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HOW'D YOU GET THAT JOB?

Therapists Without Couches: Apps Broaden Client Pools

Talkspace counselor Alicia Winkle shows how tech is opening new avenues for practice in traditional fields; 'it can be a lot more supportive than just one hour a week in the office'

By Lauren Weber

May 6, 2019 2:30 p.m. ET

Alicia Winkle is the epitome of the modern psychotherapist: She has a traditional therapy practice where she sees local patients at her office in Madison, Ala.—as well as a virtual one where she can serve clients from all over Alabama, where she has her license.

ALICIA WINKLE

- Age: 31
- Where: Madison, Ala.
- Company: Pearl Behavioral Health Services, owner; Talkspace, director of provider training and orientation
- Time in job: 4 years in August
- Education: BS, psychology, and MA, community counseling, University of North Alabama
- Key skills: Licensed professional counselor; board certified telemental health provider
- Salary: \$54,400 median, according to government statistics

Mental-health services today can be just a text message away, with thousands of people currently receiving

psychotherapy services every month via text or video chat through Talkspace, one of a crop of apps that match clients with licensed therapists for everything from marriage counseling to help with anxiety and major depressive disorder.

The app has given the 31-year-old access to a pool of potential clients she says she wouldn't have if she saw clients only in-person as well as the ability to help during a crisis in real time.

Here's Ms. Winkle's story, edited and condensed from a recent interview.

Why did you decide to become a therapist?

I went to college determined to be a nurse practitioner, but I started having severe anxiety. I had to drop out. I'd seen someone have a panic attack and I'd thought, 'Oh goodness, she's really overdoing it, she needs to calm down.' Then it happened to me and I understood the torment it was. I went to therapy. I got some specialized treatment. After that, I felt like I could relate to people on a different level. Once I got a better handle on my panic attacks, I returned to school and switched to studying psychology.

What was your first job out of college?

My best friend lives in Orlando, Fla., and her roommate was [on a military deployment] so she asked me to come and live with her. I did in-home sales for Sears, selling countertops, new cabinets, HVAC. I'd get appointments every morning, take my computer and go out and do my pitch. I was making really good money, but I was miserable because I wasn't helping anyone.

I applied for any job I could find in the mental-health field. I ended up working as a live-in counselor at a boarding school in Siler City, N.C., for adolescent girls with mental-health issues.

What did you learn from that job?

It was life-changing. I was very humbled by it. One of the girls cursed me out one day and said that I didn't respect her and that until I showed them respect, I couldn't ever reach them. I realized she was right. I was trying to hold boundaries, when in reality I was missing the point. It wasn't always about the rules and regulations. They needed to connect with me.

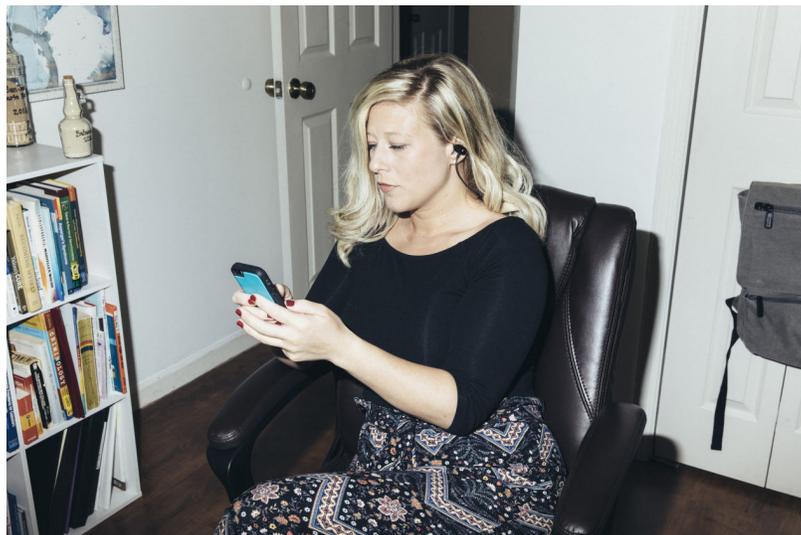
What's your career path been since then?

I came back to Alabama for my master's degree for the in-state tuition and to be closer to my family. To get my license, I needed to do 3,000 hours of clinical work. I didn't sleep a lot during that period. I worked with registered sex offenders, did screening at the emergency room of a local hospital. Later I worked in a day-treatment center for adults with serious mental illness, like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and I did school-based counseling in city and county schools.

In 2015, I was really wanting to open a private practice and my boss at the time sent me a link. She said, 'It looks like you could do this.' I clicked on it and it was Talkspace. I hadn't heard of it.

My first impression was, ‘Can I even do this with my license?’ I filled out the contact form and thought I’d just be getting more information, but I was actually applying and didn’t know it.

Now I have a private practice here in Madison, where I see clients on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. And every day, I do Talkspace, and I can respond to messages from the park or my patio, or while I’m traveling. I’ve had anywhere from five clients to 36 or 37. [Talkspace requires therapists to write back to clients one to two times a day.]



When Ms. Winkle was looking for a job that better fit her education, she ‘applied for any job I could find in the mental-health field.’ PHOTO: WES FRAZER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

What was it like at first to deliver therapy this way?

I was very robotic. It’s a learning curve even for a seasoned clinician. Then I started typing the way I talk. I’d literally sit there and ask myself, ‘Alicia, what would you say if this was face to face?’ And then I’d start typing.

We do live video sessions, sometimes I do voice-to-text, sometimes I type, and sometimes I send recorded audio texts or video messages so they can hear or see me. With a single client, I might use all of those modes.

What are some differences between in-person therapy and text or video therapy?

I can connect with clients more in the moment in regards to where they are. If a client is having an anxiety attack, I can see everything they were thinking and go back and process with them. I can give them some tools they might use to get to sleep that night. It can be a lot more supportive than just one hour a week in the office.

How do you connect emotionally with clients over text or video?



On nice days, Ms. Winkle works with her clients from the Talkspace app from her deck. PHOTO: WES FRAZER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

If someone comes into the office, they're usually referred to me by someone so there's already trust. On text and video, when they weren't necessarily referred to me, there's a gap in trust. You just have to be present. It sometimes takes a little longer on the platform, but also people are willing to share because they feel there's a barrier, they can say whatever they want, and they're not embarrassed.

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