

Interview with Helen Marlo, Professor, Clinical Psychology

We are delighted to feature Helen Marlo, Ph.D., Professor of Clinical Psychology and Department Chair for the School of Psychology, as this month's administrator profile. Dr. Marlo has been on the faculty of the Department of Clinical Psychology since 1999 and has been serving as Department Chair since 2013. She was a faculty scholar with the university's Sr. Dorothy Stang Center for Social Justice and Community Engagement and taught community-based learning courses.

Dr. Marlo began her academic career in 1990 and has taught undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students at the University of South Carolina; Palo Alto University (formerly Pacific Graduate School of Psychology), and Sofia University (formerly Institute of Transpersonal Psychology).

She earned her doctorate in Clinical-Community Psychology from the University of South Carolina after graduating with her bachelor's degree in Psychology at the University of Missouri. She completed a pre-doctoral internship and post-doctoral fellowship at the Palo Alto Veterans Administration Health Care System and a post-doctoral fellowship at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center. After becoming licensed as a clinical psychologist, she completed a seven-year advanced analytic training program at the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco where she was certified as a psychoanalyst.

Currently, Dr. Marlo maintains a private practice in San Mateo, CA, providing psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and consultation to adults and children. She also teaches at a variety of psychotherapy training programs, including the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, where she trains diverse mental health professionals and psychoanalytic candidates. She is the founder and co-facilitator of "Mentoring Mothers," a complimentary, consultative community service for mothers and infants; and serves on the Board of AbilityPath. She is the Reviews Editor for Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche.

Enjoy!

Can you talk a bit about the mental health crisis in this area? Besides the pandemic, what factors have contributed to increasing need? What are some of the tipping points? The need for mental health services has been on the rise even before this global health crisis. However, the pandemic did help "normalize" people's need for psychotherapy and it provided a more socially acceptable reason to seek out treatment.

In our area, perceptions, comparisons, and overvaluation of status, achievement, and success; the sheer challenge of making it, including financially; unconstructive messages around self-worth and relationships; dwindling empathy; and being disconnected from creativity, values, and a sense of purpose has distanced people from themselves and others. These factors can often lead to destructive relationships or they can erode genuinely good human relationships. This has led to many problems including trauma, depression, anxiety and addictions.

The pandemic exacerbated this devolution of relationships since being isolated and staying at home was necessary. However, this sanctioned cultural shift has now made it more acceptable to be less connected to others which can be less stressful and easier for some, in the short-run. Naturally, this disconnection and avoidance has resulted in even higher levels of anxiety, withdrawal, isolation, and loneliness which can diminish our physical and/or mental health.

Adding to the estrangement of this time are influential factors such as, losses and traumas; polarizing divides and political conflict; condoned intolerance, hatred, and violence; and massive knowledge and information overload which has replaced engagement, experience, and reflection.

I think one tipping point from all these factors is an alteration to our attention span and ways of relating to others, including our capacity to listen to others' personal stories—especially if their story is longer than 280 tweeted characters! We are living in an information rich and reactive society that is emphasizing commentary and quick judgments rather than receptivity, listening, and understanding. Living in a culture of “like/don't like; thumbs up, thumbs down,” supplants critical reflection and an appreciation for nuance. It changes how we relate and pay attention. Some people diminish the value of psychotherapy because, “all you do is get paid to listen to people.” I have to laugh because listening is a complicated, sophisticated, and hard skill to truly refine and master. Moreover, good therapy is far more complex than “just listening” but, even if it was only listening, that makes it incredibly and increasingly valuable! In my experience, few people are really listened to very deeply.

Which Hallmark resonates for you?

It would have to be the second Hallmark, *We Honor the Dignity and Sacredness of Each Person*. I love that we have a Hallmark that explicitly celebrates and champions sacredness particularly amidst all of life's profaneness. Celebrating sacredness means that we live with presence, awe, vulnerability, empathy, reverence, and respect. Naming it through our Hallmarks keeps it in consciousness and acknowledges its reality, influence, and power. Being part of an institution that stands for this is very important to me, both personally and professionally.

How does NDNU's School of Psychology factor into the mix; i.e., how does the School address these needs? Does the School have a particular bent vis-à-vis treatment modalities? What does the “average” program look like; i.e., what can a student expect in Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3?

NDNU is committed to applied training, one that makes a difference in the real world. The School of Psychology has a stellar reputation for producing some of the best clinicians and mental health professionals in the area. Our students are known for being good people with diverse backgrounds and solid values; who bring their intelligence, creativity, and empathy to be forces for good in our community and world.

Our curriculum is depth-oriented and integrative; so, we teach students to be deeply engaged—to take a deeper dive--which I believe is the most healing and effective way of working especially with more complex or chronic problems. About a decade ago, I redesigned the curriculum to be more practitioner-focused, and I employed more faculty who are actively working in the field. I am proud to say that we have, “professors who practice what they teach.” This teaching model truly shapes how students are trained. Our faculty are accomplished, humane, and compassionate professionals, who come from diverse personal, professional, and theoretical backgrounds so students are exposed to the gamut of psychotherapeutic approaches.

