

# **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE COUNSELLING CAREER**

## **TRANSCRIPT**

Hi, everyone. Welcome back. Thanks for joining us this morning. And we're now going into session three, Building a Sustainable Counselling Career. I'm sure we're going to touch on some of the same things that were covered in the previous session, but we kind of have chosen a number of experienced practitioners to speak to you specifically about how their career has worked out over years, and what that kind of looks like, and we're really hoping to highlight some opportunities for you.

We're joined by three PACFA expert members, Jacob, Rachel, and Rebecca, who all have different types of experience in the field.

Jacob brings 30 years of experience in human performance in high-risk environments, including his work as an air traffic controller and an officer in the Royal Australian Air Force. He combines this background with his counselling practice, supporting aviation personnel and others in high-pressure roles with a strong focus on the psychological factors that impact performance and well-being.

Rachel comes from a strong background in community services, leadership, and program management. She now works in private practice and as a clinical supervisor, supporting both individuals and other practitioners in their professional development.

And Rebecca has over a decade of experience across employee assistance programs, community services, and corrections, including working in remote settings. She is currently supporting both clients and staff in complex environments, particularly within the corrections space.

So I'm going to start by asking you all just to talk a little bit about your journey and what you think in relation to this topic that I haven't covered in your bio. And then we're going to go into kind of some general questions.

Jacob, would you mind starting us off?

Thank you for that introduction, Joanna. Hi, everyone.

As you said, so I come from an aviation background, which is quite different, very right brain or very factual, very black and white. And then I decide to join the counselling fraternity.

My initial degree was in human factors, aviation degree. About seven of my subjects or eight of my subjects were psychology-based, and that's where the love originally came from.

I then developed into a accident investigator looking at the human factor behind aircraft accidents and then also incidents with air traffic controllers, pilots, and firefighters.

So that's where the love originally came from, and then obviously during COVID, there was a bit of a pause in aviation, and I decided to study my counselling master's, which I finished in 2023.

Initially, I thought that this will be a complete pivot for me, going into a complete different environment, counselling. And the more I think I pushed away from it-- And initially it was, because the two places that I found for my practical part were in a school and then also a non-for-profit, which was family-orientated.

I then opened a private practice, which was family counselling orientated, and the more I think I pushed away from aviation, the more it dragged me back in.

I met a very influential person, Captain Laurie Shaw, a pilot, used to fly for Qantas, fly for PGA, and he put a suggestion forward is why don't we create a safe space for aviation personnel within the aviation industry?

We got Dr Kate Mannison, who's from CASA, on board, and we created a space which is called Safe Haven because what's more important, the pilot or air traffic controller got mental health issues and not getting the help they need, or somebody that's putting up their hand and get the help that they needed.

That project started probably right at the start of my or the end of my studying journey, and we initially thought it'll be something that we can do quite quickly. But, as we all found out within the counselling industry, and especially Joanna and I think Nigel found out, it's not that easy just to change laws and procedures within government. It takes a fairly long time.

I think our journey is finally at a place where we can protect people, because in aviation, if you put up your hand and say, "I've got a mental health issue," what generally happens is you actually lose your license and your livelihood.

So that journey is finally coming to an end, and we can protect people.

So a lot of pilots, I think also resonate, and air traffic controllers resonate towards counsellors rather than psychologists because they people that would like to find a solution and would like to find a plan how they can assist in their mental health, where psychology base is a little bit more deeper, as we all know.

So counselling fit quite well in that space, and I think it's an exciting space where we as counsellors can start and join.

So yeah. So, it is closely aligned.

I think what was quite surprising for me with my counselling journey, not only did I expect to do something completely different and I'm not, I also expected it to be something where my career calms down a little bit, but the more I push away, the more I join the corporate space.

So I'm sitting on a cultural reform board within my company, thanks to counselling, and then from that, also sit on a psychosocial risk improvement committee.

