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PART I

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# Confronting the Issues

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## CHAPTER 1

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# On Being a Therapist— and the Consequences of This Choice

Being a therapist has its consequences, for better and worse. On the one hand, you enjoy benefits that accrue to a professional who has devoted considerable time and energy to becoming interpersonally skilled and wise. There are things you know and things you can do that make it sometimes appear to others as if you can read minds and work magic. Indeed, you do understand aspects of effective living that remain a mystery to many others.

On the other hand, this profession offers nowhere to hide. Your worst fears are played out in sessions every day. You suffer the stresses and strains inherent to looking deeply into the core of what it means to be human—including the terrors, challenges, and torments that most people prefer to keep buried. Almost every week, if not every day, you encounter people living out the nightmares you, yourself, fear the most—addicted to drugs, out of control, mortally wounded from abuse they have suffered, depressed and suicidal, monumentally self-destructive, without hope. In addition, being a therapist forces you to examine your own motives for the choices you have made and continue to make, including the decision to be a therapist in the first place.

## Why You Became a Therapist

Examining your motives for becoming a therapist is a logical place to begin this personal journey. It isn't as if you've never given the subject some thought,

nor been asked to recite an appropriate, usually altruistic, set of reasons that highlight your devotion to service to humankind. Surely the allure of fame and riches weren't the big attraction; rather, most of us felt drawn to the idea that we might do some good for others—and, we hoped, for ourselves as well.

## Your Hopes

When we began this journey, each of us had some fantasies about what being a therapist would be like. I pictured myself ministering to the walking wounded, healing them with a kind word or brilliant story. I hoped that my family and friends would respect what I was doing; even more important, I wished I would finally respect myself. I thought about working in the company of a dozen like-minded folks, colleagues who were wise and witty and open and caring. I imagined that I would feel good about the work I would be doing, that it would be important and valuable; it would be a true calling to which I could devote all my boundless energy.

Once upon a time, you had some definite dreams, as well hazy fantasies, about what your training would prepare you to do. List here, in no particular order, a few things you hoped to achieve by becoming a therapist.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

### **Meeting Your Expectations**

In spite of what we imagined becoming a therapist might involve and what it would do for us, such expectations were often based on misguided assumptions and inadequate information. In my own case, it turned out that I learned far more than I ever thought possible about the means by which to better understand others and myself. Many of my initial expectations were exceeded with respect to learning interpersonal skills, helping strategies, and useful ways to make sense of the world. Yet I was surprised at how little I actually learned in the classroom compared to practical experiences in the field, informal

conversations with classmates and instructors, and certainly lessons from my clients. I was shocked by the hypocrisy I encountered among professionals in the field, especially among those who didn't seem to be able to practice in their own lives what they were supposedly teaching to us. Finally, I was disappointed to discover that my therapist training did not forever banish my self-doubts, as I had hoped.

Review the list you created in the previous exercise, and reflect on the items you described. Compare what you hoped would happen to what has actually taken place in your work as a therapist. For a few of the items just identified, jot down some notes to yourself about the extent to which you satisfied your expectations.

1.

2.

3.

In the space provided, consider which items you listed that you are not feeling especially hopeful about. Say something to yourself about how your dreams were compromised or abandoned.

### **Some Personal Motives**

Let's take it as a given that almost everyone in this field is, to some degree, committed to helping other people and making the world a better place. We all hoped that we could do something useful as a result of our therapist training. Perhaps we even thought that others might profit from the pain we suffered or the obstacles we faced in our lives.

It is a bit more challenging, and a lot more threatening, to examine the intensely personal and private reasons that may have led you to become a therapist. These motives were not part of your conscious hopes or your expressed expectations. Even now it is rare to hear therapists speak aloud about the personal reasons they do this sort of work—beyond, of course, their desire to help others. Nevertheless, many of us do acknowledge that being a therapist provides us with a degree of respectability, a feeling of self-efficacy, and a way of enjoying one-way intimacy in which we are the ones in control, the ones with the power.

I am reluctant to admit that I became a therapist because I hoped to reassure myself about my own emotional stability. The more clients I saw, the more convinced I became that I wasn't as crazy as I thought I was. I found that I enjoyed being the one in charge of the relationship, the one who was treated with respect, as if I really knew and understood things that, quite honestly, seemed awfully vague to me. Furthermore, I really enjoyed hearing people's stories; it satisfied my intense curiosity as a spectator. But unlike watching television, I could even tinker with the plot. And each time someone was influenced positively by my efforts, I felt redeemed, as if what I did really mattered. Because I felt so worthless early in life, to this day I don't feel totally comfortable before I fall asleep at night unless I can identify something helpful that I did for others.

In the following list of personal motives that some therapists have acknowledged, check those items that seem to fit for you:

- Need for control
- Need for power
- Observe as a spectator
- One-way intimacy
- Understand people or myself
- Become an instrument of change
- Obtain self-therapy
- Save the world
- Rescue and heal
- Be a know-it-all
- Live vicariously
- Earn prestige and respect
- Make a decent living
- Settle into a profession

These are just a few of the many possibilities that could have influenced, and may still have an impact on, your decision to be a

therapist. In the space provided, speak as honestly and openly as you can about the personal motives you have for doing therapeutic work.

