Alright. No thanks.

Allison: Yeah, it's not my kind of drama. So yeah, networking, I think, is really important. Who, you've gotten a lot of word of mouth referrals from colleagues? But it sounds like they are sending people who, are they saying, oh Shauna has a sliding scale, you should call her? Or how is it all going down?

Shauna: Sometimes. And then I do have a couple full pay clients. And some of them, they just found me through Google, too. So, you're right in that sometimes when I am being referred to its that she also has a sliding scale.

Allison: and when you say Google, are you using Google AdWords, or?

Shauna: I had been. But it didn't translate as like direct clicks. But it could have been from Google ads. I don't know. they are always so vague...

Allison: Yeah, and often when they say Google what they really mean is Psychology Today. Because it's like the first thing of Google, every time. So that might be some directory love you're getting that's not obviously directory? Like often if you say where do you find me, they'll say online when they mean Psychology Today.

Shauna: Right.

Allison: Okay, so let's go back to networking. Who all have you been networking with that have yielded referrals?

Shauna: Some schools, actually, some private schools in the neighborhood. I've been doing, I work with children and adolescents. So, I toured the schools, left brochures, ended up having a great experience. And so, they've actually sent me quite a few. And I'm trying to think, oh yes, and some mediators.

Allison: So, it sounds like you're getting maybe some referrals particularly from the mediators that are, kids whose families are going through divorce currently? Or separating? Which, I guess, in a sense really an in for people who will later be in relationships, right? Like, maybe, so part of what you'll need to do is separate out the association of you with their ex. Really. And there may be some way to do that. Because we hope that all of your clients find love again. And end up in really healthy relationships. And the blending is the part that you can help them with. So, it might even be a conversation as their kid is graduating from therapy, to say something like I don't know where you are as you're working towards dating or things like that, if that's something that's even on your radar at this point. But know that when you find love again, if you decide to blend families, that is something that I specialize in and would love to help little Johnny transition with. Something like that.

Shauna: Yeah.

Allison: And that way you are on their radar as somebody for their future.

Shauna: Right. Right. This is maybe a little off track, but maybe on track, is that I have been working on narrowing down my niche with the course. And I'm trying to figure out the ideal client. And for me, it's sort of driving me batty, because I feel like what I'm actually working with is two separate things, like divorce and remarriage. And I don't know if, and I also work with kids and I work with adults. So, I'm like, so I'm finding the things in common about the clients I love. But that's not necessarily speaking to me about my niche. Which is strange. Am I making sense?

Allison: It sounds to me like your niche are these families in different points of their lives. Which to me, because both of those points are very clear, I'm okay, I don't see it as two separate niches, in the way I might if you were like, I work with people in transition who are divorcing or moving or these kind of desperate things, like yours seems like, it just makes logical sense to me. Almost like a before and after that include the before and after work with you for each of them. Double before double after. Just to make it very confusing. So, to me it makes sense. Because remarriage is a very different experience, I am assuming, than marriage. I mean, you're bringing into it a lot more experience and different kinds of baggage. And kids, often.

And that's a whole new world than like if you're getting married as a childless couple in your 20s. or something. So yeah.

Shauna: Okay. So, when I'm trying to create content, when I'm speaking to the ideal client, I guess I get lost in between am I talking about divorce or am I talking about blended families? Or do I talk about both, and is that okay?

Allison: I think you could have a dropdown menu and one is divorce, like maybe your family and divorce. And the other is remarriage and your family or remarriage and your kids or something. I'm not coming up with a good one for that. but something that communicates both of those stages are the things that you specialize in.

Shauna: Okay.

Allison: Are most of your clients, when they are hearing the term blended families, this is one of those moments where I'm like do I know that phrase because I'm a therapist or is that a phrase in the ether that everybody knows?

Shauna: it's definitely a phrase in the ether. Like, there was even a movie, Blended, with Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore.

Allison: Well, you know if Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore are there, it's good.

Shauna: Yeah. it's hard to figure out the terminology because stepfamily, some people really like. Blended has its own issues. And yet, something I've been talking about is I also like nontraditional families. It doesn't have to be blended. It could be same sex marriages. Maybe they are not married, they are partnered, interracial relationships. Anything that's sort of sadly not considered mainstream, right?

Allison: Right. Right.

Shauna: And I've been trying to identify, I feel like nontraditional in air quotes is like kind of gross. Condescending in a way? Like oh, you're nontraditional. I've been trying to think, maybe modern family issues?

Allison: Hm, that feels like a deviation from the divorce, remarriage family struggle thing. so, I think you could still reach out to "nontraditional" families by having photos of them on your website and making sure they are represented. Versus it being kind of another niche. Because then it does feel like.... I know this feels like you're putting them in the category of people who are going to get divorced or something. Which we don't want to do.

Shauna: True. True. And somehow, they are finding me anyway. So, I guess the content that is on my page, maybe it's just the inclusive language.

Allison: Yeah. Yeah.

Shauna: But photos, I definitely need to add more. Okay.

Allison: I'm wondering about couple's therapists as good referral sources as well. And other child and adolescent therapists who might already be working individually with the child. But

they are recognizing that a lot of what's going on with the kid is some of the blended family stuff or the divorce stuff. If you're wanting to work on the family piece of that.

Shauna: Yes. Yes.

Allison: and family therapists, if you want more individual kid clients.

