Think psychotherapy, think Woody Allen on a leather couch, with a bearded egghead asking Oedipal questions. A more authentic scene, however, would be a couple of chairs and a one-to-one talk with a therapist in a quiet room for 50 minutes. Add a few more chairs and patients and it's a group therapy session.

This week, Downing Street adviser and London School of Economics Professor Lord Richard Layard claimed the NHS needs an extra 10,000 therapists. He believes that talking treatments are as important as prescription drugs to help the 3 million people suffering from depression in the UK. But what attracts someone to a profession that deals with stress, emotional and relationship problems and troublesome habits?

It was voluntary work with homeless adolescents at a Centrepoint hostel in London that convinced a former lobbyist at the centre of the New Labour cash-for-access scandal to become a psychotherapist.

"My mates reckoned I wouldn't have the patience," says Derek Draper, pictured. "But what I discovered in that hostel was that I had the patience to deal with people and their problems."

Even before his "expulsion" from Westminster in 1998, Draper says that he had lost his passion for politics. A subsequent career in advertising provided little fulfilment. "At least when I was selling New Labour I believed in it," he says.

Although the effectiveness of psychotherapy has been questioned ever since a clinical study by the German psychologist Han Eysenck 50 years ago, talking treatments are now firmly in the mainstream. Last year, therapists and counsellors were incorporated in to the NHS pay scales for the first time. "It was basically an official recognition of their role," says Gilly White of the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (BACP).

According to White, psychotherapy is a second career for most people. The average trainee is aged 40 or over, has "plenty of life experience" and was previously either a teacher, social worker, nurse or carer. But it's definitely not a quick career switch and those who are interested in becoming a therapist should be wary of fast-track and distance courses, warns White.

Bruce Sparrow, of the UK Council for Psychotherapists (UKCP), agrees. "Training is demanding; courses are a minimum of four years part-time and are often expensive, so it is important to learn about what is available and be clear about what you want before you embark on one," he says. There are, for example, eight accredited university courses in child psychotherapy available in the UK, including ones in Birmingham, Glasgow and London.

Draper decided to train abroad. He moved to San Francisco, a "fantastic place for psychotherapists", and enrolled in a full-time MA in clinical psychology at UC Berkeley, California. The course offered "very hands-on training", with students embarking on supervised consultations within the first month. By graduation, he had completed 1,500 supervised hours.

An average working week consists of three days seeing patients and one day of study, including a doctorate in psychoanalytical studies at Essex University and research on individual case problems.

Draper describes his job as fulfilling rather than enjoyable. There are days when little progress is being made with a patient or he has to accept that he cannot help. But, he says: "Occasionally, you feel you have made a difference for somebody who feels miserable or in some kind of pain and you help them break free from that."