As for how the program looks in Year 1, 2 and 3, that depends on the student. Since we have flexible scheduling, we tend to attract students who go at their own pace. That said, the first year lays the foundation, students branch out with specialty classes in Year 2, and then there's a year-long practicum at a clinical site which provides all the requisite training. It's a comprehensive, rigorous program.

What would you like to see the School look like 5 years down the road? 10 years?

I would like the School to be more widely known as a strong, informed voice and advocate for our community with respect to wellness and mental health. There is a lot of misinformation and pop psych out there which can be harmful. I would like the SOP to bring our scholarship and clinical understanding and experiences to support our community. I would like us to have an influential voice in shaping mental health care--to be a leading face of what is healing in mental health treatment locally.

The Clinical Psychology Department lives out our Department's beautiful Mission daily as expressed in, the over 20,000 free hours of mental health services that we contribute, on average, annually to our community. There are a lot of misperceptions about mental health care and many poorly trained and ineffective therapists. This is where one's graduate program makes a huge difference. It is immensely gratifying to hear how our students and alumni practice in ways that are more healing and humane to the people we serve.

I would like to see us partnering with agencies to provide more long-term mental health care. Many of our complex social problems come from untreated trauma and mental health issues. Many people who seek therapy have a variety of complex needs and would greatly benefit from longer term care. People change their lives and society, as a whole, generally benefits when people have more access to high quality and longer-term psychotherapy.

I would also like to see the School of Psychology offer continuing education and public programs to our graduates and the broader community. Students and alumni consistently share they want more of what our Department teaches--how great it would be to offer our vision and teachings through specialized classes for professionals and community education programs to the public!

Why NDNU – for you, as an educator?

As part of our mission to “educate for life,” NDNU values scholarship and research, but not at the expense of applied learning. Both are valued so it feels like a seamless integration to me here. NDNU has always been committed to living its values of giving back to the community and providing professionally oriented education. I have been supported in that applied mission. It is less common in academia for Department Chairs to also actively practice as psychologists and many universities do not even employ faculty that practice. Sadly, that divide often results in poorly trained mental health professionals. So, I really respect that about NDNU. I have never had to apologize or hide that here—it is embraced, valued, and promoted--and this value has a huge ripple effect on our program, community, students, and the patients they serve.

I am a deeply spiritual person. Values and meaning matter for me in the practice of psychology not to mention life. One of the things I like about NDNU is that, as a religious organization, spirituality and values are not taboo. They are woven into the culture and fabric of learning and shape the learning experience.

Finally, I learn all the time from my students, all of whom come from diverse personal and professional backgrounds. I am inspired by the strength of their character and dedication to this field. They are some of the kindest human beings on the planet.

Why NDNU – for a prospective student? Are there particular types of students that thrive in an environment such as NDNU?

Students who seek out an NDNU graduate education in the School of Psychology are people who want to apply their training in clinical psychology whether that be as a licensed marriage and family therapist and/or counselor or as an unlicensed mental health professional in a related field such as business, technology, marketing, human resources, medicine, education, or law.

Many of our students have worked in other careers that haven't been as satisfying for them. They are passionate about this profession and truly want to make a difference. They are drawn to our innovative, depth-oriented, integrative curriculum; talented faculty; extraordinarily diverse student population; commitment to the community; devotion to clinical training; and to our very accepting and flexible community and culture.

Are there any stories or anecdotes from your teaching experiences that especially stand out?

There are so many! One year, a student came to class shattered by the suicide of a teen who didn't get the services s/he needed. We spent the entire class helping him process this tragedy. Years later, this student designed a treatment program for similarly at-risk adolescents. He took this painful experience, learned from it, and transcended it.

Other powerful examples: international students who bring all they learned back to their country where minimal to no mental health services even exist or students who share, sometimes years later, that they now "get" how valuable their training was--that they have internalized ways of being and working from our program--that have made a profound difference to others--and that they now have a successful career which they love.

How did you find your professional path? What led you to pursue a career as an educator? What led you to pursue a career as a therapist?

It feels like destiny, actually—and it is partially a spiritual calling. I grew up in a large family that highly valued education. I am a very curious person and find people interesting. I am humbled by what I have experienced of the human psyche and the unconscious which is powerful, fascinating, and awe inspiring.

Being a psychologist, psychoanalyst, and professor allows me to engage in these mysteries daily while also being a healing presence to the adversity, pain, and suffering that is part of life for most of us. By age 12 I knew I wanted to be a psychologist. It is incredibly meaningful to be a part of the sacred parts of others' lives. I enjoy alleviating suffering and being part of their transformation and growth which can happen when one receives good therapy. It is tremendously moving. While it's not my bent to fix people, it is fulfilling to be part of their journey in navigating life.

I also strongly believe in the power of education for personal and social change. There is a reason one of my favorite psychology concepts is something called the "epistemophilic instinct"!! (Google that one!). Being a psychologist and an educator has enabled me to pursue a life of meaning and it is a sheer joy.

What are some of your outside interests?

Being with my family and close friends is precious – my husband and I have two daughters, ages 11 and 18 and a 15-year-old son. I cherish time with them. I love the arts and culture—I inhale the visual and

performing arts and am a voracious reader and lover of museums. Travelling, writing, poetry, collage, mixed media art, meditation, yoga, the Bar Method, winetasting, and magic have been fun parts of my life over the years.