

# BRINGING YOUR HEART TO WORK

A Seven-Step Journey to  
Mental Health and Wellbeing

*Hazel A. Hyslop*



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## About the author

**Hazel Hyslop** currently works as an executive professional leadership coach as well as a systemic psychotherapist, tutor, and supervisor. Her passion is helping organisations invest in and develop their leaders. She has a keen interest in working with women in leadership. Hazel has a background in mental health nursing, psychology, systemic psychotherapy, and coaching. She's worked in the field of mental health in clinical, leadership, and training roles in the NHS, as well as in social services, education, charities, and corporate sectors. Hazel has worked across various multicultural and social contexts in areas such as the London boroughs of Hackney, Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham, and Kensington & Chelsea, Essex, Kent, and the West Midlands. Hazel brings extensive knowledge and experience in delivering and leading services across multiple contexts locally, nationally, and globally. Aside from her working life, Hazel enjoys sea swimming, Pilates, walking, dancing, djembe drumming, and writing.

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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

*You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.*

—Buckminster Fuller

Everyone, at some point in their lives, will come to ask the question, is this it? Is this all my life is going to be? Have I achieved all that I set out to do? When clients come to me, a familiar story that I hear all the time is, “I am lost, I have no purpose or I feel stuck. I don’t know who I am anymore. I just don’t seem to have any motivation.” When I hear these statements, usually my heart leaps because I know that this person is at a crossroads. I know that they are experiencing some form of transformation, which makes them feel scared and powerless. Arriving at a place that is unfamiliar and uncertain can elicit natural responses, a moment that leads to questioning the meaning of life. Questions such as, What is the point? Who am I? What is my purpose?—are common when in this state of mind.

Almost immediately I can detect that my clients are not working in alignment with their values. They have lost their sense of purpose.

Usually they have been busy chasing success, striving to get that relationship, or the car, the house, or the job. Either they get there and remain unfulfilled or continue to pursue the thing that seems unreachable. Questions such as, Why am I not happy? Why am I feeling lost, alone, confused?—are then typically asked.

Take for example my thirty-seven-year-old client who was showing up highly anxious because her teaching work had taken over her life. She was a mother to three young children and had been feeling depressed and overwhelmed. She was conflicted because she wanted to be with her children but also loved her job. Her dilemma was that she feared disappointing her students if she left the job. The tension between choosing her family over her career was leading to feelings of unhappiness.

Clients will often describe the road ahead as being unclear or impossible to see a way through. They sometimes find it easier to give up on their goals or not care anymore. While they might be thinking that there is no way ahead, I feel the opposite. I get totally excited because I can see the opportunities for growth and transformation. I immediately spot where the client might be stuck and by taking them through my “Seven-Step Journey” process, I am able to help them find clarity to take the next step forward. Through the seven-step process, I am collaborating with my clients in a “therapeutically loving way”, as suggested by Dr Karl Tomm, in order to bring about change and transformation.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is the Seven-Step Journey model?**

All journeys have a beginning and an ending. Like most journeys, along the way, you will experience stops, delays, or diversions. How you choose to experience this journey will depend on your attitudes to travelling. In the human life cycle, our journey begins with birth and ends with death. However, along this journey of life, there are stages of transition and growth. We live, we create, we play, we build relationships, and so on. We never stay the same, as we are constantly evolving. This model uses the metaphor of journey to describe how we can engage in our own journey authentically.

Like most journeys, when we start out, there is usually an end in mind. We want to get from point A to point B. Sometimes, the path to reach there is clear, sometimes we may have an idea, and sometimes we haven't got a clue how, except that we know we have to get to the end point.

Our journey in life is similar in many ways. We often start out with set goals. From as early as we can think, we have goals at different stages in life. In the beginning these goals are established by our parents, teachers, and society. For example, go to school, then university, get a job, buy a home, have a car, get married, have children, take holidays, etc. For many, this is the formula that they have followed and for the most part, have had some success in, until perhaps one day they wake up and there is a roadblock or a diversion. These roadblocks or diversions can come in the form of health issues, relationship breakdown, trauma, bereavement, loss of employment, etc. Whatever the interruption, it can destabilise, disrupt, or disorient us on our path.

