

Ashneeta Prasad, Clinical Psychology Registrar - Transcript

Denise: Today I'm talking to Ashneeta Prasad. She's a clinical registrar at the Southside Health and Wellbeing clinic. She graduated from UNSW, her Masters in Clinical Psychology and PhD. Hi Ashneeta, thanks for being here.

Ashneeta: Hi Denise, thanks for having me.

Denise: So, can you tell me what does it mean to be a Clinical Registrar? What do you do?

Ashneeta: So, in a Clinical Registrar is someone who has completed their masters and then has gained entry into the Clinical Registrar program. So right now, I'm working as a registered psychologist under the supervision of a senior clinical psychologist who is board approved. So, I will have to complete two years of supervised training under their guidance and then I can then be considered a clinical psychologist that's endorsed by the board.

Denise: Excellent, ok, great. So, you need two years of this before you can practise independently, is that right?

Ashneeta: Yes, that's correct, so I'm still a registered psychologist, but because I want to do that specialization as a clinical psychologist, then there's certain requirements that we need to follow in terms of supervision and professional development as well.

Denise: So, when you're at the clinical registrar stage, do you have a chance or an opportunity to specialise in a certain type of clinical psychology, or are you doing basically everything and being supervised across the board?

Ashneeta: It really just depends on your preferences. So, for me I'm really interested in complex trauma, which is considered a specialization or a type of therapy or type of population to work with, but it's still quite broad. So, I may work with clients who have other kinds of presentations as well, but maybe their main presenting problem is complex trauma. But at this stage, most people will tend to practise quite widely and start to figure out what they like and also what they don't like, and then kind of hone their skills as they go along their program.

Denise: So, did you get this role as a result of your Masters? Is this something that your Masters help set you up with when you graduated?

Ashneeta: Yes, that's correct. So, in order to be a registered psychologist you need to have completed the Masters program for the particular pathway that I'm following, so that's the postgraduate route. And so once I had started wrapping up my final placement, I was a registered psychologist, but I needed to find a registrar program. And I actually found this role through some of my connections at UNSW and through some of the mentors that I had, so I was really fortunate.

Denise: Can you describe a little bit of what it's really like day-to-day to be doing this kind of work?

Ashneeta: Yeah, it's a really interesting transition to go from placement student to actual practicing psychologist. It's really nice to finally, you know, I guess, get paid for my time, but it also is quite daunting when you first begin just because you are now getting paid for your time. So, you'd be hoping that you're doing good quality work and I think there's a little bit of – probably a lot of – impostor

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syndrome, and that never really goes away. But in terms of the day to day processes, there would be things like supervision meetings with my senior supervisors as well as peer supervision. So that's case consultation with people who are at similar points in their career as me and also working with clients. So, depending on the presentation and the type of therapy that you're doing, generally I'll have an initial assessment with someone that will take around an hour and a half, and then subsequent weekly sessions or fortnightly sessions that take around 50 to 60 minutes, depending on what comes up.

Denise: So being in this stage now, where you actually get to work with real people and get paid to do a real job, is there anything that surprises you about the work? Something that you didn't expect as you were going through your training?

Ashneeta: Um, I think the admin is probably the bane of my existence, but I feel like a lot of people in the healthcare profession will agree with that perspective. I think what has really dawned on me over the last maybe 6 to 8 months after beginning this role is the sheer responsibility that I hold and the power differential. So, I think by the time you get through your masters and through your placements, you get to meet a lot of wonderful people, you get to work with lots of wonderful clients, but you always sort of have this psychological safety that your supervisor has got your back. You know, if you don't know something, you can go to them and that's still very much the case for me. I'm really lucky to be in a lovely workplace, but there's still a sense of like, ooh, you gotta make sure that you get this right because for a lot of my clients actually I'm the first psychologist I've ever seen, so I take that responsibility really seriously because I want to set a good kind of precedence for them. So yeah, I think the professional responsibility is probably something that I didn't really consider as much when I was doing my placements because at the time I was like I just want to get through this, learn as much as I can and now, I think my focus is a lot broader in terms of the profession, what it means to be a psychologist and how to do that responsibly.

