



Sherry Benton

St. Petersburg, Florida



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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Sherry Benton:

Sherry Benton, founder of TAO Connect, which offers a suite of online tools for client education, interaction, accountability, and progress assessment to facilitate effective treatment, enjoyed a successful career as a practicing psychologist and counseling center director before being thrust into the world of entrepreneurship.

"I am completely an accidental entrepreneur," she said. "I am what is referred to as an encore entrepreneur. I'm a psychologist by training and have always been passionate about finding ways to reduce mental health disparities and increase access to mental health care. I thought this could really be a game changer and decided to pursue it as a business. For me, it was about the mission more than about the business or being an entrepreneur. It is the vehicle to trying to make a

difference in terms of people's mental health care."

Benton invented the tools while at the University of Florida. She received feedback that her creation was commercially viable and was encouraged to explore that option. When UF's Office of Commercialization agreed and decided to move forward, Benton decided to join the effort. With assistance from both Florida High Tech Corridor and SBIR grants, TAO Connect has grown rapidly. In only two years, TAO Connect is now used in 57 college and university centers and an outpatient mental health clinic is in the works.

"I thought 'this has been the mission of my life and I want to do this,'" she explained. "They put me in their business incubator and I started to build it. Our CEO says that there are two emotions in a startup: elation and terror and you'll experience both virtually every day. The difference it makes for people is what keeps me going. We hear stories from counseling centers about the help it's providing and that's very gratifying."

Benton's advice for aspiring entrepreneurs is to persist in the face of chaos. "Understand that chaos is normal and ups and downs are really part of the deal," she said. "You're not alone in experiencing startup chaos. Make sure you attend to your self care to survive the experience. Persistence is key. Seek out advice and mentoring from people who have been through it before."

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