My journey's model is a socioecological, psychological, and systemic model, which acts as a guide to getting you back on track. It's aimed at anyone going through a life-cycle transition and who might be struggling to make sense of their journey. It is based on many years of experience of working with clients experiencing these transitions. It's also based on my own journey to wellbeing.

This model evolved over a period of seven years, as an experiential model to help me make sense of my own journey while experiencing a number of crises in my life. It's a model that is still evolving. Many factors have influenced its development. My training in systemic psychotherapy, psychology, coaching, and mental health nursing has had a major impact on how I see the world and is therefore reflected in this framework. Most importantly, what influenced me to develop this model was thinking about my own values and the choices I made to influence my clients in their process of change. My values include spirituality, a posture of curiosity, creativity, honesty, love, hope, self-reflexivity, and coherence. A strong value for me is having hope and holding the hope for others. This, coupled with love is what I see as my purpose in life.

Because I was starting to see results for myself when using this model, I started experimenting with some of my clients. I would always begin by sharing my ideas and asking them for permission to trial the model. What was also interesting was that the majority of these were high-achieving women with strong perfectionist traits, who were doing very well in their lives until faced with a crisis, a traumatic event, or some form of transition. These changes in my clients' lives seemed to be the trigger that disrupted their journeys. It wasn't just the disruption to the journey but their reaction to this that piqued my interest.

Mostly they were reporting feelings of failure for not knowing how to manage their experience. Having such high expectations coupled with such little compassion for themselves was affecting their mental health. I have also introduced this model with my male clients and have had similar outcomes. Therefore this model can be used by anyone. However, as most of my clients in the past seven years since beginning to use this model have been women, I have more evidence of changes in that demographic. After seven years I came up with the concept of the **Seven-Step Journey** to mental health and wellbeing:

**Step 1: PAST**—Starting out

**Step 2: POSITION**—Current location

**Step 3: PURPOSE**—Who am I?

**Step 4: PROBLEMS**—Getting clear

**Step 5: POSSIBILITIES**—Creating alternative stories

**Step 6: PLAN**—A way forward

**Step 7: PROMISE**—Commit to your journey

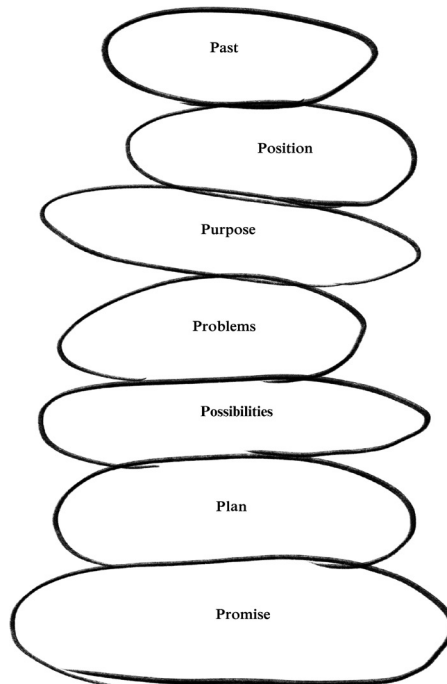


Figure 1. Seven-step model.

My model challenges you to see success as not a thing to pursue, but more a resetting of your inner compass that helps you to get in alignment with your values. Once this inner satnav is reset, getting to your destination becomes easier, clearer, and more purposeful. You are then able to make choices that are driven by you and not by what you believe others expect of you.

### **Bringing your heart**

I know what you must be thinking. Bringing your heart to work? Here we go, another one of those soppy woo woo books that is going to tell me how to live my life. Well, wrong on most levels. It's not a soppy book, nor is it a woo woo book. But it is partly self-development, if only just. And no, I am not going to tell you how to live your life. My intention here is to reveal bits of my own heart and, with permission, a little bit of the hearts of some of the people that are in my personal and professional life. Permission has been given to me to share their stories and the names used here have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

I believe that the heart is the place of creativity: it represents that space where you are truly connected to the real you. You are able to feel, to be, and to surrender to everything in you and around you. It means using your compassion, empathy, and full potential when engaging with work and relationships. That to me is the key ingredient in the recipe for success.

