

It's Never Too Early to Start Thinking About Private Practice – Jessica Setnick Tells You How

Of all the things my interns want to know, the hardest question is “What is your typical day like?” My standard answer is always, “You’ll see!” because between seeing patients, teaching workshops, giving presentations, writing articles, and trying to stay on top of day to day business activities, there is no such thing as a “typical day” at Understanding Nutrition.

Some days are exciting, some days are boring, and some days are just plain painful – like that day last month when I had a presentation on my calendar for the wrong date... and missed it. But most of my days are like spending time with my best friends – my office manager, Celena, my dietitian friend Laura, interns here and there, Robin when she drops by to use an empty office, and the wonderful patients who invite me in to their lives.

It has taken a long time to get here, and I have a few regrets, but most days I am thrilled to be living my dream of not having a boss. And bosses out there don’t know it, but their lucky that I’m not their employee. I am not a very good team player, and I can’t sweep things under the rug when they conflict with my integrity. I want things to be done right, or my way, or both, and I don’t like when problems occur that could have been avoided. And I really, really, really don’t like having to wait around to come to the top of someone else’s to-do list. After my internship, I interviewed for a few jobs, and was lucky to be offered my dream job in a children’s hospital psych program with an eating disorders branch. It was a half-time position, with the other half in the endocrine clinic, which in my mind was a waste of time, since I was only interested in eating disorders. But I was thrilled to have a job, so I dove in. My experience with endocrine disorders has proved invaluable in assessing and treating patients with eating disorders, which I would never have expected.

No matter what job you take right out of school, you will learn things that will come in handy when you start your own venture.

Some things that seem like a waste of time if you’re working a clinical job, like coming in early to attend the budget committee meeting, or volunteering to give a community presentation, can be valuable learning experiences if you are looking ahead to your future. You might even learn what not to do.

Being in private practice is so different from hospital work because you spend a lot of your time alone. You have to fill every role, or hire someone, and there is no one to ask how to make decisions or how to choose priorities. It is crucial to have others you can ask, so that you don’t make costly mistakes, or reinvent the wheel. Nutrition Entrepreneurs DPG is the best value you’ll get for your ADA membership dollar. And it’s important to join before you start your practice so that you are preparing all along.

If you’re interested in eating disorders, you should also join Behavioral Health Nutrition, SCAN, and Pediatric Nutrition, the three DPGs that include eating disorders. BHN has a \$10 student membership rate, which is a great way to join the group. The more active of a role you take in your memberships, the more you will get out of them. Most DPGs have one or more listservs, where you can post questions that will be answered by more experienced RDs. And many DPGs have Frequently Asked Questions on their websites on common topics. It is amazing how generous and giving dietitians can be when a peer asks a question.

It's important to read business-related books and news to learn about private practice topics such as marketing, budgeting, and everything else, but we are lucky to also have two books specifically targeted toward dietetics private practice. ADA's Guide to Private Practice, by Faye Berger Mitchell and Ann Litt and The Entrepreneurial Nutritionist, by Kathy King Helm are essentials for your bookshelf. I also recommend books by Jeffrey Gitomer, The Millionaire Mindset, by T. Harv Eker, and I subscribe online to many business-related newsletters.

Private practice is of course very challenging, but it can also be very rewarding. In theory it is less stable than a "typical" job, but with the economy the way it is, stable is not what it used to be. I like knowing that even with the many things I can't control, what I choose to focus my time on is up to me. I feel proud when I realize that I have been "successfully unemployed" for almost 9 years, and I encourage anyone with entrepreneurial spirit to consider private practice some day. I wouldn't be where I am without my time working in the hospital, and my business wasn't financially stable for several years, so I don't want to make it sound like private practice is a snap. But once you have your specialty area and you have some business savvy, there is no reason not to pursue your dream!

Jessica Setnick owns Understanding Nutrition, PC, and is the author of The Eating Disorders Clinical Pocket Guide and Eating Disorders Boot Camp, both great resources for students interested in working in the eating disorders field. She has recently ventured into producing webinars as another way to share information without leaving home. Her next webinar is perfect for any student considering private practice in the future. Double Your Patient Referrals... Without Getting Off the Couch! will be webcast on May 13th, and for one registration fee, any number of students can participate. Plus, All Access Internships readers can get a \$10 discount of the registration fee by entering coupon code "imworthit" at checkout. Visit understandingnutrition.com for more information.