Denise: It sounds like you've come into feeling more of the pressure of the role because it's more, um, it's more real now, right? So how do you manage for yourself working in such a high-pressure roll? Something where the stakes are quite high for the people you're working with?

Ashneeta: Yeah, it's been a learning journey for me, definitely. I think that one of the most important things is really good supervision. So, prior to getting this role, I was really mindful of the kind of supervisor that I would like the kind of workplace culture that I want to be in as well, and I am really, really fortunate that I was recommended this position by a friend of mine who had really lovely things to say, and I did my own research and I think because of that, when I do feel you know, like if I'm feeling burnt out or overwhelmed, I know that I can speak to my supervisors and my colleagues and let them know like, hey, I can't take new referrals this week or I'm taking leave this week because I need a bit of a break and there's no judgment or criticism. There's always like yes, of course, like you do what you need to do to look after yourself and I will admit that after postgrad, there is a bit of a learning curve of figuring out how to be a human again and finding things that you enjoy and keep yourself, you know, happy and occupied and you're not just like slaving over papers or trying to get reports done, so it's a good time actually to learn what works for you, what doesn't work for you when it comes to that self-care and managing burnout.

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Denise: I imagine that's a perk of working for a mental health organization – that people working there would be very aware that their employees also take care of their mental health.

Ashneeta: Yeah, I think surprisingly, unfortunately, some places haven't always taken that approach. I think the other thing that I've sort of come to reckon with going into the profession is recognizing that it's also a business and like there are also corporations that are trying to make money, and so that's why for me it was really important to find a place where my values aligned with the workplace culture and vice versa. So, there is that support. But generally, it's a good idea to be able to manage your boundaries and manage your burnout. And when you can't do that, having a team behind you makes it really, really helpful.

Denise: Yeah, absolutely. I'm curious to know more about what it was like going through the Masters of Clinical Psychology. What was the training like? What was the experience like?

Ashneeta: So, in terms of just logistics of how the program was structured when I completed it, there were three components. I did the combined program, so there's the research component, the coursework, and then the clinical placements. And I remember at the time finding it very stressful and draining, and then I look back at it and I'm really, really thankful for my experiences and how, while it was really intense, I think I'm a better clinician for it and I see it in really subtle ways now when I practice. And I remember the clinic director back then, Chen, was saying to me, 'I know it's hard now, but you will thank me once you're out and you're practicing.' And I think just hit me like a few weeks ago I did something and I arrived at this conclusion and my supervisor asked, 'oh, that's yeah, that's what I would have done. How did you get there,' and then I walked her through my process and realized, oh, these are things that I used to find really tedious when I was first learning them and now it makes a lot of a lot of sense to do it that way. So, I think it's a very intense time, but in terms of my experience with the UNSW Clinical Program, I think it was one of the best places for me to get that foundational learning, and it's good to learn the rules before you then learn how to break them. If you spoke to me like in 2018 and you showed me this video, I'd probably be like 'what is she talking about? I'm so stressed I'm so sleep deprived,' but yeah, now that I'm through it I can look back and be grateful for my experience is.

Denise: Yeah, that sounds like it was intense and difficult, but worth it.

Ashneeta: Yeah, definitely.

Denise: Well that's good. I'm glad you had a good experience in the end. I think a lot of students who are studying psychology consider clinical psychology as a possible pathway, but it is a very specific role and it requires you know specific kinds of skills or personality traits even. What kind of person do you think would really enjoy and do well through the Masters of Clinical Psych and into the kind of work you're doing now?

Ashneeta: That's a really good question. I think one that I wish I probably would have spent a bit more time pondering when making a conscious decision to enter the field. In my experience, and you know, from speaking to my friends and colleagues, I think especially at the training level being open to learning and open to feedback. I think psychology is a very unique profession in that you don't actually have any specific, like concrete tools, like you're not buying equipment, you're not measuring stuff that tangibly.