In talking about the heart, I am leaning into the concept used by Dr Karl Tomm as mentioned earlier, called "therapeutic loving". His statement, "I learn best when I fall in love", captures my intentions here. If I was to consider therapeutic loving as a process, this invites me and the other to open up a space for collaboration. As a therapist and coach, I am ethically expected to work on behalf of my clients. I have to also pay attention to the needs of my own wellbeing. The choices that I make will be conscious and intuitive, which will be shaped by my belief system, the wider context, and my ability to practise relational reflexivity.

Part of reassessing where you are on your journey is going to involve your willingness to also take responsibility for your wellbeing. In order for this formula to work, you must first recognise that you need help and be willing to look at the issue from a different perspective. You have

to be willing to take a position of “not knowing”, be curious, and be open to consider multiple possibilities. You must be willing to dismantle your version of success and create a new reframe.

I am introducing the topic of success because it is my personal and professional view that one of the reasons why we suffer with stress and burn-out is because we have somehow got it wrong about what it is to be successful. From the time we were born, we have been fed the message that to be successful we have to meet certain criteria. Normally these criteria are externally based and therefore must be validated by someone other than ourselves. In my case, being a high achiever and a people-pleaser led to me losing my way. As a woman trying to climb the career ladder by following a model that was heavily influenced by a male gender and cultural prototype, I diminished my voice by trying to fit in. My story is not dissimilar to the stories of other women.

From a very young age, we have been programmed to focus on the external things to make us feel happy. We measure success by what can be seen by the visible eye. We base our self-worth on what we have, the job titles, the house, the car, relationship, etc. We depend on external validation from others to measure success.

While feedback from others is important, I believe that learning to trust our inner wisdom is essentially much more important. Women are naturally known for their emotional intelligence and intuition. However, it's a quality that is often denigrated as weak and fluffy, especially in leadership roles. Recently a number of examples in my coaching context have brought this to life. One female client was warned by her male manager not to be too emotional in her communication with her staff; another male manager hesitated to give my female client opportunities for growth and typecast her in a role that limited her growth. Another client expressed how she wished that she was more like a male colleague who seemed so formal and strategic, downplaying the value that she brought to the organisation.

Trying to fit in and not trusting our natural instinct can lead to a disconnection from ourselves. This disconnection can manifest in symptoms in our physical and emotional bodies. One of the biggest indicators of this disconnection is stress. Women should also be championed for not pursuing a career. Recently I met a black young mother who expressed joy in spending time with her eight-month-old baby and the

pleasure she felt in feeding him. However, she spoke about other people around her, who kept asking when she was going back to work. She had made a decision to experience what she called some softness in her life, after living a life that was stressful and exhausting. She spoke about the narrative that she grew up hearing that black women were strong and therefore as a black woman you had to keep going. She was thankful for her heritage and that her parents had taught her that you didn't have to follow the script about success and that you can create your own model of what that looks like for yourself. These women's experiences clearly reflect attitudes in society that need to be challenged.

What I hope to do in this book, therefore, is to add to the narrative that is continuously evolving around work and success. Perhaps a good starting point is to consider these questions. How do you define success? Do you consider yourself to be successful? What is the evidence that you have to say that you aren't successful? What are your measurements?

Perhaps you have stopped loving or taking care of yourself. Or perhaps you never learnt how to love and take care of yourself. In that case, your journey from now on is to learn how to do so.

This starts with first making sense of where your journey began, where you are now, and what your intended destination would look like.

There has to be an understanding of what your values are. Replacing your limiting beliefs with your core values. Redefining who you are and who you are becoming.

Clearing the blockages that might be getting in the way of you living out your purpose.

Shifting from seeing success as only externally motivated to something that is intrinsically driven.

Understanding where our journey began is a good place to start in making sense of our story.