So I think counselling is something that you can do in a lot of different careers, and we all think that counsellors should be separate, but yet in every single career, counselling's got a space.

And that was the biggest lesson for me.

So yeah. So the only advice, I think, just before I close that I can put-out there is people tell people what your skills are as a counsellor.

I don't think the world out there realize how important we are, whether that's corporate, whether that's aviation, and whether that's the mental health space.

That's a little bit about myself. Thank you.

Thanks, Jacob. That's a really interesting story.

And I think one of the things that I was surprised about when I first joined PACFA was how common it is for counselling to be a second or even third career, but also how cumulative that professional experience is in enabling counselling skills and expertise to be used in so many different places.

And of course, we're sharing stories here today with interest and curiosity about other people. And we don't expect people in the audience to suddenly start working in aviation.

But we are excited to encourage people to think about their own professional experience and what a pivot might look like for them, or what an evolution might look like for them, rather than a complete stop in relation to their previous work.

Rachel, would you mind going next for us and just talking a little bit about your counselling journey, maybe when you started and what you did and what it looks like in terms of a counselling career, particularly in the case of employment and not-for-profits.

Sure. So I had already been working in not-for-profits for a few years before I decided to go back and do a counselling degree.

So I did a bachelor's degree and then a grad dip, both in counselling.

And from there I got some part-time work as a counsellor in a not-for-profit organization that I was already working in, in a different role.

So my first job kind of, I fell into that when a very short term backfill position opened up, and that just meant that I got my foot in the door.

So really for the first probably five or six years of counselling for me, I was part-time counselling and part-time doing other community services work, which suited me because I like a bit of diversity.

I don't like just doing one thing.

So yeah, so I worked in a family and relationship services program for quite a while.

I then became a manager and did middle management, along with some counselling as well. So looking after teams of counsellors.

And then I moved into a mental health NGO and did some work there for a few years as well.

I think probably one of the biggest things I think about working in a not-for-profit and in organizational settings is really understanding that whilst the counselling is your job, it's only one part of your job.

And so it's really about being open to a whole lot of different learning that will enrich your practice.

The more that you learn about different issues, about different communities, about different experiences, about different systemic issues, that all enriches your counselling and really adds to your skillset in that environment.

I think that's probably enough from me for now. I'm sure I'll have lots to say later on.

And we look forward to it. That's fantastic. Thanks, Rachel.

Rebecca, could you give us your story please? And I know it's an interesting one.

And I would just flag that we've already got questions in the chat about the viability of working in corrections.

So we're really keen to hear about your counselling career in these really interesting spaces.

Well, I'll try and make it brief, but can I just start with, I don't actually work in corrections. I work across all the government frontline services and agencies, and I'm 30 years in.

So I'm actually a trauma counsellor and critical incident clinician for first responders and all sorts. But corrections was a special place for me when I worked in Tennant Creek. And so I still do have clients from corrections.

So okay, join some dots a bit differently.

Listening to all the other panellists this morning has been absolutely fantastic.

There are still very odd and unconventional ways into counselling jobs and longevity as counsellors.

And to join my bizarre dots, I started off life after school as a visual artist about 100 centuries ago.

Did an undergrad visual arts degree.

That took me into performance painting in hospitals, believe it or not.

And due to that, I became more and more therapeutically interested in the things happening around me and started to do de-stressing workshops.

Ended up doing an associate diploma of art therapy.

That took me then into other areas where I became the first diversional therapist, art therapist for the Royal Adelaide Hospital, working for brain injury SA, doing groups, et cetera.

And so I've played a catch up for, I'm in my 60s now, and I've played a catch up my whole life where qualifications have had to catch up with experience because often the positions and things I've done, they didn't have courses for in those days.

We all go pioneering in some way.

So I've often said it's a lot about insight, instinct, intuition, and really being courageous and brave.

And I love what other panellists have said about doing other things, trying other things because nothing is ever wasted. Nothing.