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A lot of the skills that you learn in your masters are like soft skills, interpersonal skills, and with any skill it takes practice, it takes refining, it takes feedback. And I remember from when we first started our program, Chen, the clinic director at the time, was saying, you know, it can be hard to get feedback because these are all traits that we've probably you know, prided ourselves on. Like, oh I'm this caring, warm, enthusiastic person, like I want to help people. And then you have a supervisor saying, you know, I can see why you did that, but for this client, given where they're at, you know it would probably would have been better to like sit back and wait for them to say something instead of trying to like, cheer them up. And so that process of remaining teachable and open to feedback, I think is probably one of the most important skills or traits to have going into the program. And also, I guess learning to sit in the uncertainty of not knowing what you're doing and I guess embracing the idea that you may not always, you may not fully know anything ever again, and that's OK. I used to think, I was like, oh, God, like I hope by the time I graduate I would be like really confident, competent psychologist. And I definitely think you know I've got skills, but me, knowing that I don't know everything motivates me to seek out more training to learn from other people that have got more experience. So, I'd say yeah, grit, resilience remain teachable, and having a good support network, whatever that looks like for you, would be really important things to take into the program.

Denise: Thank you Ashneeta. I think that's really helpful. It makes perfect sense and it's not something I would have considered – that that need to have an openness for feedback. But yeah, I can see how that would be extremely important. I'd also like to know a little bit about what it was like doing a PhD. So did you do the combined Masters PhD degree? What was that like? That must have added even more of this intensity for you.

Ashneeta: Yes, it was a very, very intense time. Now again, I guess I can say this with like the benefit of hindsight, I think my research informs my clinical practice and my clinical practice informed my research. So really, a nice way to experience that scientist-practitioner model that we talk about. But it was definitely challenging and I remember when I first started placements, I found it really challenging to kind of balance, well, OK, I've got to do this analysis and you know, write up this manuscript or get in this grant, and I have these really tricky clients who have these really complex needs, and how do I allocate my time? Where do I triage my energy and my effort? So that is a learning process and I was fortunate enough to have really great supervisors in the clinical program who kind of helped me split up my time a bit more effectively, which I think are skills that we're not really taught how to do when it comes to working with clinical clients. I think maybe in undergrad we'll learn about how to manage our time to get assignments done to manage personalities maybe in a group assignment context, but it's a whole other kind of skill when you're working with clients. So yeah, it was challenging, but again with hindsight, beneficial for both my research hat and my clinical hat.

Denise: Yeah, and I would also imagine that it's helpful for your current professional hat in the sense that balancing those different needs at that time was practice for balancing the kinds of needs you would have now. Because as I understood you describing the registrar experience, you're working with clients, but you're also working with colleagues. You're also still getting support and discussing things and doing multiple different things in your role.

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Ashneeta: Yeah, definitely. I think the role of a psychologist is quite diverse and so even though clinical psychology may be a specialization within that sub-specialization, there's so much variety and so many things you have to kind of keep in mind. So, professional development, supervision, peer supervision, and if you want to be contributing to the field in different ways, whether that's presenting at conferences, writing up papers, holding workshops, all that kind of stuff. So, I definitely think the Masters is a good training ground, learning how to maybe drop some of those perfectionistic habits that we may pick up along the way or at least know how to manage them a little bit better. One of the most liberating messages I ever received from the supervisor was 'sometimes good enough is just good enough.' Like, we don't need to have the most specific session plan or the most beautiful outline, like sometimes we need to just do what we need to do to get by and in hindsight I look back and some of the most profound moments I've had with clients come, you know, both for myself and for them, telling me later on like 'that was a really important moment for me in therapy,' those are the sessions that I didn't necessarily have a really detailed outline. I was just present and kind of trusting myself and trusting the process, and I think the Masters program gives you a lot of practice learning how to trust yourself.

