5 Strategies To Grow Your Healthcare Practice with Dr. Damian Jacob Sendler

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As a part of my interview series with prominent medical professionals about “How To Grow Your Private Practice” I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Damian Jacob Sendler, who is the chief of the division of clinical research at Felnett Health Research Foundation. After graduating with degrees from the
Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and Harvard Medical School, Dr. Sendler became the founding director of one of the most successful sex therapy research clinics in the world. In day-to-day practice, Dr. Sendler manages a team of over two dozen scientists, assistants, and clinicians, spearheads over 25 funded research projects with 3000+ clinical participants, and sees patients in his Center for Sexual Medicine and Psychotherapy.

Dr. Damian Jacob Sendler is an award-winning Polish-American clinician sexologist, the scholar of forensic and legal medicine, and the scientist trained in digital epidemiology. Educated at Harvard Medical School and the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Sendler combines the passion for medicine and psychiatry to deliver exceptional clinical care and to maintain the highest standard of scientific research practice. At Felnett Health Research Foundation, he serves as head of the sexual behaviors consultation clinic, the chief of the division of clinical research, and the director of the European program on studying sexual minorities and health policy. Dr. Sendler’s clinical expertise and research into mental health and medicine are regularly featured in world’s most reputable public media, including television, lifestyle magazines, print newspapers, and radio. He is the past recipient of the Presidential Service Award and the United Nations Letter of Distinction for public service.
where my mentors inspired me to translate population-based research into improving clinical care in mental health. My training path is quite unusual as I never imagined myself to become a sex therapist.

It was entirely accidental that I discovered the passion for sex medicine—one year into graduate studies in biology I got bored with laboratory research and decided to find a new passion. I took a brief sabbatical for two months and started reading through various books and research magazines to find new inspiration. One evening I discovered a book by Lisa Downing, who is an Oxford-educated historian, whose scholarly work talks a lot about the role of psychiatry in everyday cultural discourse. I was fascinated by her take on how little we know about the relationship between sexual health and mental health. This is when I realized my new passion in medicine and went on to pursue seminal work investigating how unhealthy sexual behaviors arise in individuals who experience psychiatric distress.

One reason why it’s worth investigating unusual sexual behaviors and its relationship to mental health is that it has molded my clinical mindset into a very inquisitive and understanding. See, once you spend some time working with people who enjoy sex with unusual partners, like animals, or in weird situations, like sadomasochism, you begin to see patients as incredibly diverse and super-fascinating entities. It helps me remain competitive in my field and patients enjoy working with someone who is non-judgmental and open-minded. This is especially important when providing care to vulnerable populations, like the LGBTQ or victims of sexual abuse. You could say that my tough dissertation research opened my mind to the kinds of medical problems that can’t always be fixed with medications. Instead, it helps to be someone’s clinician, mentor, and a friend—all at the same time. In the end, I find my transgression
from biology to treating highly stigmatizing sexual practices very rewarding. It’s pretty fun to say that “I talk about sex all day” for a living.

Another exciting part of my clinical work is that our patients get to participate in a wide range of research projects that advance science. Some even get to be featured in the news when our published research is discussed in the media. Therefore, I am excited to positively influence my patients with the passion for clinical practice and research. It’s like we all come to the same place to help each other achieve great things—I help patients find their happiness, and they help me satisfy my scientific curiosity.

What made you want to start your own practice?

It was a combination of seeking independence and being able to use experimental treatment approaches. Since I am lucky to be a scientist who has the funding to test various treatment ideas, it was vital for me to go into private practice as soon as possible. It is indeed convenient to be part of the large medical center, as these environments can offer the administrative support that is difficult to establish in the private setting. However, when you are your boss, you can set your destiny. There are no boundaries that prevent you from seeing any types of patients you want—and that sense of freedom is refreshing.

Managing being a provider and a business owner can often be exhausting. Can you elaborate on how you manage both roles?

I have two executive assistants who help me run everyday operations. Besides, I have other clinicians work for me, which allows me to focus on working with cases of patients whose medical problems align with my expertise. The most important aspect of running a successful private practice is to establish a network of professional connections that you can rely on when the demand for your services is either high or poor. Either way, you always need help with staying afloat.

A challenge for a clinician who doesn’t have business training is
figuring out whom you can have “on call” if you need professional support in the business side of running a private practice. Hiring the right people and figuring out novel sources of revenue are some of those things that you don’t learn in school. It is so difficult to find a reliable and creative manager, who can propel your private practice into a successful venture. I am thankful to have people around me who are not just hard workers but are also inspired by the mission of healing.

As a business owner, how do you know when to stop working IN your business (maybe see a full patient load) and shift to working ON your business?

That's probably the most difficult challenge that I face as a young clinician. It's easy to overwork yourself in either the clinical side or the business side to achieve greatness. However, it is easier for me to spend more time on clinical tasks since that's where my heart is—and the business side is usually something that I get reminded about by my business strategist and friends who have MBA.

From completing your degree to opening a clinic and becoming a business owner, the path was full of many hurdles. How did you build up resilience to rebound from failures? Is there a specific hurdle that sticks out to you?

I’ve learned resilience in graduate school. The training that I received was ruthless. I am not sure what was worse—my super demanding mentors, or the clinical and research assignments that I had to complete as part of the training. When you are a student, you happen to be the least powerful person that is expected to follow the advice of your peers and mentors. This intrinsic reliance on others for help, and uncertainty about the future—all of these aspects of the training set you up for mentally succeeding in ‘adult’ life.

