

Dave Kasdan:

Removing the Stigma Around Mental Health



Please tell us a bit about your history in the mental health field.

After battling addiction in the late '90s and getting clean and sober, I went to grad school to get a Masters Degree in Counseling Psychology. At first, I began working in addiction counseling with adolescents, then with adults, veterans and homeless services. I held a variety of different positions both as a clinician and a Program Director. I also worked in the general mental health field, family services and in college counseling. I finished up my clinical career working in a middle school / high school system as a confidential counselor for students and families.

What is your position at Talkspace? How closely do you work with specific therapists? What do you do in your specific position and what are your overall responsibilities?

I am the Senior Vice President of Business Development at Talkspace. I joined it when the company was still a start up seven-and-a-half years ago. I was employee number 16. We are now the leading company in the online therapy space. We went public in 2021 and as one can imagine, have been extremely busy for the past several years.

I don't work on the clinical team and don't really have regular interactions with our network of therapists. However, I do interact with certain specialist therapists and leadership on the clinical team on a regular basis (including

our chief medical officer and clinical directors) as I bring them in to join me on presentations and pitches to prospective clients.

My role is to work with large corporations, organizations, colleges, nonprofits and more to develop partnerships in which they bring us in as a benefit for their employees, students, members, etc.

I quarterback and lead the presentations and pitches and focus on sharing the various capabilities of Talkspace services. I also conduct online demonstrations of how the services work and the outcomes and other benefits of partnering with us. I'm involved in every aspect of the sale from prospecting through presenting through contracting. Once they have signed with us, I hand off the partnership relationship to our account team. I still maintain long-term relationships as an executive sponsor for the companies that I sign.

What types of services does Talkspace offer? Does Talkspace offer group therapy, couples therapy and children's counseling in addition to individual therapy? Do you offer specialties, such as therapy for elders, family therapy, race, LGBTQ+ and the like?

Talkspace provides three core services: our foundation is online therapy where individuals match with a therapist. The individual does one-on-one counseling online via both asynchronous messaging with their therapist and live video and audio sessions. We also offer online psychiatry via live video sessions. This includes ongoing medication management. And we also have a wonderful newer service that we released in the last couple of years called Talkspace Self-Guided, which is a self-help, mental health, psychoeducational and wellness app with over 80 program topics (like depression, anxiety, holiday stress, workplace conflict) and over 500 different activities (like meditation, surveys, videos, journaling, deep breathing, gamification and more) along with weekly live group classes.

Talkspace is able to work with anyone 13 years and older, with the exception of psychiatry, which is 18 years and older.

All of our programs and services are developed in a way so that they can be flexible and address specific needs and services based on race, gender, identity, ethnicity, age, specific diagnoses or the presenting problem area, etc.

We do not offer group therapy, although we do offer live group classes in our Self-Guided service. We offer couples therapy through our consumer channel and we offer couples and relationship counseling on the Self-Guided app.

What types of issues bring patients to Talkspace? Anxiety, depression, OCD, ADHD?

Talkspace tends to be attractive to individuals suffering from mild to moderate mental health issues or searching for personal development and wellness needs. The most popular diagnoses on our platform are depression and anxiety. However, Talkspace also tends to work well for individuals with PTSD, mild to moderate alcoholism and substance abuse, stress-related problems and family issues. We have the capability to work at all levels of care that don't require intensive outpatient treatment or inpatient care.

How do you recruit your therapists?

For many years clinicians have been coming directly to us through our website and digital marketing efforts. However, we have an entire division of the company dedicated to recruiting clinicians, which we do both online and through events. We also try to recruit clinicians from a broad variety of demographics, ethnicities, gender, identities and the like to represent our client base most effectively.

Do you also work with psychiatrists? If so, can they prescribe medicine virtually?

Yes, Talkspace offers online psychiatry as one of our three core services. This is all conducted via live video, which includes monthly medication management. Our network of psychiatrists and licensed psychiatric nurse practitioners render a and prescribe medication as needed. However, we do not prescribe controlled substances of any kind.

How do your rates work? Is there a sliding scale?

For consumers who come to Talkspace on their own and pay privately and out-of-pocket, there is no sliding scale. We have standardized pricing on our website. Through our advertising efforts and our online promotional discounts, we aim to make our services as affordable as possible, especially for people who are looking to get started for the first time. For individuals who have Talkspace in their health plan through their work or via family members, the same costs are incurred

as traditional mental health benefits. So, an individual would have whatever their normal mental health co-pay would be or it would go to their deductible. When we work with businesses, we charge what's known as a PEPM charge – or per employee per month. For students, it's PSPM. In these instances, the end user, employee or student and the like gets the service completely for free and we see much higher utilization in these partnerships.

We've been hearing a lot about the worldwide mental health crisis. Why do you think the mental health crisis has exploded? How much has the pandemic contributed to this? What about politics?

Prior to the pandemic, we were quite aware of the increasing volume of mental health issues around the world, and specifically in the United States. There are many theories around this, ranging from the fact that we are better equipped to diagnose mental health issues, and we can do so at earlier ages. People are more aware of their mental health needs and are increasingly more open to accessing mental health care. As a society, we are getting better at making mental health more acceptable and less stigmatized. There is also a lot more stress and conflict in the world, especially in this country. The political and social climate in the past decade has increased levels of stress, which in turn has an effect and impact on mental health.

