Reinvigorating Practice

One psychologist’s approach to building a niche

Many health professionals who have practiced for 30-plus years are focused on retirement. They cling to long-standing professional activities and avoid shifting gears.

And then there are psychologists like Sanford Portnoy, PhD, a private practitioner in Waban, Massachusetts. He infused new life into his practice of several decades by developing a fulfilling niche in divorce coaching.

Throughout his career, Portnoy has engaged in psychotherapy with adults and children. He has seen a variety of clients with a wide range of clinical disorders. As Portnoy started doing more work with couples, he became increasingly interested in issues related to marriage. Dr. Portnoy began to orient his professional pursuits more toward divorce work.

With a sizeable portion of his practice now devoted to helping couples divorce in a healthier fashion, he’s busier than ever. Meanwhile, he hasn’t abandoned his traditional roots in practice; Portnoy still does psychotherapy with clients. The successful shift toward non-clinical divorce coaching and consultation took a lot of hard work that included engaging in extensive research, cultivating mentors in the field, and taking steps to make himself visible to prospective clients and referral sources.

Dr. Portnoy immersed himself in studying steps in the divorce process and the effects of those steps on the individuals involved. He also explored the lawyer-client relationship and what transpires between lawyers and their divorcing clients. Interestingly, Portnoy found that, “Lawyers confront similar issues as psychologists do in working with clients going through a divorce.”

To further build his competence in this area, Portnoy took workshops and other courses and attended meetings of organizations with a focus on divorce. He used his interview skills to gain a wealth of information from attorneys about legal procedures. “I surrounded myself with lawyers, judges and others who served as mentors to me.”

In building his niche practice, Portnoy did not feel he had to become an expert in legal processes or have formal forensics training. Instead, he says, he really needed to understand the psychology of divorce and what people experience when going through a divorce.

Several years ago, Portnoy began sending a newsletter to psychologist colleagues reflecting the knowledge he was gaining. He provided information about divorce trends, stages of divorce and new research findings. Having gradually built up a database of lawyers, he now shares his newsletter with several hundred attorneys, most of them involved in family law.

Some of his divorce coaching work reflects the “collaborative law” movement, with its focus on shifting from litigation to collaboration between parties.

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Two lawyers and their clients are involved in a four-way process of consultation and negotiation. Dr. Portnoy becomes the fifth party to the process, serving as coach for the rest of the team. There’s no clinical assessment and diagnosis involved, and his work is not connected to third-party reimbursement. Clients generally pay at the end of each meeting.

In his own office practice, Portnoy works with individuals and couples to help them protect themselves and their children from the damage that can result from divorce and to help children remain fully functional. He works with parents on child development issues in the context of divorce. Portnoy also helps divorcing clients explore what role they want other family members to play in the lives of their children and what they would like to see happen when future partners appear.

Portnoy has found other applications for his expertise. He teaches lawyers how to spot signs of potential clinical disorders and how to successfully encourage clients to seek help from mental health professionals. Some clients, for example, may be too depressed to fill out the paperwork involved in divorce. “It’s important for lawyers to know what they can do to help individuals form a working alliance with them,” says Portnoy. As another example of skills development, Portnoy helps attorneys understand how providing structure such as a closed seating arrangement and guiding verbalizations can help make angry and demanding clients more focused and calm.

His growing recognition as an experienced divorce coach and consultant has created many opportunities for Portnoy to provide continuing education for mental health professionals as well lawyers. He has conducted workshops for health care providers on how to build a thriving divorce practice. His workshops at American Bar Association meetings, as well as state and local bar association functions, have helped attorneys effectively represent their clients by honing participants’ skills in managing client emotions. Portnoy has published books and several dozen articles based on his expertise.

“My work as a divorce coach is exciting and gratifying,” says Portnoy, who has found that coaching enhances his enjoyment of psychotherapy and assessment. Divorce coaching diversifies his practice while giving him a break from the clinical work he still enjoys doing.

Looking ahead, he sees a growing market for divorce coaching and consultation. “It’s fundamentally about maintaining relationships,” Portnoy observes. He expects that alternative models to litigation should help fuel demand for these services. “Psychologists can help people maintain their health by making divorce less litigious and confrontational.”