Denise: Thank you for that. That's really insightful. There are so many different areas that you might choose to specialize in within clinical psychology, right? Like you've mentioned you're working with trauma of some kind, yeah? At what point along the way in your studies or in your practice do you start to determine what kind of focus you might have? Do you need to know early on? Is it something you figure out later?

Ashneeta: Yeah, that's a really good question and one I'm still grappling with. So I would say that at the moment my focus or my interest kind of lean towards complex trauma and the clinic that I sought out a lot of the clinicians, including the clinic director all practise within that space. So it's been a really nice fit for me because I'm getting to learn different approaches to trauma and kind of learning from so many people with so much experience. At the same time, there was never any pressure from anyone that I received that was like 'you need to have a specialization.' I think sometimes with research that may be a bit more applicable, where you know if you want to do a postdoc after your PhD, then there's certain kinds of things you need to do to line that up, whereas with the registrar program the beauty of it is that while you're a registered psychologist, you're still figuring out under that clinical umbrella what interests you. In terms of how I found that I was kind of drawn to this area of work was I found those to be some of the most rewarding and intuitive sessions that I had. And so, when I did my final external placement and we were putting selections down for that, I had a meeting with the clinic director who's also, our placement coordinator, and we were talking about tailoring our preferences to what we had hoped to do after our program. And I had said like I'd like quite a challenging one and one that specializes in this area, just so that I can see whether I can do it or not. It depends on the program and the specialization, but with something like complex trauma, even if you really want to work in it, your temperament or your approach to therapy may not fit with it. So, it was really important for me to really make use of the intense supervision that we do get in Masters, to have people who have got a lot more experience than me watch me practise and then for them to be able to be like, yeah, I think you can do this work. And then it gave me the push to then apply for the role that I'm in now. Whereas had I received feedback

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like, oh, you know there's some things you probably to work on if you want to work in this space, and I would have maybe taken a different option as well.

Denise: OK yeah, that's helpful to know. So, it sounds like there isn't one specific point in the path where everyone needs to choose something.

Ashneeta: No, I mean not in my experience at least. And the other thing is a lot of our work is intertwined. So just because, say at the moment I'm focusing on complex trauma, doesn't necessarily mean that 5-6 years from now I may switch to something else, or I might naturally gravitate to a different area. For example, I have lots of colleagues who initially started out in eating disorders because that's what they were really drawn to. And then they kept working with eating disorder clients, noticing, oh like you know, eating disorders and trauma kind of coexist. They feed into each other sometimes. Maybe I need to learn a bit more about trauma to work more effectively in this eating disorder space, and then that kind of lead them down the complex trauma road. So, there's a lot of overlap and the beauty is that you can move flexibly between them. And the professional development side of your registrar program builds that into your training. In that you need to hit a certain amount of hours so you can get that broad experience quite early on.

Denise: Asheeta, when in your study life did you decide that you definitely wanted to go into the Masters and PhD of Clinical Psychology and to pursue this kind of work?

Ashneeta: Really great question. We were chatting about this before and I think I probably almost kind of got into the program, thinking, oh yep, you'll do a bachelors and honours and you'll be a psychologist. And I remember sitting in a capstone subject in my third year and they had someone who did her Masters Clinical at UNSW and was working at the careers coordinating unit, they have. And she was like, yep, so pathways to becoming a psychologist, generally, entry level is a Masters degree. And I remember sitting there with my friend, I was like, I have to do a masters? What? Oh ok. And then I think at that point I was like, well, I'm here I may as well try and see if I can do it. If I can't, then we'll like cross that bridge when we get to it, but don't count yourself out. And I think probably my naivete of not knowing how competitive it was helped me because I was like, yeah, I want to help people. Let's see how hard this is. And then like it dawned on me as it got closer and closer. I was like, oh well, lots of people apply.... Oh, there's only so many spots.... But I think that when I realized it was part of how to get to where I wanted to go, it almost felt like, well, I'm going to do it one way or another. So, I might take a more direct route. I might take a more scenic route, but that end point is where I want to be. So, let's work backwards from that, and thankfully now there's a lot more options to get into the profession, which is so comforting to for me to see sometimes because I remember being back there where, for example, when I applied the UTS program didn't exist. There were fewer spots available in the state. They didn't have the 5 + 1 program available either, so it was really like 4 + 2, do your honours, do a supervision or get into Masters. Those were the two. Whereas, now there's a lot more options if that's where someone wants to go.

