

The Business of Therapy

By R. R. Hixson

My granddaughter has a book that tells the story of the three little pigs. This classic tale is more than just a cute story; it is an anecdote that can teach us big people about our need to build a strong foundation in life. As the story teaches us, the wind can blow down a house made out of straw, sand or cards. But a house made out of a solid foundation, a reinforced structure, can become a haven for a family or a business. Therapy may look like a house made of magical cards to some outsiders. But therapy works; it changes lives, it saves lives, and the cost of therapy is pittance compared to the costs associated with the devastating effects of untreated mental illness—such as a mother stoning or drowning her children because “God told her to do it.”

There are many approaches to building a new house or a business, and they can be arduous, demanding and expensive. Few are cheap. While you build a new house you are thrilled with the exciting feeling of ownership. When your new house is finally completed, you may yell, jump up and down, or even do somersaults in celebration. Then you move into your dream house and you get to know a little about the structure. You may find the house groaning at times. Its windows may leak during a thunderstorm, or the roof may get damaged by high winds. The sewer could back-up. Suddenly, due to these early surprises and problems, your new house begins to look, sound, and smell like a monster, and sticky doubt creeps in that maybe you shouldn't have built it in the first place. This doubt could cause indigestion and muscle aches, even headaches. Every time you pay your mortgage, you feel your hand and arm getting weak.

You will always remember that special excitement down deep in your bones when you entered your first office and hung up your license. Perhaps you bought a special desk, or maybe your significant other helped you pick out your furniture. You were so proud of the new practice you started, and everything seemed to be good with the world. Then you waited for the phones to ring, but only silence answered. You opened the front door and the parking lot was empty, or people were getting out of their cars and entering other offices. A sinking feeling began to tear back your flesh. You signed a lease, you invested in furniture and office equipment, you even had tons of business cards printed along with stationary and envelopes. It was a beautiful day, others had told you that your services were greatly needed in your community, but still there were no patients for you. An empty appointment book, a silent phone, and a growing stack of bills began to stare you down. Those free presentations to different church and social groups seemed to be received well, but there were still no patients today. You felt the urge to run out the door and give every person on the street your business card, or visit every doctor's office in 10 or 15 square miles, but you felt held back by the silent phone. You were wise enough to buy a phone with an answering service, but you had no one to greet people who might walk in. You began to question your decision to set up your own practice of therapy. Fixing your house would have been easier and cheaper, but by that time you didn't have the money to do either.

This column is not about buying or investing in real estate; this column will focus on the business of therapy, though many people don't want to consider the details of the business side of therapy. My attempt in writing this column is to challenge my readers to

seek a greater awareness of the business issues of a psychotherapy practice, whether these readers work for a hospital or in a group, or if they are in private practice. I write this column with the hope that it may raise the consciousness of therapists about the seriousness of understanding the many costs of setting up an office, including issues such as non-compliance with federal or state laws and regulations. It is my hope that when more therapists become educated on the business aspects of psychotherapy, more active in the political process in an effort to educate those who write laws that affect our practices and our bank accounts.

None of us really knows everything about the business of therapy. But perhaps by starting to initiate a dialogue with this column, a new platform can be built to encourage change and activism in our chosen field. Change in the curriculum of mental health graduate programs. Change in how we develop working relationships to support the need for expense infrastructure. And challenging more active participation in the political system so our legislatures might have the opportunity to learn of our value in their communities. If nothing else, this field of therapy, which includes disciplines from psychiatry, psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy, professional counseling, and nursing, is *OUR* business, it is *OUR* life, and we need to value *OUR* role in *OUR* communities more. Because we are worth it.

If you have a question or issue that you would like to read about in this column, don't hesitate to e-mail me with that issue or question. If there is an overwhelming response, there may not be enough column space available to address each issue I receive. However, I will give you be a response, even if it's in the form of a reply to your e-mail. I promise.

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About the Author

Ronald Hixson has been a therapist for over 25 years, serving both military and civilian communities. He has a Texas corporation private practice and has founded a non-profit group mental health organization where he serves as President/Executive Director. La Familia Counseling Centers was formed to meet the mental health needs of rural South Texas. Currently the group services six counties with its headquarters in San Antonio. Hixson has a PhD in Health Administration from Kennedy-Western University, a MBA from Webster University, a graduate degree from University of Northern Colorado in Psychology, and a second graduate degree in Organizational Communications from the University of California (Sacramento).