

# **Therapy Without a Therapist**

A DIY Guide to Good Mental Health & Growth



Avigail Abarbanel

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Fully Human Psychotherapy  
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Therapy Without a Therapist  
*A DIY Guide to Good Mental Health & Growth*

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**Note:** This book is not intended as a substitute for needed medical or psychological treatment. It should not be used for diagnosis or treatment of any illness. Please seek the advice and care of a professional if you experience severe symptoms.

## Introduction

Captain Jean-Luc Picard (to Ralph Offenhouse):

“A lot has changed in the past three hundred years. People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We’ve eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We’ve grown out of our infancy.” ...

Ralph Offenhouse: “Then what’s the challenge?”

Captain Jean-Luc Picard: “The challenge, Mr. Offenhouse, is to improve yourself. To enrich yourself. Enjoy it.”

— \*Star Trek, The Next Generation. (Episode: ‘The Neutral Zone’. 1988.)

Some people laugh when they read on my website that my aim as a psychotherapist is to ‘make myself redundant’. As you read on, I hope my reason for saying this and what I mean by it will become obvious.

I was trained within a therapeutic tradition<sup>1</sup> that does *not* view psychotherapy as something similar to what a technician does when he or she fixes a machine. If a car doesn’t start, we think of it as broken. The purpose of a car is to move on its own power and take us from one place to another. We consider a car broken when it doesn’t work and doesn’t fulfil the purpose for which it was created. A car does not suffer when it is broken. But it is an inconvenience for us so we take it to the mechanic to be fixed so it can work again and do what it’s supposed to do. But what about humans? What are humans supposed to ‘do’ or ‘be’? What are we, humans, ‘for’?

My tradition of therapy does not view human beings as ‘broken objects’ that need fixing. Most human beings are not even unwell psychologically. And yet my diary is always full and most of the people

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\* For non-Star Trek fans: In this 1988 episode of *The Next Generation*, the starship ‘Enterprise’ comes across cryogenic pods from the late Twentieth Century. When the three humans in them are thawed and healed, they find the 24th Century very different from the reality they remember. The conversation above is between the Captain and Ralph Offenhouse, a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century fifty-five-year-old financier, whose whole life was about the accumulation of money and possessions.

<sup>1</sup> The therapy tradition I was trained on is *humanistic* and *existential*.

who come to therapy think they are ‘malfunctioning’ in some way. They think something in them is broken and needs to be fixed, like a car or a washing machine. They think something in them is broken because they don’t feel good or are unhappy in some way or something in their lives isn’t going the way they believe it should.

In our societies, people are expected to be happy, or at least OK, with the life they have and with what they do regardless of anything. What happens when they are not happy, depends upon who pays the price. If people are still able to carry on functioning despite not being happy, it doesn’t much matter to their employers or society if they drink a bit too much, eat a bit too much, watch TV a bit too much, are not very nice to their children or partners or are generally stressed and not so healthy. Few employers care when it is their employees’ children who pay the price for their parents’ unhappiness. As long as the children themselves keep going to school and seem to be ‘OK’, then everything keeps going.

Only severe cases of child abuse or neglect come to the attention of the authorities or social services. But a lot of suffering stays ‘under the radar’ because things can seem OK on the surface. As long as people, including children and young people, keep fulfilling their duties or do what they are expected to do, no one much cares. My point is that I think people in our society are measured by what they *do*, not who they are. We seem to be looking at people as ‘human doings’, not so much as human *beings*. We are seen or evaluated by what we contribute to the economy, by our ‘economic output’, rather than by who we are.

Under our current economic system human functioning is measured by people’s ability to get up in the morning and do their job. It does not really matter whether they like it or not, whether it makes them happy and regardless of whether they are treated well. People have to earn a living, do the shopping and pay the bills, take the children to school, take care of their home if they have one, not fall apart and not stop functioning. It is mostly when people’s unhappiness begins to interfere with *functioning*, that they are considered to have a ‘mental health problem’. A lot of people seek therapy only when they really can’t function anymore, when they have reached the limits of their own resources.

From this perspective, therapy is seen as an activity or service that is expected to help people ‘get on with it’ and continue to function. If

functioning is the most important measure of being a 'healthy' or a 'good' person, it is no wonder that so many people see psychological difficulties as a matter of shame and asking for help as an admission of personal failure.