Then there's the pandemic ... which elevated levels of stress and mental health to epidemic proportions. This shone a very necessary light on the mental health needs of employees, students, families and just people in general. However, it has also increased the demand for services and created a shortage of available therapists and psychiatrists. Companies like Talkspace (which were already set up to make therapy easier to access and provide therapists with a way to conduct therapy in a more convenient way), have helped with this clinical shortage. However, this seems to be a problem that just won't completely go away. I suspect that in the future, there will be continued innovative ways to deliver mental health care without creating an overwhelming strain on therapists' time.

What drew you to work at Talkspace? What was your previous experience in this area?

My background as a clinician and my skill set for developing business partnerships led me to

take the job with Talkspace. It was such a good fit. However, my deep passion for mental health care and helping others drives me because I've been able to make quality mental health care more accessible for millions of people.

Do your therapists have goals for their clients? Or is therapy more open-ended?

Talkspace therapy is set up in the traditional person-centered therapy model where therapists address each client individually and uniquely. They evaluate their specific needs for care on a case by case basis. Having said that, we require a therapist to use the treatment plan model, where there is a system of goals, objectives and action steps to achieve them. Those can be very detailed and diverse, or it could just be one basic goal like "reduce stress." It's up to each individual and therapist and the work they're doing together. These goals, objectives and action steps are documented and measured.

What are the benefits of online therapy as opposed to in-person therapy?

More affordable and better and quicker access to care, reduced stigma, convenience, flexibility and quality control.

What are some of the overall benefits of therapy, both long-term and short-term?

Primarily, the reduction of symptoms of the individual's core specific diagnoses or problem area. However, in a more general sense, the overall benefits of therapy are: feeling better, an impact on physical health, better relationships and a better workplace experience and productivity. For students the result is better school performance and socialization. People who have been in therapy often experience, higher levels of confidence, self-awareness, a sense of personal responsibility and better interpersonal, familial and work-related relationships.

How do you connect Talkspace clients with an appropriate therapist? What is involved with your intake process?

We use a brief (90 second/eight question) online survey to understand the individual's problem area, location (state) and other demographic points and their needs and wants in a therapist. This information goes into our proprietary algorithm, which produces the best therapist match for the client very quickly. It takes between a few hours to a few days at most. If the individual decides they don't like that initial assigned therapist, or they would

like to switch at any point – on the first day, the 100th day, the 1000th day – they can do so at the click of a button on their personal dashboard on Talkspace. Then the person can have a variety of nine or more therapists to select from that are also a very good fit for them.

Outside of the survey, there is a separate brief intake process that occurs once the individual has signed up for a Talkspace account after selecting their therapist. This involves obtaining informed/signed consent to conduct therapy services, a brief, multiple-choice, medical and mental health history, obtaining emergency contact information, etc. This is similar to the same types of forms one would fill out in the waiting room of a clinical therapist's office.

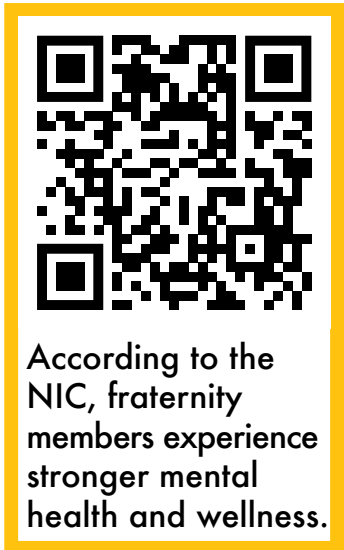
Does Talkspace offer crisis counseling?

By definition, we do not offer crisis, emergency or urgent care services. And before someone signs up, they will see that information displayed on our app and our website. It indicates that if they are in danger or feel like it is an emergency and need immediate help, then they should NOT use our service. We provide links to them for the general crisis hotline and a variety of other specialized crisis hotlines. It's very rare, but in the instance that someone develops a crisis while being treated on Talkspace, we have protocols in place for our therapists to handle that situation. This is done in the same way any private practice clinician would handle a crisis with their client. We also have a crisis hotline partner called ProtoCall that individuals can access 24/7/365.

Does Talkspace offer therapy and support for at-risk children? How about for adults and children with special needs?

Talkspace provides therapy for individuals 13 years and older. It is the same for our self-guided/wellness services. For individuals with special needs, using Talkspace varies ... based on the level of those needs. However, the core element in regards to using Talkspace is being able to utilize a laptop or desktop computer and/or a smartphone to access our website and/or our app. Many individuals with special needs are able to utilize technology in their day-to-day lives either by themselves with gadgets or with assistance and they are able to access Talkspace in the same way. We have also completed regular ADA audits and testing and have made changes over the years to comply. Therefore, we have increased accessibility for people with specific needs such as being hard of hearing, having diminished eyesight and the like.

