

HOW TO FLOURISH AS A PSYCHOTHERAPIST

Brett Kahr



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*To my wonderful students, past and present,
who have listened to me with open-minded affection
and with engaging challenge.*

“Sie arbeiten und zeugen und verdienen, daß beide Werke gut geraten.”

(Freud, 1912a, p. 119)

*[“You work and you create and you deserve that
both your efforts should flourish.”]*

(Freud, 1912b, p. 107)

*Professor Sigmund Freud, Letter to
Dr. Ludwig Binswanger, 16th December, 1912*

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“Meine Kleine gedeiht”

(Freud, 1887a, p. 4)

[“My little one is flourishing”]

(Freud, 1887b, p. 16).

*Dr. Sigmund Freud, Letter to Dr. Wilhelm Fliess, 24th November, 1887,
regarding the birth of Mathilde Freud*

INTRODUCTION

Survival May Not Be Enough

As a full-time psychotherapist, I spend much of my life seated quietly in a brown leather chair, listening to the most agonising, heart-wrenching tales of woe.

Many people would not particularly relish such a sedentary and, sometimes, burdensome profession. But I find it deeply engaging and satisfying and, over time, increasingly so, as I become more and more adept at helping my patients to live peaceful, fulfilling, even joyful, lives.

But characterological transformations do not occur magically. Psychotherapeutic work can be extremely taxing. Many of my colleagues suffer from profound stress and burn-out, and quite a number of them often lament that they never made a success of their careers. Some retired after decades in a state of deep despondency because they had never achieved their goals and desires.

In recent years, psychotherapists have become frustrated, if not frightened, because the professional marketplace has become extremely crowded, and more and more colleagues now struggle to earn a living.

In view of these challenges, how does one develop a truly rich and rewarding career in psychotherapy? How can we put a secure structure in place? How can we develop our skills and capacities and intelligence? How can we conquer our creative inhibitions? How can we derive deep delight from such painful work?

More than a quarter of a century ago, the distinguished British psychoanalyst, Dr. Nina Coltart (1993), wrote a book entitled *How to Survive as a Psychotherapist*, which certainly captured the imagination of many younger colleagues at the time of publication, myself included. This topic—survival—has remained so firmly embedded in the minds of psychotherapists that, in 2015, the British Psychoanalytic Council, in collaboration with the Association of Child Psychotherapists, actually sponsored a day-conference entitled “Life as a Therapist—How to Survive!”, replete with exclamation point.

Although nothing could be more important, psychotherapy practitioners must not only survive but we must also *thrive* in order to derive true satisfaction from our work. In doing so, we not only bring comfort and fulfilment and meaning to ourselves and to our families but, above all, we become models of hope and inspiration for our patients, who scrutinise our very state of being with much intensity.

Hence, I hope that while Nina Coltart may have helped us to *survive* this challenging work, we might also wish to explore how to *flourish* as psychotherapists.

In the pages that follow, I offer a frank portrait of the life of the psychotherapist, from cradle to grave, and I hope that these very blunt remarks will be of use to clinicians at every stage of development. Naturally, I recognise that these observations and recommendations derive predominantly from my own experience and from those of close colleagues and students. Certainly, I appreciate that there may be many other ways in which one might flourish. But for the truly enthused practitioner, this book offers some guidance on how one can undertake the *maximum*, rather than the *minimum*, in order to prosper in every respect.