I've had a stint in law, stint in microbiology, a little bit of a stint in med, that was hilarious.

Dropped back to psychology and then got into my master's of counselling and have been majoring in trauma ever since.

And sometimes I think my best mantra is if I just keep out of the way and let it evolve, things happen really, really beautifully.

So the most interesting parts I've done, well probably going from contract, having worked in well, group work with psychiatric and personality disorders in residential settings, in medical settings, to remote work.

I've run an NGO, I've worked for NGOs, I've also now worked for governments.

I've got to see the flip side of all those organizations.

It's just always an unbelievable privilege to sit alongside somebody in their humanity and their vulnerability.

You never get tired of that, never.

It's fantastic.

And I just think it's the best job in the world.

It's so flexible. It's so varied.

I would also say learn another language if you can. Honestly, nothing is wasted.

Every hobby, every interest, you will find down the track, clients--

You will find connection with clients through who you are, because it's not so much the roles we're assigned. We are the job.

It's so relational that you are the job, your personality, your instincts, who you are, what you bring to a client with you, what you bring to a critical setting with you.

It's your sense of humour. That's huge. That's everything.

Also incredibly, the ability--

Look, I'll just go back. So I'm a bit caffeinated at the moment.

I liked what originally that you saw with Daniel saying that he's unstoppable.

My personal label is I'm unshockable.

And that comes on with age.

So please, young ones or new ones, don't be hard on yourself if you're having a bit of trouble maintaining or containing other people's horror or other people's despair.

That's where there's fantastic reach out to great supervisors you need, rapport with people you can really talk to.

And yes, I really like what somebody else said about doing 9:00 to 5:00, and this is often not possible, especially if you're in quite intense trauma or forensics or quite close to critical incidents.

You really need to balance it with as much time off as you can in between.

So I will go from having my DNA taken because the rape victim wouldn't let go of me while we're talking, to going and sitting on the beach and collecting shells or doing nothing.

Or you really need to give yourself permission to play, just to play, just to breathe, just to be.

I think that's all I can cover at the moment.

Thanks, Rebecca.

So if we're talking specifically about working with government, in your case, and working in the not-for-profit sector with Rachel, I might go back to her first.

Maybe if you could just talk a little bit, Rachel, about the best parts of working in the not-for-profit environment as a counsellor and the worst parts of working in the not-for-profit environment as a counsellor.

The best part is the diversity and the experience that you get, without a doubt.

And I think one of the probably most surprising things for me, particularly earlier on in my career, was actually how similar the work is with different presentations.

I think especially for people starting private practice, there can be a whole lot of talk and pressure to specialize.

But if we think about what core counselling skills are and the core thing that we do as counsellors, that's meeting another human being.

And I would say 70% of that is the same no matter what the presentation.

And so I think that was really a surprising thing for me to learn and an important thing for me to learn around what it is that I do as a counsellor, what's my professional identity.

I think the challenging thing in not-for-profits, you're never going to find a perfect organization.

I think I know for me and other people that I studied with, we kind of went through study and we had this image of we'll work in an organisation and we'll have a lovely few sessions in a day and we'll have this, this and this.

But every organization has shortcomings in some way.

And that's not to say that organizations are bad, that's just organizations, because the reality is resourcing is always tricky.

So I think probably the biggest thing I would say about working in organizations is being really savvy and thinking about how you can resource your work.

So is it about making sure that you have supervision?

Is it about making sure that you've got a work buddy that you can vent to in a confidential way and it doesn't become toxic and gross?

Don't expect perfection.

Expect good enough and expect to be there for a season and learn what you can learn and get that extra resourcing in.

And then you move on to the next thing and you get to learn a whole lot of other stuff.

It's pretty cool.

That's great, Rachel. Thank you.

Rebecca, drawing on your experience with government, because there is a lot of opportunity for people in government, if they can get through the door and find the right environment for them.