Why do so many people view the need for therapy as a "weakness?" If someone is sick with a physical disease, they will go to a doctor. If someone has an emotional, spiritual and/



or mental illness, why do you think so many people won't get the help they need?

Unfortunately, mental health in our society (and in many societies) is looked at differently from physical illness. There is often an overarching thought process that we have more control over our mental and emotional state, well-being and behaviors. But that is simply not the case. However, our society has stigmatized mental health problems in a very shaming and blaming way. This causes people to hide their problems and it also prevents them from seeking the care they need. This also causes others to ignore what are obvious signs of mental distress and avoid awareness of these issues in their loved ones.

As a society, we are continually getting better at being more open to the mental health needs of ourselves and others and much more accepting that mental health care is normal. One of my colleagues referred to the pandemic as “the great educator” when it comes to mental health so we've seen some pretty big leaps and bounds in the normalization of mental health issues.

Do you feel that men are less likely to seek therapy?

Yes, men are three times less likely to seek mental health care than women. This is a well-known fact. There have been generations and generations of stigma in regards to men interpreting having any mental health issues as weakness. This is also evident in most male-dominated and patriarchal cultures. But again, over time, a greater percentage of men have been admitting and addressing their mental health needs. Many revered male figures have come out in the past decade and publicly admitted their mental health issues and subsequent path to addressing their needs through therapy. To me, one classic and very personal example of this is Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympic champion ever. He is Talkspace's big celebrity endorser as well as a member of our advisory board. I've had the pleasure of working with Michael on several different occasions doing presentations and events for Talkspace. I've had the chance to interview him and speak with him one on one and he has opened many peoples' minds and hearts up to the need for mental health care – not just for men, but for anyone.

Is there a general philosophy that you and your therapists have?

Therapy for all! (We want to make therapy more available, accessible and affordable for as many people as possible.)

Is there a recommended time frame that you suggest for your clients?

No, individuals using Talkspace can have success in dealing with and addressing a

particular issue in just a few weeks but others may want to use the service for many months. We see successful treatment outcomes most often around the two-and-a-half to three month mark in therapy, which is close to half of what is seen for outcomes in more traditional in-person, office/face-to-face therapy situations.

You offer messaging support for your clients, too. How does this work?

Unlimited messaging between client and therapist is actually the core service that Talkspace started with. It's our biggest differentiator and the goal was to make therapy more convenient, affordable and accessible for both the client and the therapist. By using messaging as the primary therapeutic tool for client and therapist to communicate, it eliminates the fixed session time as the core component of care. This frees up the therapist to have more flexibility and availability to work with their clients throughout the day, rather than with only a limited amount of time-based sessions. Therapists can actually handle much larger caseloads and are much less stressed and burnt out.

Messaging is asynchronous, so it's not a live chat, but the therapist will always respond the same day. A client and therapist will often exchange multiple messages in one day. That's not required, though. The cadence (or frequency) of messaging stems from the needs of the client.

What do you think can be done to let people know that therapy and counseling can help?

As a society, I think we've already turned the corner. We are actively promoting mental health care services as well as normalizing the subject of mental health. More public figures and influencers speaking out about their own personal mental health struggles and accomplishments helps, too. It also helps for us to address mental health as normal. Making mental health services available for much younger ages helps in that it becomes part of the lexicon of life. This way, when an individual starts to feel symptoms that might indicate a mental health issue, they not only accept that it's okay to see a therapist, but they will also have knowledge and accessibility to those resources.

What do you suggest for brothers who are considering therapy?

First of all, give yourself credit for being aware of your needs and being open to getting help. That's the primary step to healing. Then check out the various available options on campus, online and in your community. See what fits you and give it a try. If you don't feel therapy is helping in your first experience with a clinician, don't be afraid to try another one. Sometimes

the fit between client and clinician is not ideal, but it doesn't mean that therapy doesn't work. Sometimes people will work with several therapists for a little bit before they find that person they feel comfortable with.

What are your long-term goals for Talkspace?

As Talkspace continues to grow, we hope to continue expanding into larger business partnerships with corporations and universities. We also hope to eventually move into government systems and veteran affairs as well as partner with more health plans. We hope to build out our technology and products in a variety of different ways. Unfortunately, due to the proprietary nature of these items, I cannot get into more specifics here.

How and when did you decide to make Talkspace a publicly-traded firm?

While it wasn't my specific decision, “going public” was always the ultimate goal for our unique little start-up company. We decided to finally do it during the pandemic, as there was an opportunity to go public many years before we had expected. This was due to the massive increase in business we saw in 2020 and 2021. The timing was right and the investment dollars were available to make this happen, so we pushed forward. By going public, we could also expand our business faster and thus ultimately provide access to mental health care to many more people much sooner than we expected.

Dave Kasdan is the SVP of Business Development at Talkspace, an online therapy provider. Dave graduated from the Phi chapter at NYU in 1990, where he served as Phi. Raised in Washington, DC, he currently lives in Westchester County, NY with his daughter, son and their puppy, Millie.

If you would like to contact Brother Kasdan to discuss incorporating Talkspace into your business, please feel free to email him at dave.kasdan@talkspace.com.