

Natasha van der Eyk, Mental Health Support Worker - Transcript

Denise: Alright, today I'm talking to Natasha van der Eyk. She's a Mental Health Support Worker at a company called Psyche. This is a private organization that helps people connect to mental health support through the NDIS. Hi, Natasha, nice to talk to.

Natasha: You hi, nice to talk to you too, Denise.

Denise: Thank you so much for being here. So, let's get right into your job. What do you do as a Mental Health Support Worker?

Natasha: So essentially, I have regular clients that I see weekly, sometimes twice a week just to support them on their NDIS goals, or you could call it like their recovery goals. And they all live with diagnosed mental health conditions, often, you know, at least two or three. And they have really varying sort of agendas of what they want to do with their time with me. So, some people just need assistance going out in public if they have really extreme anxiety or panic disorder, or if they have, you know, auditory hallucinations, they can find those things really hard. So, you just help them do their daily activities. Whereas some people want help doing, you know, fitness, or hobbies like gardening, or to tackle real challenges in their life like they're being unable to organize their schedule or their appointments, and sort of helping them with routines and things like that. So, it really depends on the client and what they want to.

Denise: Yeah, it sounds like you might end up doing anything on a given day, like there are so many different ways of helping people.

Natasha: Yeah, and that's part of what I enjoy about it the most is the variability. Like, no day is really the same and no person is the same. And yeah, you just get to meet a lot of different, really lovely people and do a lot of different exciting things.

Denise: So, Natasha, I know that you studied psychology at UNSW and you got your Honours. Was that required for the role that you have?

Natasha: Honours was not required. I think the minimum requirement for my company was to either have completed an undergraduate in psychology or to be near completion and that's something specific to Psyche. It's a big thing for our company to have everyone be psychologically minded and trained, but there are other companies that do similar work where that's not a formal requirement technically. But it depends which company you go to as a support worker.

Denise: Yeah, now I'm sure that studying psychology helps you a lot in this job. Can you talk a little bit about how? How does your psych study help you with what you're doing now?

Natasha: Yeah, I think it helps in a few ways. So, I think one of the big ones is that you understand the conditions that your clients are living with and what their experiences might be, which I think unless you've had sort of training in psychopathologies, you're not necessarily going to know, especially some of the less common ones, like something like schizoaffective disorder. You know, that's something that having done the degree, I know more about it than I would just as a lay person. And then I think the other thing is, you understand base level strategies and information that can help. So, like the importance of sleep wake cycles, the impact of diet on mood, and these sorts of things help you look at

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what might be contributing or affecting them. And being able to pay attention to those things that you might not pick up if you weren't psychologically trained. But just to clarify, you aren't performing any treatment or anything like that. It's more it helps you be able to accurately relay notes and communicate to their coordinator or their psychologists even, and pick up on that information or any risks that you could see in their life.

Denise: Yeah, so my understanding is that probably at your organization there are people like you doing mental health support, but also psychologists all working together as a team, is that right?

Natasha: Yes, that's correct. So, at our company we have the support workers like myself and then you have an advisory team which usually have sort of a Masters level training or a counselling kind of Masters. And they're there to support us with how we provide our care. But we also have in-house counsellors and psychologists that the clients can access if they have available funding as well through the NDIS.

Denise: And so how could you distinguish between the type of support that you're providing and the support that their therapist through psychologist is providing? Just to help me understand where the line is between mental health support and therapist.

Natasha: Yeah, I like to think of myself as more of an assisting role or an enacting role. So, say someone has like a wellbeing plan or their smoking cessation psychologist has said, 'you know, by two cigarettes at a time, don't buy a pack.' If the client shares that sort of information with me I can, be a kind of like influence in their life to help them stick with the plans that their therapist or psychiatrist has set out for them. I can help with things like routine. That's in my sort of training and ability to help them come up with routines or to break goals down into little steps. I can do stuff like that up, but where it comes to sort of treatment-based things, I'm more enacting an existing plan, yeah?

Denise: Yeah, that makes sense. And do you also then feedback some of this to their therapist?

Natasha: So, I don't often have contact with their psychological therapist or counsellor, but I do have to regularly write case notes. After all of my sessions, those are available to their case coordinator because it's all run through the NDIS, so those notes are read regularly. And if I sort of escalate an issue or a concern that I've noticed, that might be taken or shared, depending on what the confidentiality agreements are.

Denise: So, is this the kind of role that you thought you wanted when you started studying psychology?

Natasha: I didn't really know about this role to be honest. When I started studying psychology I was very much like, I'm just going to do my degree, and then I'm going to be an academic. And that was my whole kind of initial plan when I started. And I got more interested in clinical work, and as I finished my degree, I think I just wanted more exposure to that sort of world and to find out if it was for me as I was moving away from the idea of just being a researcher. So, that's sort of what led me into this sort of job, is wanting to find out more about all the other aspects of health and support that are out there besides clinical and to help me make up my mind about clinical as well.

Natasha van der Eyk, Mental Health Support Worker - Transcript

Denise: So, what kind of person, do you think would be really drawn to and enjoy doing the work that you're doing now?

Natasha: I think you'd have to be someone who enjoys being really flexible because, you know, you're gonna have varying shift times and doing really varied tasks in your day. But I think you'd also have to have a lot of patience, as the other important one is you know patients have different sort of communication styles, and different clients have different challenges, and how they sort of engage with you, but also how they engage with other people while you're with them. And I think just someone who's really interested in these people and their lives and how they're doing. And yeah, if you have that curiosity and that care, you'll really go away a long way in getting to understand them. And that's the biggest part for being able to help them, I think.

Denise: Thanks. And how did you get into this role?

Natasha: Yeah, so I just saw it advertised. I had already had experience working as an admin assistant in a private psychology clinic, so I thought I had a good sort of background of experience with clients and I just applied. And yeah, rest is history.

Denise: So, is this the kind of work you think you'd like to keep doing or are there other things you're thinking about for your future? Do you still think about being an academic?

Natasha: I do, so I'm thinking about doing my Masters in Clinical Psychology and maybe a PhD combined, but this is the sort of work, because of how flexible it is, that I can continue doing while I study. You really can work as many or as few hours as you'd like, at least with my company. So, I do intend to keep doing this line of work. The other thing that I have considered is being a case coordinator as well, which I wouldn't do through my company, I'd have to change, but helping people structure their NDIS plans and access the help they need. I think yeah, that's something I'd never thought of before, but have been considering recently too.

Denise: Yeah, good luck! Also, I'm wondering... do you have any advice, Natasha, for people who are interested in doing the kind of work that you're doing now?

Natasha: Yeah, I'd say that you don't have to wait to start. Especially the sort of the role I'm in, it's accessible if you're sort of towards the end of your degree and it if have questions, because I know a lot of people aren't sure – Did I pick the right course? Is this the right job for me? Do I wanna be a clinician? This might really help you get an idea of what it's like working with people with really significant mental health conditions. And also, getting to better understand what the health system looks like. Like, how the NDIS operates the public and the private sector. And yeah, it's just really helpful information, so you can always start early. And I'd recommend it as something to try if you wanted to take a bit of time to find out what you wanted to do, like I did, and it might lead you to other roles, like I said, like being an advisor or a case coordinator through the NDIS.

Denise: Awesome alright, well thank you so much, Natasha. This has been really helpful, thank you.

Natasha: Well my pleasure. I'm glad to help.

