

HARD FEELINGS: Setting a New Course for Healing

by SCOPO Magazine



WE NEED TO TALK — LITERALLY.

Nearly 7 million Canadians currently struggle with mental health issues in a system where access to publicly funded care is difficult to navigate and resources are limited. But the alternative of private, out-of-pocket therapy is expensive and far beyond the means of most. This unfortunately means that otherwise highly treatable mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety often go unaddressed until they end up ballooning into full-blown crises.

Hard Feelings, founded by Kate Scowen, exists to bridge the access gap. Its small and welcoming storefront near Bloor and Ossington serves as a third option for Torontonians who need help navigating their mental health care options. Hard Feelings is based on a low-cost, short-term therapy model and acts as a safety net to catch those who would otherwise have fallen through the cracks in the system, providing them with the support they need in an accessible and timely way.

“The navigation piece is really complicated and people tend to reach out when they’re in crisis, so at that point a wait of two months seems inaccessible,” Kate points out. *“Our goal is to shift this and make talking about mental health part of everyone’s self-care so that the crisis might be averted.”*

Kate completed her master’s in social work later in life, after a career as a youth and community worker. The idea of private practice appealed to her, but she wanted a space where she could both offer her services at a low cost and benefit from the presence of other therapists. *“I wanted to practice in a community where I could have camaraderie and support. Sitting with people’s psychological pain [on a regular basis] can be a challenging experience and private practice can be isolating,”* she admits.

She was also acutely aware of the barriers to access that many Canadians face, even as mental health challenges become increasingly prevalent in our public discourse. Kate began to formulate an idea that, if successful, would act as an alternative pathway for counsellors and clients alike who are constantly coming up against the walls of our current mental health care system.



Kate spent several years developing the model. She established Hard Feelings as an incorporated nonprofit and brought together an active board of directors. Finding the right space was key to the model's success. On a spring day in 2017, Kate was walking down Bloor Street when she came across an empty shop. The sign in the window declared it was for rent, which she took as a literal sign. A few months later, Hard Feelings opened its doors and Kate's idea became a reality.



path forward. Hard Feelings originally opened with eight counsellors, but in two years they've grown exponentially, with 27 currently renting space in the small building and 60 more on a waitlist to join.

COMMUNITY, CONNECTIONS AND CONVERSATION

"People say all the time, 'Thank you for being here,' 'This is amazing,' 'I never thought I'd be able to do this work,'" Kate says with a warm and humble smile. "People come into this space and feel safe and welcome. Mental health for a lot of people is pathologized, so to create a space that's welcoming is innovative and important."

Kate is clear that Hard Feelings is not intended to be a final destination for everyone. *"We do a lot of*



By providing rental space for independent counsellors, Hard Feelings facilitates the delivery of short-term therapy for those who need help while they navigate their best

navigation for people, helping them find the resources they need, even if it's not Hard Feelings," she explains. "But that doesn't mean we don't see [those who need



> *ongoing care] here. People with complex presentations [of mental health challenges] often don't know where to go and can't access supports.* Kate and her team work hard to ensure that they're creating a space where all who enter — whether they are doing the work of counselling or benefitting from it — feel supported.

But Hard Feelings faces its own challenges. The demand for mental health care is increasing, and being able to meet that demand while still retaining their low-cost, short-term model can be difficult. Kate herself is a full-time volunteer in her own organization. *"I told myself I would do this work pro bono for three years,"* Kate confesses. *"Looking for funding can be frustrating and complex, so figuring out new paths of sustainability is important."*

Hard Feelings is a social enterprise, which



is a big part of its innovative model. Unlike mental health organizations that rely on public funding and grants, Hard Feelings generates revenue through office rentals to counsellors combined with sales from their storefront. This accounts for a large part of their sustainability, and they hold several online fundraising campaigns each year to garner further support from private donors.

"I love practicing," Kate affirms. *"I want this to be a concrete, solid model that we can share with others and that they can take and run with."* Demand to replicate the model is high, and Kate is creating a manual to share it with others. She's also actively looking to develop partnerships with donors and organizations interested in social innovation in mental health.

By offering community, support and short-term access to care, Hard Feelings is disrupting both the publicly funded and private mental health care models. *"We are not a traditional mental health service,"* Kate clarifies. *"We are an innovative pathway to accessing mental health support. Under every behaviour is a feeling, and under every feeling is a need. If we can help people explore this in a safe and destigmatized environment, maybe we can help them deepen their connections to themselves and others."*

Connections are the core of Hard Feelings. With an atmosphere of support for each other and for their clients, Kate and her team have their boots on the ground and their hearts in the work. They meet the myriad challenges they face with enthusiasm and a deep-seated passion for what they do, bridging the gaps in our current system through much-needed care and conversation. ●

