

HOW TO DO THE WORK

RECOGNIZE YOUR PATTERNS,
HEAL FROM YOUR PAST,
+ CREATE YOUR SELF

DR. NICOLE
LEPERA

THE HOLISTIC PSYCHOLOGIST

How to Do the Work

Recognize Your Patterns,
Heal from Your Past,
and Create Your Self

Dr. Nicole
LePera



HARPER WAVE

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

For Lolly, who saw me before even I could.

To each of you, I see you.

Epigraph

As above, so below, as within, so without, to perform the miracles of one only thing.

—Hermes Trismegistus, *The Great Work*

The evolution of man is the evolution of his consciousness. With objective consciousness it is possible to see and feel the unity of everything. Attempts to connect these phenomena into some sort of system in a scientific or philosophical way lead to nothing because man cannot reconstruct the idea of the whole starting from separate facts.

—George Gurdjieff, *The Fourth Way*

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin, *Remember This House*
(inspiration for the film *I Am Not Your Negro*)

Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless . . . we become illuminated and enlightened to the Truth of who we are and where we are going . . . to the light while we live through love.

—Jesus, about *The Great Work*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

A Note on Doing the Work

Preface: Dark Night of the Soul

Introduction: A Primer on Holistic Psychology

1: You Are Your Own Best Healer

2: The Conscious Self: Becoming Aware

3: A New Theory of Trauma

4: Trauma Body

5: Mind-Body Healing Practices

6: The Power of Belief

7: Meet Your Inner Child

8: Ego Stories

9: Trauma Bonds

10: Boundaries

11: Reparenting

12: Emotional Maturity

13: Interdependence

Epilogue: The Pizza Box

Acknowledgments

Glossary of Holistic Psychology Terms

Suggested Further Readings

Notes

Index

About the Author

Copyright

About the Publisher

A Note on *Doing the Work*

A long, rich tradition of *the work* of transcending our human experience has been passed down by different messengers throughout the ages. The ancient Hermetic traditions spoke of mysterious alchemy, while modern mystics, such as George Gurdjieff, urged seekers to engage more deeply in the world by attaining higher levels of consciousness. We see similar language used in the required knowledge for antiracism training and the necessary dismantling of systemic oppression, as well as in substance use recovery models, like twelve-step programs. What all of these iterations of *the work* share—and what this book will foster and continue—is the pursuit of insight into the Self and our place in our community. The goal of *my* work is to provide you with the tools to understand and harness the complex interconnectedness of your mind, body, and soul. This will foster deeper, more authentic, more meaningful relationships with yourself, with others, and within the greater society. What follows is my journey, and I hope that it inspires you to find your own version of *the work*.

Preface

Dark Night of the Soul

Poets and mystics always seem to have their transcendental awakenings somewhere divine—on a mountaintop, while staring off into the open sea, by a babbling brook, next to a burning bush. Mine happened in a log cabin in the middle of the woods, where I found myself sobbing uncontrollably into a bowl of oatmeal.

I was in upstate New York with my partner, Lolly, on what was supposed to be a vacation, a retreat from the stress of city life in Philadelphia.

As I ate my breakfast, I pored through the pages of another psychologist's book, my version of a "beach read." The topic? Emotionally unavailable mothers. As I read it—for professional enrichment, or so I believed—the words activated an unexpected, and confusing, emotional response.

"You're burnt out," my partner, Lolly, offered. "You need to take a step back. Try to relax."