This approach to life and to mental health and therapy is as ignorant, uncaring and cruel as what led the British military to execute soldiers with 'shellshock' for being 'cowards' and 'deserters' during the First World War. The British military did not care how these soldiers were feeling or what was happening to them psychologically. All it cared about was that they continued to do what was expected of them. When they couldn't, they didn't even deserve to live anymore. They were *objects* for a purpose, like a car or a machine and were deemed useless when they couldn't fulfil their function. Killing them was meant not only as a punishment to them but as a powerful deterrent to anyone else who might break down (as if a traumatic response is a choice).

I remember sitting through a module on career counselling back in the early days of my training to become a therapist. The trainer, a highly paid corporate psychologist, started his lecture telling us that 95% of people work in jobs or occupations they don't care much for and that do not fulfil them. Only 5%, he said, were among those fortunate enough to earn a living doing something they feel passionate about. I expected the next sentence to be something about how our job as therapists would be to help those in the 95% group to move to a more fulfilling career, but no... He said our job would be to help the unhappy 95% to find a way to somehow cope and be OK with what they are doing and with their lives. He said that this is 'just how things are in the world' and it was simply 'not realistic' for people to expect anything else.

I remember feeling shocked and depressed hearing this. As a new psychotherapy trainee, I was a member of the 95%. I had a job as an admin assistant but a dream to open my own psychotherapy practice someday. Here was an 'expert' telling me that I was 'unrealistic'. His message was that I should not hope to make a living doing what I felt passionate about, because that's just not how the world worked...

I have been disappointed with the way that my profession has been colluding with the objectification of people and I see generations of

people being let down by therapy. What passes as therapy today<sup>2</sup> can be described as little more than putting a plaster on a wound and getting people back out there to function so they continue to be productive ‘economic units’.

Is this what psychotherapy should be? Is it OK that so much of psychotherapy is an exercise in helping unhappy people *cope* with being unhappy regardless of how they live? Is it OK for my profession to do so little to make a real difference to society as a whole? Is it OK that people are taught to expect so little out of their life or out of life in general?

No one does well when all they are offered is survival from day to day, when they live in an anxious, fearful state all or most of the time. Human beings need more than just existence to be well. Yes, there is dignity in coping for a little while if things are difficult. Bad things happen and sometimes it isn’t anyone’s fault. But if coping is what life has to offer to most people, then I can see why as societies we have such a problem with mental health. This book is about an approach to human beings, to psychology and psychotherapy and to life that is not just about functioning.

A few years into my work as a psychotherapist, I began to realise that my profession doesn’t need to exist. We already know all we need to know about how to raise whole and thriving human beings. We know how to nurture children to grow into adults who can do a great deal more than just survive and therefore will not need psychotherapy. But we don’t use this knowledge.

Despite the fact that we know what humans need in order to thrive, we do not seem to have the will to offer the best conditions for everyone to develop to their full potential. Farmers don’t just throw seeds on the ground and hope for the best. They know how to give their crops the best conditions to develop their full potential. If farmers operated their farms like we run societies, we would starve. Perhaps psychotherapy exists because we are starving psychologically and spiritually<sup>3</sup>.

Everything in nature has an in-built need to develop to its full potential. But we humans are unique in that for us, developing our

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<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, many good therapists who do great work and who also try to make a difference to society. But I believe they are the exception not the rule.

<sup>3</sup> There are millions of humans on the planet who are starving because they do not have enough food. They and their children don’t even get the option of thinking about more than daily survival. This is inexcusable.

potential includes a need for purpose and meaning. Nature wants us to continue to exist to make more copies of ourselves so that our species continues. But we, humans, need our life to *mean* something. Even if we are physically well and live a long life we might not feel fulfilled unless we have a sense of meaning in our existence.

But we already know that psychological (and therefore also physical) symptoms are an indication that people are not moving towards the fulfilment of their potential. They are surviving but not thriving. People often describe this as feeling being ‘stuck in a rut’ or that life feels ‘dull’ or ‘pointless’. Even people who are financially well off and might have ‘everything you could wish for’ can feel this way. For a human being, a life without purpose or meaning feels empty. Even people with learning disabilities, people at the end of their lives or people with advanced dementia still have a need for purpose and meaning all the way to the end. Sadly, this is often overlooked. Prolonging life tends to be prioritised over our human need for meaning and purpose.

I have a job as a psychotherapist because we are a self-aware species. We *know* when we suffer or are unhappy. We know that we don’t choose when or where to be born or to whom. We know we are going to die someday and we have no idea when or how. We know we will lose people we love and if that’s not enough, we also worry about our purpose and the meaning of our existence.

