

‘It Gets Harder Every Year’: What It Takes to Win Over the Therapist Workforce

By Chris Larson | June 16, 2026

The therapist workforce is increasingly seeking employers and practice partners that reduce administrative burdens, provide strong clinical support, and offer flexibility in how they work.

Outpatient mental health providers, in turn, are working to make therapists’ jobs as frictionless as possible, strengthen support systems, and refine hiring practices to meet the evolving expectations of clinicians.

“I can tell you it gets harder every year,” said Lisa Miller, Chief Operating Officer of LifeStance Health. “They’re possibly the most sought-after segment out there. We are extremely passionate about continuing to meet the demand for care, which means we have to continue to be attractive to clinicians as we recruit and hire.”

LifeStance Health employed 8,349 clinicians at the end of the first quarter of 2026, an 11% increase over the previous year. The company operates 594 locations across 33 states and is the largest provider of outpatient mental health services in the United States.

Demand for therapists has grown significantly due to the lasting effects of COVID-19 and reduced stigma around seeking mental health treatment. Counseling professions are among the fastest-growing occupations nationally, while increased investment in behavioral health has further intensified competition for therapists.

At the same time, therapists have more opportunities than ever to enter private practice. Therapist-enablement platforms have created new pathways for clinicians to build independent practices with varying degrees of autonomy and administrative support.

“For us, it’s about how we can create as much value [therapists] want or need so that this is the place [they] want to practice,” said Jessica Crain, Chief Operating Officer and Co-Founder of Mindful Therapy Group. “Lots of our providers come to us saying they are on 17 different platforms. Our goal is, ‘Let’s make our services and our offering so good that those platforms become less relevant.’”

Jessica Crain and her husband, Derek Crain, founded Mindful Therapy Group in 2011.

A Snapshot of the Therapist Workforce

Mindful Therapy Group recently surveyed its network of approximately 2,300 contracted clinicians, receiving responses from 204 providers.

Key findings included:

- 59% reported that patient distress levels are somewhat (39%) or significantly (20%) higher than in previous years.
- 78% reported they are either managing (40%) or doing well (39%) personally.
- 91% said world events frequently arise during therapy sessions.
- Common emotions discussed by patients include:

- Anxiety and fear (73%)
- Frustration and anger (61%)
- Hopelessness (58%)

“There’s this assumption with therapists that they sit in that chair and they’re able to disassociate from problems that their patients bring in,” Derek Crain said. “They experience vicarious stress, they experience vicarious trauma, and they internalize all that.”

He noted that therapists are simultaneously navigating their own reactions to a politically charged environment, economic uncertainty, and broader societal challenges while supporting clients experiencing similar concerns.

LifeStance reports continued growth in care-seeking behavior, which Miller attributes largely to reduced stigma and increased willingness to use insurance benefits for therapy.

Colleen Marshall, Chief Clinical Officer at Two Chairs, said clinicians continue to face significant clinical complexity, compounded by the unique challenges of 2026, including economic uncertainty, technological change, and election-year tensions.

“Clinicians need to feel like they know how to support the client with whatever they’re coming in the room with,” Marshall said. “One of the reasons measurement-based care is so important to us is it monitors the progress over time, but it also triggers conversations for the therapist to have informed decisions around what’s happening.”

Employment Versus Contracting

Mental health providers are taking different approaches to engaging therapists.

Mindful Therapy Group operates with an independent contractor model, while LifeStance and Two Chairs primarily employ therapists as W-2 staff.

According to Derek Crain, Mindful’s model provides clinicians with maximum autonomy while handling essential administrative functions such as billing, scheduling, and office space. The company does not impose productivity requirements such as minimum therapy hours.

By contrast, employment models appeal to clinicians seeking greater stability and support.

“That’s why we invest in the W-2 model,” Marshall said. “How do we get that out of their way so that they can really spend their time with their clients and make sure the caseload that they have is right for them?”

Marshall noted that many therapists move between private practice and employment settings throughout their careers as their personal and professional needs evolve.

“All the things that it takes to run a business, clinicians don’t really get trained in that,” she said. “For some folks, that works and they thrive. Others just find that that’s a burden, and they really want that to be taken off their plate.”

Listening to Clinicians Matters

Executives interviewed for the story agreed that therapists want administrative burdens minimized so they can focus on patient care.

Billing and revenue cycle management are among the most significant pain points, particularly as insurers increasingly use artificial intelligence and automated systems to scrutinize claims and payments. Mindful Therapy Group leaders reported a noticeable increase in such activity over the past 18 months.

Artificial intelligence itself has become a divisive topic among clinicians.

At Two Chairs, internal AI tools are optional.

“Because autonomy and flexibility are equally important to them, when we roll these things out, we have to roll them out as a choice,” Marshall said.

Some clinicians embrace the potential efficiency gains, while others prefer not to use AI tools at all.

Mindful Therapy Group is also exploring AI capabilities while focusing heavily on clinician concerns related to ethics, safety, data retention, and how AI systems are trained.

All of the organizations emphasized that AI should support clinicians rather than replace them.

Clinician feedback has also driven broader operational decisions.

Examples include:

- Mindful Therapy Group surveying clinicians about office locations, parking, and commuting preferences before opening new sites.
- LifeStance replacing a stock-based productivity incentive with a cash-bonus program after receiving clinician feedback.
- Ongoing evaluation of benefits and support services based on workforce input.

Recruiting and Retaining Therapists

Like many professionals, therapists want to feel valued, supported, and able to grow professionally.

At LifeStance, support includes continuing education opportunities and both formal and informal professional consultation.

“They hold the emotions of their patients in their hands, and that gets burdensome and it gets isolating,” Miller said. “When they are around their peers, they can debrief, they can download and feel like they have partners that they can work with.”

Marshall noted that recruitment conversations have become increasingly sophisticated. Candidates quickly move beyond discussions of salary and benefits and ask detailed questions about:

- Accountability measures
- Organizational culture
- Technology tools
- Career advancement opportunities
- Leadership pathways
- Clinical support structures

To address this, Two Chairs ensures that clinical leaders participate in the hiring process and maintain close communication with recruiting teams.

According to Marshall, this feedback loop has been instrumental in helping the organization understand clinician perspectives on issues such as AI adoption and workplace support.

The central takeaway from providers across the sector is that therapists increasingly expect employers to reduce administrative burdens, provide meaningful support, offer flexibility, and actively incorporate clinician feedback into organizational decisions. As demand for mental health services continues to grow, competition for qualified therapists is expected to remain intense.