

PROfiles

Health and wellness professionals
who are making a difference

SARAH HAAG
PT, DPT



PROfiles: Sarah Haag

Amy Bowman, OPTP Staff Writer - October 21, 2019

Conversations about bowel, bladder and sexual function are all in a day's work for Physical Therapist Sarah Haag. Because her job as a pelvic health specialist involves talking about deeply personal problems, her role has a bit of a therapist quality to it, "But you certainly would not want to come to me for help with relationship or life issues," she says, laughing.

Sarah helps patients who are experiencing problems with basic, everyday bodily functions. "When those basic functions aren't working well, it can really affect your life," says Sarah. "Plus, there aren't many places to talk about these topics. People come to me with problems they find embarrassing and they don't want to tell their doctor—or they did tell their doctor, who said, 'Well, that's no big deal.' Or, 'That just means you're old.' I let patients know that it's okay to talk about it and that they can get better," she adds.

Discovering a way to help people

The ability to help people get better is what drew Sarah to the physical therapy field in the first place. As the daughter of parents who both work in the medical field, she had exposure to what nurses and doctors do, but it was a volunteering opportunity at a local hospital during high school, and encouragement from her grandmother, that solidified Sarah's interest in physical therapy. "I was volunteering and observing the physical therapists, and I thought—this sounds great because literally my job gets to be helping people do things they want to do and helping them feel better," she says.

Knowing that physical therapy was her ultimate goal, Sarah enrolled in a direct admit program at Marquette University, first completing her sociology degree, followed by a Master's degree in Physical Therapy, which she completed in 2002. After completing a stint at the Texas Back Institute directly out of college, Sarah accepted a position at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, where they were just starting a Women's Health team that they asked Sarah to join. "I said, 'Absolutely!' And it was amazing because it was just a perfect fit," says Sarah. "I was really

inspired and excited to help people experiencing problems with these basic, everyday bodily functions. It's just an absolutely amazing part of the profession to be involved in," she adds.

Sarah feels that her success helping pelvic health patients is partly due to her ability to talk about difficult topics, which she says is a result of her upbringing and her background in sociology. "Studying sociology made me aware that the relationships people have with those around them impacts their lives and that we're all different," she says. "So, for example, if you grew up in a place where women don't exercise, that's important for me to know. If I have a better understanding of that culture, that upbringing, or that value system, it can really be useful when I'm trying to help you figure out a way that's okay to start exercising. It's not just looking at people as bones and joints and muscles, but rather looking at them as people who are trying to figure out how to change their bones and joints and muscles in order to feel better."



Sarah Haag teaching fellow clinicians.

High volume clinics with lower quality care

Getting to know her patients in order to provide better care was difficult when working in high volume clinics in the early years of Sarah's career. "The hardest part was helping people navigate and better understand the healthcare system," she says. "Sometimes there's a disconnect between what good health care is, what health insurance will pay for, and what a healthcare provider is actually able to do," she explains.

Because there are so many moving parts, Sarah says providing quality patient care can be tricky and that a lot of high volume clinics don't do a great job because many clinics expect the PT to see four or five people at a time, patients can't get an appointment as frequently as they should, and treatment isn't individualized because the PT doesn't have time to sit down and listen to them. "When I was in that environment I realized that I was working in a system that wasn't working for me anymore. I wasn't able to give the care that I thought was best," she added.

These frustrations led to a series of conversations with Sarah's friend and fellow physical therapist, Sandy Hilton. The two shared their thoughts on treatment approaches and principles, and the challenges that are present in the healthcare system, which, ultimately, resulted in the decision to open a clinic together. "We wanted to provide health care in a way that is more

efficient and effective,” says Sarah. In 2012, they opened the doors at Entropy Physiotherapy in Chicago, Ill.



Sarah Haag presenting at the Third World Congress of Sports Physical Therapy.

Helping people feel less like patients, more like people

“People come in and say it doesn't feel like a clinic,” says Sarah. “We have normal living room chairs and exposed brick and exposed beams. The whole idea was to have people feel less like patients and more like people who are just trying to work out some physical problems, because another thing we tend to do in the system is medicalize people. And although some problems are ongoing, we shouldn't have people stay patients forever,” she adds.

Helping people get better and get back to their lives as usual involves taking the time to really get to know them, which Sarah has the time to do at the new clinic. “Really understanding why a patient is having trouble doing their home program, really understanding why it's hard for them to make that change, and then working with them to figure it out—that's where we actually have the biggest impact,” says Sarah.

Doing what she set out to do—help people

For Sarah, the process of helping people feel better starts with humanizing the medical system. Here's an example she shared: “I just had a patient this morning who told me, ‘I don't know why I always cry when I'm around you,’ which sounded really terrible. And then she said, ‘No, I just feel really safe and comfortable here.’ I think that's beneficial—and I think that comes down to my ability, especially in the setting I work in now, to shut up and listen and let patients know it's okay.”

In addition to treating patients at Entropy Physiotherapy, Sarah enjoys educating people about pelvic health topics which inspired her to write her first book, *Understanding and Treating Incontinence*. Learn more [here](#).