Helping families face difficult transitions

Practitioner Profile: Lauren Behrman, PhD

Back in the 1990s, Lauren Behrman, PhD, was facing a difficult challenge. In her late 30s and eager to start a family with her then-husband, she got pregnant repeatedly, only to have her hopes dashed. After eight miscarriages, she gave up on pregnancy, but not on parenthood.

“As I was living it, I recognized what a serious need there was for mental health services to help women and couples through this terribly challenging life experience,” says Behrman. “And I realized I had the skills and the wish to help others.”

Today Behrman has a thriving practice in Westchester County, N.Y., that specializes in helping individuals, couples and families navigate infertility, divorce, (and parenting after divorce,) raising special needs children, adoption and other difficult life transitions. She and colleagues have also created an institute to help psychologists at any stage of their career spot opportunities and shape diverse practices just as she has.

“One’s life can inform one’s practice, and one’s practice can inform one’s life,” says Behrman.

Helping families cope

Behrman traces her interest in joining the helping professions as far back as age five, when she began guiding a blind schoolmate through the hallways of their Queens elementary school.

Her first job was as a psychometrician in an early childhood development program for children with special needs. After earning a doctorate in clinical psychology from Long Island University in 1985 and a postdoctoral certificate in child, adolescent and family psychoanalytic psychotherapy from the Postgraduate Center in New York in 1990, Behrman served as a staff psychologist working with children and families at the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health and as a supervising psychologist at the Child Development Center at the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services.

Behrman began part-time independent practice in 1986 and launched her full-time private practice in 1994, specializing at first in treating children. Then her own experience and what she saw around her led her to develop an additional specialty: helping infertile women and couples.

“New York has a significant population of women who are spending their 20s and 30s developing their careers and believing they can have children whenever they’re ready,” says Behrman, who got her start in the field by leading support groups for the national infertility associations Resolve and the American Fertility Association. “They’ve been successful in almost everything they’ve tried to do, then find themselves unable to get pregnant.”

The result can be depression. “I help them grapple with the losses they’re facing,” says Behrman. She also uses mind/body approaches to help women overcome the anxiety that comes from being so focused on their menstrual cycles, the disappointment of finding out they’re not pregnant and the fear of pregnancy loss that can arise if they do manage to get pregnant. And she helps couples bolster relationships strained by infertility. Some just need help assessing their options, making decisions and navigating the enormous, complex business that infertility treatment has become.

“Infertility is a huge emotional minefield,” says Behrman. “I help people navigate their way around the mines.”

Behrman’s own struggle with infertility ended when she adopted three children. But that brought its own challenges. She was still working primarily with children and realized that her young patients were available to see her just when her own children needed her most. “I remember very vividly sitting on the floor playing a game with someone else’s child.
knowing my own children were on the other side of the door,” she says.

Her solution was to head to the annual APA Convention in search of a new niche that would allow her to practice between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. What grabbed her attention was a panel on alternative dispute resolution techniques in divorce. That niche not only met her practical needs but also felt like the perfect use of her skills.

“As psychologists, we have a diversified skill set including, but not limited to family systems, conflict resolution, child development, communications and problem-solving,” says Behrman, who had been treating many children of divorce in her practice. “I was very interested in the idea that you could help children by working hard with parents to make sure they kept their eye on being parents rather than getting caught up in conflict.”

Now Behrman is a collaborative divorce professional, family mediator and parent coordinator. Behrman explains that collaborative divorce professionals “look at divorce as a problem to be solved, not a battle to be fought. As part of that, couples recognize that divorce is not just a legal issue but has huge emotional and psychological implications.”

Working as part of multidisciplinary teams, Behrman may serve as a facilitator to move the process forward, a professional who helps individuals manage feelings that are getting in the way of a successful divorce negotiation or as a child specialist. After a divorce, she may be called in to help parents follow through on parenting plans and stay focused on their children.

Behrman is so enthusiastic about protecting children by changing the adversarial divorce culture that she helped start the New York Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, and served as the first co-president. She is also the first psychologist to serve on the board of the New York Association of Collaborative Professionals and now helps conduct multidisciplinary trainings. She even provided psychological input to an HBO documentary called Don’t Divorce Me: Kids’ Rules for Parents on Divorce that aired in 2012.