## Consequences of Being a Therapist

Our clients often come to us with wildly unrealistic expectations about what we can do to help them. They seem to think we have magic wands, that we will “cure” their spouses, banish their addictions, fix all their problems, or agree with them completely. We may find their innocence or ignorance amusing, if not counterproductive to our efforts; but at times, the hopes we held for what therapist training would do for us were no more realistic.

Regardless of the personal as well as professional motives at stake, a number of misconceptions were, and continue to be, perpetuated during training years. Only after we get into the field and spend considerable time facing the realities of therapeutic practice do we learn a number of difficult lessons for which we may have been unprepared. For example, clinical practice is not composed of a series of decision points at which there are only four choices, like a multiple-choice test, one of which is correct; nor are the answers we are searching for found in the indexes of books. Furthermore, some clients will not

improve much no matter how hard we try, and some situations we will face will have no satisfactory resolutions.

In therapist training programs we often got the idea that we would have plenty of time to set up treatment plans and implement them. Little did we fully understand that, much of the time, we would be lucky to have a half-dozen sessions with a very disturbed client. Then there was all the paperwork and organizational politics, for which we may have been unprepared. Little did we realize that some of our most difficult challenges would come from dealing with our own colleagues!

Supply personal examples of the following lessons that directly contradict what you expected originally. Whereas some of these lessons might fit your situation, others will not; address the ones that speak most to your own experience.

- Life isn't a multiple-choice exam.
- Answers aren't found in books.
- What you do is often absurd.
- Your family still won't listen to you.

- You will never feel good enough.
- You will never really understand how therapy works.
- This job has negative side effects.
- Some people don't respect what you do.
- Some clients don't improve no matter what you do.

## **Stages of Growth and Transformation**

The unrealistic expectations and distorted hopes we held, the things we never learned in school, didn't prepare us for all the inevitable difficulties we faced along the journey. Nevertheless, by talking to more experienced colleagues,

you probably learned that you weren't alone in your struggles: All therapists go through a series of stages along their journeys.

During the training years, a number of themes emerge that are quite different from those that occur during the middle career stages or the later years as a veteran and then a master practitioner. Whether you are just beginning your training in school, in your first years of practice, a veteran enjoying a sense of competence, or a mentor and supervisor for others, you experience some unique developmental challenges to remain energized and avoid burnout. Of course, most of us straddle more than one of these stages at a time.

For each of these stages that applies to you, write down one story from your own life to describe how this theme resonates with your experiences.

**Training Stage: "What if I Don't Have What It Takes?"**

Example: I remember sitting in my first class, looking around the room, thinking to myself that everyone else seemed so much brighter than me. Sometimes I didn't even understand the questions they asked, much less the answers that were given.

**Hero Worship Stage: "If Only I Could Be Like You."**

Example: Some of my professors and supervisors seemed to know and understand everything. I was in awe of the seemingly effortless way that they could get to the core of an issue and then provide an assortment of apparently brilliant interventions. They never

seemed to be at a loss, and always seemed to know exactly what to do in any situation.

**Enchantment Stage: “I Can’t Believe I Get Paid for Doing This!”**

Example: I was sitting with this one client who was so interesting, so grateful for my help, that I felt like paying *her* for the privilege of talking to her. I think I learned as much from her as she learned from me.

**Competence Stage: “I Seem to Know What I’m Doing!”**

Example: There came a time when I began to notice that I could anticipate what my supervisors would say to me. In fact, after a while I was using them more as a sounding board for my own ideas. Then I became aware that I was picking out a few things that even they didn’t notice or understand.

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### **Honeymoon Stage: “Hey, I’m Really Good at This!”**

Example: It’s rare these days when a new client comes in that I don’t feel reasonably confident that I can do something to be helpful. At least, I usually have a good idea where to start.

### **Midcareer Doubt Stage: “What If I’m Not Really Doing Anything?”**

Example: I’ve been thinking a lot lately about whether my life’s work really means anything, whether what I’ve been doing all these years really makes much of a difference. It seems as if no matter how hard I work or how much I learn, so many people I see don’t have much of a chance in life.

### **Preburnout Stage: “Another Day, Another Dollar.”**

Example: This has become just a job to me. I sit with my clients, try to stay attentive most of the time, accept the limits of what I can do, and leave the rest to them. I figure, in just a few more years I can move into another job so I don’t have to do this stuff anymore. It’s just not the same anymore.

**Revitalization Stage: “What in Me Is Getting in the Way?”**

Example: I’ve recently experienced a rebirth of sorts. I have completely changed the way I do things. For many years I felt I’d become stale, seeing the same old clients doing pretty similar things. Now I’ve refashioned myself, developed a new specialty area, and started confronting more often the ways I have avoided looking at my own blocks. I’ve never felt more creative and excited by the work that I do.

**Mentorship Stage: “You Want to Be Like Me?”**

Example: I seem to have attained that place once occupied by my own mentors: Therapists now come to me for guidance. I’m not sure exactly when or how this happened, but it almost seems as if I have attained a degree of wisdom.

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## Review

This chapter begins the journey by examining your initial hopes and expectations for being a therapist and comparing them to the realities of your professional practice. You looked at the stages of your growth and evolution as a practitioner, starting from where you've been and, now, heading toward the future. Beginners projected themselves into the future, while veterans looked back on their earliest years.

In reviewing the thoughts and feelings that were stirred up in you while doing the preceding reflective exercises, what one issue stands out for you, and is one that you want to hold onto?