n 2008, Mitchell Greene, PhD, took a risk that paid off: launching a sport psychology practice in Haverford, Pennsylvania, to fuel a longtime passion for sports. Today, about 80% of his clientele at Greenepsych are either athletes, coaches or both. His work includes speaking engagements and consulting gigs, and his income is about 15% higher than it was when he practiced traditional clinical psychology.

Last year, Greene took another leap: adding holistic services, such as yoga and mindfulness, to his practice.

“`The word ‘wellness’ kept floating through my mind, and I thought, ‘Why not have someone in my practice who could integrate holistic services into what I’m already doing?’” he says. While the thought was inconceivable to him five years ago, “now these modalities seem to fit under my umbrella,” he says. His practice now includes a yoga instructor and mindfulness coach, as well as a psychology doctoral student with a master’s degree in kinesiology and training in mindfulness techniques.
Greene is among a growing number of psychologists who are beginning to incorporate such services into their practices. Conceptually, the move makes sense—after all, integrating mind and body is a key tenet of psychological health. But you need adequate planning; a good understanding of the legal, ethical and regulatory issues involved; the right people and sufficient capital to achieve success.

As a veteran consultant to psychologists interested in launching a niche practice, Jeff Zimmerman, PhD, ABPP, has seen his share of new-business successes and snafus, especially when they involve an idealistic concept like a wellness practice. “What tends to happen is that [interested providers] get to know each other and say, ‘Wow, this is a great idea. Let’s do it,’” he says. “However, they don’t really think through the possible ways it could go wrong.”

To avoid potential pitfalls and to reap the benefits of running your own wellness practice, consider these tips from practice consultants and seasoned practice owners.

Consult with the right experts. First, meet with an attorney who is versed in your state’s corporate statutes and mental health laws. An attorney can help determine whether your state allows you to pursue the kind of practice you have in mind, says Connie Galietti, JD, APA’s director of legal and professional affairs. Several states, for example, only allow psychologists to co-own a practice or incorporate with other mental health professionals. In Alabama, for instance, professional corporations can be organized “only for the purpose of rendering professional services ... within a single profession.” Other states are more lenient but have varying stipulations, she says.

Even if your state allows you to include other practitioners as part of your business, “consider starting with a less formal collaboration,” Galietti adds. This will help to ensure that all parties are comfortable with your practice and partnership plans before you formalize a business relationship.

Once you are clear what’s allowed in your state, consider meeting with an experienced practice consultant who understands the mental health field and the nature of your potential business, Zimmerman notes. A consultant can help you develop your practice vision and strategy, he says, including your business model, record-keeping and management, billing, ideal partners, structure for decision-making and governance, and how you will fund your enterprise.

“You need to work with someone who can help you do the planning on the front end—who can help you figure out the basis of your relationship as potential business partners and the principles and practices you’ll follow,” he says.

Over time, these professionals can help you grow and refine the concept of your organization clinically, administratively and financially, Zimmerman adds. Consultants can help you consider future contingencies—for example, determining staff benefits, or how to handle payment if one partner makes considerably more or less than others—and be on call if problems or questions emerge. For further help in some of these areas, visit Apaservices.org, which includes information on alternative practice models, practice management, marketing, financial management and more.

Choose a role and a structure that you (and others) are comfortable with. Do you want to be the leader of your practice or a co-owner? Have a full-time staff, hire independent contractors or both? Be a sole proprietor, a general partner, a corporation, an independent practice organization or something else? Address all of these questions in the beginning, advisers say. (See the APA article, “Choosing the Best Legal Structure for Your Practice,” at on.apa.org/practice-legal-structure for more on this topic.)

Greene has developed a system that works well for him. He is full owner of Greenepsych, employing independent contractors who receive a percentage of what they bring in without paying rent. He also meets monthly with a billing manager who keeps track of client payments and follows up as necessary.

Andrew Tatarsky, PhD, founder and owner of the Center for Optimal Living, an addiction treatment center and professional corporation in New York, employs a mix of salaried providers and independent contractors, including 11 psychotherapists, a Chinese medicine practitioner and practitioners versed in yoga and meditation.
With advance planning, a strong vision and input from others, a wellness-oriented practice can be a meaningful new direction for some psychologists.

The Practice Institute, a behavioral health consulting firm. Your practice may be liable for the actions of others and your reputation may suffer as a result.

Choose your colleagues carefully. While credentialing is standardized for psychology, that is not the case for complementary and alternative practitioners: Some are licensed, some are certified and some are neither. As a result, choose providers in these domains carefully, advises Pauline Wallin, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, and co-founder with Zimmerman of The Practice Institute, a behavioral health consulting firm. Your practice may be liable for the actions of others and your reputation may suffer as a result. "If you have a practitioner who’s doing some really fringe stuff—that is not well supported by evidence but is being popularized by some celebrity—things can go bad really quickly," she says. An extreme example is a 10-year-old girl who died in 2000 after being smothered during a "rebirthing," a dubious treatment for attachment disorder.

"You want to make sure that the people you’re working with are well respected by their peers," she says, "because they’ll be part of the face that your practice presents." Also important? Getting your attorney’s input on issues related to informed consent and privacy, Wallin says. For example, ask holistic practitioners to create and use their own informed consent forms that do not implicate you in the effects of their treatments. In addition, make sure that the other practitioners will not create issues or liability for you under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) privacy or security rules—something your attorney can help to address. Another good move is consulting with your malpractice insurance provider to make sure your policy applies to services beyond psychology, as well as to contractors or employees who may not be licensed, Galietti advises.

More generally, choose your staff with the health of the whole organization in mind, Tatarsky says. "If the team isn’t really working together—if the chemistry isn’t right, the communication isn’t right, the culture isn’t one that everybody feels a part of—that becomes a real problem," he says. "So, it’s important to be really clear about your vision and the people that you invite to be part of it." In fact, colleague dynamics are another reason to consider practicing together informally for a while before creating a combined legal entity, Galietti notes.

Manage your time wisely. As Tatarsky’s business has grown, techniques like these have made a huge difference in his ability to manage his workload, he says. "I’ve put a lot of attention into goal-setting, limit-setting, self-care, being able to say no, being able to delegate—to really manage myself in the midst of growing interest and success and growth," he says. He also meets regularly with leaders of similar businesses in order to tap their expertise and experience.

Target your marketing. Gear your marketing efforts toward potential clients who are already inclined toward integrative approaches, Wallin suggests. "Rather than trying to convince the general population that these services are good for them," she says, "target your promotion, marketing and messaging to people who are already invested in wellness." For example, tap owners of health food stores, members of gyms and physicians who see patients who might be interested in these services. "Such people already appreciate the value of wellness, and are more likely to pay for professional wellness services," she says.

College students are a big part of Tatarsky’s practice because there’s an abundance of colleges and universities in New York, and students tend to be interested in integrative approaches and many have insurance that pays for addiction-related services. As a result, he has developed a referral network with New York University, The New School and other area institutions, which also serve as training pipelines for his center, he says.

Meanwhile, Greene chose the greater Philadelphia area because of its access to college-prep schools. "There are a lot of high schools in the area and a lot of competitive parents with competitive kids who are aiming for college scholarships," he says. "It’s a prime location to do the kind of work that I do." As he launches the wellness aspects of his practice, he’s finding that athletes enjoy adding them to their therapy and coaching work, thanks to their physical nature.