Shauna: I have done work with kid clients. And I really want to keep it focused going forward on just processing divorce and remarriage. I don't want the other. Kids.

Allison: So, but you like individual kid clients, if that's what they are going through? Okay, yeah.

Shauna: I do. Yeah. Ok, other child and adolescent therapists. And any kind of particular couple's therapists that you think? or just any other ones.

Allison: I think certainly discernment counselors, right?

Shauna: And I actually do discernment.

Allison: So, you speak the same language. And you can be like, I know, like sometimes at this stage it starting to show up with the kids. So, send them my way. So, discernment counselors, I mean, I think that, I don't know, I'm not a couple's therapist. But there's like a reasonable percentage of couples who go to couple's therapy and end up divorced. Right? I mean, often they are just coming really late, and there's just yeah. So, to that end it feels like, any couple's counselor is seeing a fair amount of that. So, I would definitely just spread your tentacles out to as many as you can find and be like hey, we could totally collaborate. Because you're both offering something to the family that it's hard to provide all as one provider. Or sometimes unethical, depending.

Shauna: Right. Right. So, I've also been, in addition to the mediators and attorneys and some therapists, I've been thinking about also reaching out to some of the midwife clinics here. there's a huge midwifery culture here in Minnesota. And they are much more involved in not that they counsel, but they are much more open for providing feedback. And I'm thinking of heading that route because they often would be seeing couples who maybe have "nontraditional."

Allison: Yeah.

Shauna: But I don't know if that's too much work...

Allison: That and that's something to consider. It might even be, if you have relationships with a few, reaching out to them. Or if they've worked with any of your clients that you've seen. Something like that. Additionally, pediatricians, child psychiatrists, because I can imagine a lot of families who are going through upheaval, whichever upheaval it is, their kid might be acting out. they don't know what to do, they are doing their best. So, they take the kid to try some medication. Maybe this is ADHD or why is she so defiant all of a sudden. And that way a good child psychiatrist is certainly going to know if there was a recent family change. And I would say a good pediatrician would, too. Mine always asks if anything has changed in the household.

Shauna: Right. Okay. Yeah, those are really good ideas. And then, as for the potentially, this is down the road, obviously this would be my career. It's not like overnight I'm going to develop my own type of therapy, right? But, as a starting block, obviously I need to get the clients. And I have my questionnaire to track progress before and after. Do you have any other insights in sort of launching this kind of initiative, as this I guess it's sort of a secondary, I mean, it would hopefully be a secondary income down the road if I could write a book or have a training program and other people could train. I don't know. just stuck on that aspect, because it feels overwhelming.

Allison: Well, what I think, what I would suggest is, and I've never done this, so this is just like me thinking through it with you, not me as an expert. I would think about it from the perspective of testing it out in all the different variations you could imagine in your mind. With as many clients as you can. And then, if you're wanting it to be an evidence-based treatment, then getting connected with the University that does studies, making sure in that process you have copyright and things like that. So that it can be yours and doesn't become property of the university. And then, yeah, I can imagine a book and then maybe travel training, or people coming to you for training. Or you training other people to train people over time. I think about this as a very long term, like you were saying, over the course of your career. I don't think it needs to be over the course of the next 30 years. But just because of the struggle with research and [unknown 22:09] and getting participants and all of that, I would expect 5-10 probably. But having it as manualized as you can. So that those studies, so it's ready to go once its at the study level.

Shauna: Yeah.

Allison: But yeah, like I said, I'm certainly no expert. And we'll have anybody who has done this, can we invite them to get in touch with you on your website at blended-families.com. As just kind of having kind of a mentor through that, I can imagine would be invaluable.

Shauna: Right.

Allison: Awesome. Well is there anything else that would be helpful for you today?

Shauna: I guess just thinking about any other marketing ideas. I have been debating starting a group or a workshop for blended families. And it just seems like, I know that there's a lot of struggles with that. just sort of wondering, any tips on that? I think you have an event coming up that's coming up focusing on groups.

Allison: Do I?

Shauna: I think its in August, or something far out.

Allison: I don't.

Shauna: Maybe it's from the past?

Allison: Oh yeah! It's from the past. It's actually in the training section. We have a training about how to market a group.

Shauna: So, I'll definitely look at that.

Allison: Yeah, look at that. and I'm trying to just think through the timing of like is the summertime better or worse for that? Just depending on your ideal client. For me, like an eating disorder group in the summer is a good thing. because people are not feeling bikini ready. And we have to convince them we are bikini ready all the time. Let's throw that thing on! But with busy families, especially blended families, we're talking about multiple kids often. It can be a lot of juggling. So, we've got that as a resource. I mean, you've had success from networking thus far. That's been the thing that's worked best. I would say blogging or vlogging could also be a really good way to not only bring in clients, but also start to establish yourself as an expert in this so that when you are writing your book or you're creating your training, there's a certain level of clout, I guess, is a little bit more fancy schmancy than I mean. But it legitimizes you a little bit more. Because you've got a lot of time having spoken about that.

Shauna: Okay. Well, I think that's about it!

Allison: Alright. Cool! Well I'm glad we got to talk! And definitely keep us updated in the party Facebook group so that we can troubleshoot and/or cheer you on!

Shauna: Sounds good! Thank you so much, Allison.

Allison: Sure. Take care.

Shauna: bye

Allison: Bye.

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