**Promoting entrepreneurialism**

Behrman’s own story shows that both infertility and divorce can lead to happy endings. She is now remarried to psychologist Jeffrey Zimmerman, PhD, and they have five children between them.

She and Zimmerman also work together on a project called The Practice Institute. Along with two colleagues, they help psychologists and other behavioral health practitioners build thriving practices. The institute’s trainings cover such topics as how to identify your skill set, interests and temperament, identify community-based opportunities and market your expertise to create a vibrant business.

“We are hoping to teach our colleagues how to look at their practices as small businesses and see themselves as entrepreneurs,” says Behrman.

One key message is diversification, and understanding that our skills are transferrable, says Behrman. Psychologists have so many skills, she says, and they can apply those skills far beyond the traditional realm of just diagnosing and treating psychological disorders. “Diversifying your practice and accessing the full potential of your skillset are critical for [building] a healthy practice that you can sustain over the long term.”

Behrman shares with early-career professionals her experience of transitioning her practice to operate outside the third-party reimbursement system. At first, managed care was a great way to build her practice. But as the cost of living went up, third-party fees either stayed the same or went down. The amount of hassle increased. And companies began requiring more and more confidential information. “If you reported that your patient was getting better, they would take away sessions; if you reported that your patient really needed treatment, they’d say you’re not making progress,” she remembers. “It was a lose/lose proposition.”

These days, all Behrman’s patients pay out-of-pocket. If someone can’t afford her fee, she is willing to consider adjusting it.

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New directions
Behrman’s personal life continues to suggest new avenues to explore in her professional life. Now 60, she experienced the death of her father a few years ago and started thinking about mortality. “I became acutely aware that people have beginnings, middles and ends to their lives,” she said.

As a result of that realization, she’s now contemplating a new direction for her practice: helping people write their memoirs. She’s considering taking a three-year postgraduate training program in writing with a psychological perspective offered by the Washington Institute of Psychoanalysis.

“People have amazing stories,” says Behrman, who also hopes to pen a memoir of her own someday. “If they don’t get those stories out in time, they may be lost.”

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Bourdeau also gives lectures to a variety of professionals, including physicians, dieticians, other health care providers and patients. She’s also happy to consult with physicians when they have questions. And when they send patients her way, she tells them what she’s working on so that the physicians can reinforce the message in their own offices and even use some of the same language when they talk to children and their families.

Promoting psychology
Bourdeau isn’t just an advocate for psychology at work. As APA’s Public Education Campaign coordinator for Oklahoma, she’s eager to spread the word about psychology’s value. She blogs on APA’s Your Mind Your Body blog. She tweets under the name @DrTeriB. And she gives lectures on psychology topics “all over town,” she says, citing talks at the local Y and the diabetes organization JDRF as just two examples.

Bourdeau is also active within the psychology community in Oklahoma. In September, she was appointed by Governor Mary Fallin as a member of the Oklahoma State Board of Examiners of Psychology, which oversees licensure and ethics issues. Last year, as president of the Oklahoma Psychological Association, she worked to increase membership and awareness of what APA, the APA Practice Organization and the state, provincial and territorial psychological associations have to offer.

Bourdeau also represents Oklahoma psychologists as a member of the Medical Advisory Committee (MAC) for the Oklahoma Health Care Authority, the state’s Medicaid agency. “This involves a great deal of advocacy for adequate coverage of psychological services,” she says. During her time as a member of the MAC, psychologists were given approval to bill for health and behavior codes for Medicaid patients under the age of 18.

Even when Bourdeau isn’t officially on duty, she’s still working to promote psychology. In May, for example, she joined a medical mission to Nicaragua. Although her role was more group facilitation with the participants, she found herself called upon to help physicians from all over the United States with such tasks as breaking bad news to patients and helping others cope with medical conditions.

“It was a great way to train medical providers about the value of psychology,” she says.

Bourdeau, a native Oklahoman, doesn’t even stop when she gets home. She has been teaching her husband Jim, a nephrologist with whom she has three adult children, how to give his patients the support they need to adhere to their dialysis regimens. She laughs as she says, “I’m really proud when he comes home and tells me he did psychonephrology.”