The most important thing to succeed in running a private practice is to be able to seek help whenever in doubt. It’s really easy to get lost in a myriad of regulations. Managing human resources is another
complicated aspect of the job. Should I hire someone with a doctorate or a college degree to do a specific task? Hiring costs money, and you need to be able to allocate money wisely. Therefore, it is essential to form, what I call, an ad-hoc committee of help—a trusted group of professionals, who are there for you when you need their advice. This group of individuals should include a business professional, a lawyer, organizational management, a salesperson, and someone else trained in medicine or science.

It's not cheap. Initial hurdles include the cost of rent and salary of at least three people.

In the beginning, you might not have any patients. When you’re new to the community of providers, you’re going to experience difficulty getting new patients. The reason is simple: no one knows you exist, therefore marketing is the key. It helps to brag about your credentials if they are stellar. Moreover, it would help if you offered flexibility and innovation in healthcare treatments. For instance, I utilize e-therapy to work with frequent travelers and patients who live outside of New York but want to work with me.

Network to expand your horizons. Everyone says that
networking is important, but what many clinicians don’t understand is that it matters whom you network with and what is the quality of this interaction. Sure, you might stop by the offices of nearby primary care providers and distribute business cards for future referrals. However, that’s not helping you form any long-lasting relationships. Instead, it would help if you build relationships slowly, preferably starting in school and slowly expanding as you gain more experience and professional recognition.

**Eliminate weak employees immediately.** Perhaps more senior providers can afford to be forgiving. However, when you are starting, you have to eliminate any sources of weaknesses in your private practice. Unfortunately, a lot of young workers are tempting for hiring because with limited experience you can pay them less. However, in practice, you need to invest in people and to develop their talent. That’s why all of the people that work for me are not just doing their job—they also get to participate in research, so that they become well-rounded, scholarly professionals. I believe in mentoring and allowing people to move on when they need to, be it for school or other employment opportunities. However, when someone is a weak employee, they need to go. There’s nothing more discouraging for new patients than coming to your clinic and feeling unwelcome by employees who don’t like their job. Everyone can sense it, especially patients, who then ask themselves why he or she’s even coming to see you with this kind of poor service.

**Be genuinely passionate about what you’re doing.** I mean it sincerely. You have to think of yourself as the next successful provider in your neighborhood. When there are troubles along the path, you need to find people that can help you discover solutions. There’s no easy way to establish yourself. Complaining doesn’t work, as it only makes you look weak—and hence, scares away patients.

Many healthcare providers struggle with the idea of “monetization”. How did you overcome that mental block?

I talked to people who are leaders in medicine and who have
practiced for far longer than I have been alive. It turns out that the longer you own private practice, the more likely you are to accept payouts as a natural outcome of hard work. Also, medical and scientific training is the most demanding of all academic disciplines, which helps me rationalize the pay rate I get.

What do you do when you feel unfocused or overwhelmed?
I recharge by heading outside into public spaces, parks—all while listening to music and drinking coffee. There’s no point for me to continue responding to e-mails or seeing patients if I can’t focus.

I’m a huge fan of mentorship throughout one’s career—None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Who has been your biggest mentor? What was the most valuable lesson you learned from them?
My biggest mentors were my doctoral advisers. They are the people I admire the most for their ability to practice medicine at the highest level of intellectual perfection, while pursuing other passions, like traveling or playing competitive sports. Your mentors should be successful in their field because they can help you understand what it takes to be in their shoes one day. The most valuable lesson I was ever told sounded like this: “Sendler, you need to be more patient.” Granted, I became a lot more pragmatic about life and career, and I am enjoying the thought of working toward specific goals, even if it might take me a few more years to achieve them.

What resources did you use (Blogs, webinars, conferences, coaching, etc.) that helped jumpstart you in the beginning of your business?
I think I looked up every possible resource, from the sites of professional coaches to visiting on-campus resource center. The best source of information came from my mentors and professional acquaintances who already owned private practice. Just going into
their offices and seeing how they set up their practice, what kind of people they employ, how much they charge for services—all of these aspects were very influential in my ability to grow my own business.

What’s the worst piece of advice or recommendation you’ve ever received? Can you share a story about that?

Oh gosh, there were so many! Probably the worst one is to follow what my peers do. That’s super problematic because not all of us have the same opportunity to succeed. Furthermore, comparing yourself to your peers is mindless, since you might feel stressed about your prospects of achieving an adequate level of professional recognition. Therefore, creating a self-inspired space of isolation, away from what your peers are doing, is very helpful in identifying the path toward success.

Please recommend one book that’s made the most significant impact on you?

Exploring Ethics by Steven Cahn, because as you build your private practice, many people will suggest some unethical ideas about establishing your business. It is worth remaining sane and kind to yourself, without engaging in ominous practices.

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They can visit me at www.sexmedicine.org. I will also be maintaining a regular presence on Thrive Global, where you can read my articles on topics related to mental health, medicine, and science: https://thriveglobal.com/authors/damian-sendler/.
A Note for Readers --

For other incredible interviews, please check out our podcast: **Healthcare Heroes**.

A special thanks to Dr. Sendler again! The purpose of this interview series is to highlight the entrepreneurs, innovators, advocates, and providers inside Healthcare. Our hope is to inspire future healthcare providers on the incredible careers that are possible!

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