No one comes to therapy to ask for advice on how to survive physically. My clients come to therapy because they are not happy in some way with their life, their work, their relationships or themselves. Their soul is hurting. They are suffering and they don’t want to die feeling this way. Many clients tell me they don’t want to pass on their unhappiness to their children.

Some people come to therapy saying they just want to feel better. But this isn’t because they don’t want to grow or find a purpose. Mostly it is because they don’t know, or maybe don’t dare to hope that there is more they can expect from life. They certainly have no idea that therapy, or at least some approaches to therapy can help guide them in that direction. I know this because so many clients have told me this over the years. This book is about a way of looking at human beings, mental health and life that is not focused only on functioning. Psychotherapy can and should be about more than just coping.

Unfortunately, most people have no idea what psychotherapy is or what it can offer them. So another goal I have is to try to take the mystery out of therapy and mental health. In this book I share a practical, science-based approach to therapy that focuses on our potential, not on fixing problems.

The last two decades have seen significant advances in neuroscience and our understanding of psychology. These advances have made it possible for most people to practise things for themselves that could be life-changing. This book offers the way I work with my clients to everyone. An added bonus is that anyone responsible for small children or young people can learn how to help them develop into adults who might never need therapy at all.



I do not work with people who have mental health diagnoses, such as personality disorder, psychosis, bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia. Since I don't know how the work I do might impact on people with these conditions, I choose not work with such diagnoses.

I also do not see people who are actively drinking or abusing drugs or who are in serious crisis. If people do have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, they need to be completely clean, committed to recovery and have a strong support network before I can accept them for therapy. A therapist in private practice cannot provide crisis support and cannot provide the ongoing and close support that is needed when people are just starting on a journey to recover from an addiction.

It is a matter of ethics for each therapist to know what they can and cannot offer people. Like all professionals, therapists have to work within the boundaries of their training and what they know they can offer.

A fundamental principle in my profession is 'do no harm'. If you do no good, at least don't do any harm. Nothing in this book is harmful. But if you do have a serious condition, you need to make sure you see someone and not try to deal with it on your own. If you have a history of childhood trauma it is also important that you seek an appropriately trained professional who can offer you the help and support you need.





I don't believe that our individual happiness and wellbeing can or should ever be seen in isolation from our society and our relationships. This is why this book is not just for us as individuals. It is also for us as societies and groups. The knowledge we now have carries the potential to change us as a species. We have a potential we can fulfil and we do not have to continue to repeat harmful or unhelpful patterns both as individuals and as societies.

Each of us has an impact on what our groups and societies feel like to live in, the 'atmosphere' within them, how they function, what they value, how they choose to distribute resources, how they look after our physical environment and how they treat individuals. In turn, the societies we are born into determine how we each develop, the resources we have access to, the nature of our physical and relational environment and what opportunities are available to us. Our societies can either contribute to our individual growth and development, or move us away from them by forcing us to spend too much of our time and mental resources on just coping or surviving from day to day.

As each of us moves towards fulfilling our potential, towards being well, we interact with others differently. As we change, we have a positive impact on everyone around us, not just by what we consciously do or say, but by our very presence. This book is for those who hope to get more out of life, who wonder why things in the human world can be so disappointing and why so many of us feel so powerless.



I have tried to keep the publications in this series as short as possible. The feedback I have been receiving has repeatedly confirmed that this has been a good decision. Many people look for self-help literature when they are not at their best and might not have the 'brain space' to read a long book. I am aware that by keeping it short, I also have to leave things out. I do, however, try to include everything I think is important and to communicate in a clear and focused way so that the reader can make the most out of the time they put into reading. I encourage you, as always, to read widely to continue to learn, to question what I write and to always use as many resources as you can.

Each chapter in this book builds on those that come before it. If you read them in order they will reflect the coherent framework I am trying to communicate. However, if you choose to read selectively, I have repeated key concepts in a few places, so that hopefully things will still make sense.

This book provides both the theory and the practice that I use in my work and it reflects over two decades of clinical work and research in independent psychotherapy practice. The reason I feel confident enough to share the way I work in a book is not because I know everything. It is because as a practitioner I have a professional, moral and ethical duty to ensure that what I know and what I do in my work is beneficial to my clients. Plenty of ongoing feedback from clients that what they do in therapy with me leads to life-long changes gives me enough confidence to share my work.

I hope you will find this book useful and thank you so much for reading it and for being a person who seeks to grow and develop. Just by developing yourself, you already make a difference.

I welcome feedback on everything I write. You can contact me through my practice website at <http://fullyhuman.co.uk> or my blog at <http://avigail-abarbanel.me.uk>.

Avigail Abarbanel

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