Denise: Yeah, you're totally right that it's surprisingly competitive. I was unaware of how competitive the field was as well. If you could put yourself back mentally and also emotionally into that sort of process of being an undergrad and then during your honours and Masters and all of that, and at the

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point right now, where you've gone through that and you're in your registrar and you're happy to be where you are.... Could you give any advice to students who are at the beginning of that process, from your perspective now?

Ashneeta: I think my mind goes to two places, so I have like practical advice and then I have more like broader philosophical advice. So, in terms of practical advice, definitely try and get experience wherever you can, because unlike other health professions, psychology undergrad program doesn't build in work experience, so we don't have placements and things like that. Which is understandable given in terms of the ethical considerations, you want to make sure that if you are working with quite vulnerable people at times, that the candidates that are best suited to do that roll are doing that role and vice versa. So, where you can get experience definitely try and build it into your own CV. So, when I was in my second year of undergraduate, that's when I started applying for RA [Research Assistant] positions because I knew I wanted to clinical or like I was interested in clinical, still sort of on the fence about it. I applied for a clinical research lab, so this was a research lab that was working with families and refining treatments for them. So, I got to see both the research side of things as well as the clinical side of things and that definitely really helped me get a better sense of what I was in for, whether it was something I'd be interested in. And another thing to maybe consider would be the different types of experience you want to get. So, there are ways to do volunteering overseas that you get psych based support. There's also ways to do things like Lifeline training. Or even at the UNSW level, there's lots of societies and clubs that you can contribute to, just to show your interest in the profession and also just to gauge if you still aren't interested. Because you may do something and realize, I actually hate this, I want to do this, and that's fine. That just adds to your experience of knowing a bit more what you want, what you don't want. Philosophically, I would say 'back yourself.' I know that's really, like a very easy for me to say now, but I think backing yourself and ensuring that you have some sort of network in place, some sort of guidance. I am so thankful for the people who took the time out of their day to tell me, 'hey, there's this role going, you should apply for this,' or 'have you checked this out, maybe this will be helpful' and because of that I spend a lot of time doing mentoring now, just because I know if it wasn't for those people who had, you know, reached their hand out to me, I wouldn't have known. Like no one in my family is a psychologist. I come from a cultural background where mental health isn't something that people talk about. So, for me to then be like, 'hey, I'm going to be a psychologist,' the only way I knew these options were available was by networking and by people volunteering their time. And I think at the undergrad level it can be intimidating to ask for help or to ask for guidance, but definitely I'd really encourage you to do so. And you might even be surprised by how forthcoming and willing people are to help you on your way. Because we all know how hard it is to get here sometimes, so if there's something we can do to give back and help people get into the profession, then more people than not are willing to help out.

Denise: Thank you so much, Ashneeta, I think that's beautiful advice. I'm sure it will help people to hear it.

Ashneeta: I really hope so. Yeah, it's a hard journey at times, but definitely one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. Again, if you had told me this in 2018 I would've been like 'this girl is crazy, don't talk to her.' But you also learn about yourself as a person. So even if you decide 10 years from now to

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change careers, you can never unlearn the stuff that you learn about yourself during the process, so it's definitely one that I'd encourage people to check out if they want to.

Denise: Thank you so much. Thank you for talking with me today, Ashneeta, it's been a real pleasure.

Ashneeta: No worries. Thank you so much for having me.