I brushed her off. I didn't believe that I was in any way unique in my general feelings and experiences. I heard similar complaints from so many of my clients and friends. *Who doesn't get out of bed in the morning dreading the day ahead? Who doesn't feel distracted at work? Who doesn't feel distanced from the people they love? Who in the world can honestly say that they aren't living each day for their vacation? Isn't this just what happens when you get older?*

I had recently "celebrated" my thirtieth birthday and thought to myself, *Is this it?* Even though I'd already checked off so many of the boxes that I'd

dreamed of since I was a child—living in a city of my choosing, running my own private therapy practice, finding a loving partner—I still felt like there was something essential in my being that was lost or missing or had never been there in the first place. After years of being in relationships yet feeling emotionally alone, I had finally met a person who felt *right* because she was so different from me. Whereas I was hesitant and often disengaged, Lolly was passionate and headstrong. She often challenged me in ways that I felt were exciting. I should have been happy, or, at the very least, content. Instead I felt outside myself, detached, emotionless. I felt *nothing*.

On top of it all, I was experiencing physical issues that had become so acute that I could no longer ignore them. There was the brain fog, which would cloud me so thoroughly that I sometimes not only forgot words or phrases but entered a complete state of blankness. This was particularly upsetting, especially during the few times when it happened in session with clients. Persistent gut issues, which had plagued me for years, now made me feel heavy and constantly weighed down. Then one day I fainted out of the blue—full-on passed out at a friend’s house, which terrified everyone.

Sitting in the rocking chair with my bowl of oatmeal in such a serene setting, I suddenly felt how hollowed out my life had become. I was energetically drained, in the clutches of existential despair, frustrated by my clients’ inability to make progress, angered at my own limitations in the pursuit of their care and my own, and deeply constricted by a free-floating sluggishness and dissatisfaction that made me question the point of everything. Back at home in the hustle and bustle of city life, I could mask these troubling feelings by channeling all of these energies into action: cleaning the kitchen, walking the dog, making endless plans. Moving, moving, moving. If you didn’t look too closely you might admire my type A efficiency. But dig in just a little bit, and you’d realize that I was moving my body to distract myself from some deeply rooted unresolved feelings. In the middle of the woods, without a thing to do but read about the lasting effects of childhood trauma, I could no longer escape myself. The book exposed so many of the feelings about my mother and my family that I had long repressed. It was like looking into a mirror. There I was, naked, no distractions, and very uncomfortable with what I saw.

When I did look more honestly at myself overall, it was hard not to notice that many of the issues I was having closely mirrored those I saw in my mother’s own struggles; in particular my mother’s own relationship

with her body and emotions. I watched her struggle in many ways with near constant physical pain in her knees and back, and frequent anxiety and worry. As I grew up there were, of course, many ways I was different from my mom. I was physically active, making it a priority to take care of my body by exercising and eating healthy. In my twenties, I even became a vegetarian after befriending a cow at an animal sanctuary, making it impossible for me to imagine eating any animal ever again. Sure, the bulk of my diet revolved around hyperprocessed fake meat and vegan junk food (vegan Philly cheesesteaks were a particular favorite), but at least I cared about what I put into my body. With the exception of alcohol, which I still overindulged in, I sometimes took that caring to an extreme, restricting myself and eating joylessly.

I always thought that I was *nothing like my mom*, but as these emotional and now physical issues erupted, spilling into all aspects of my life, I realized it was time to start questioning things. And that realization sent me sobbing into a pile of hot mush. Contained in this sad, somewhat pathetic picture was a message. This outpouring of emotion was so unusual, so outside the realm of my typical personality, that I couldn't ignore this soul signal. Something was screaming out for me to pay attention, and there was nothing for me to hide behind in the middle of the woods. It was time to come face-to-face with my suffering, my pain, my trauma, and ultimately my true Self.

Today I call that incident my dark night of the soul, my rock bottom. Hitting rock bottom is like a death, and for some of us, it can literally bring us close to death. Death, of course, enables rebirth, and I emerged determined to figure out what was wrong. That painful moment brought the light in, revealing so much of myself that I buried. Suddenly, clarity hit: *I need to find change*. I had no idea that this insight would lead to a physical, psychological, and spiritual awakening and eventually become an international movement.

Initially, I focused on what I felt was most pressing: my body. I assessed myself physically: How was I sick, and where was this sickness manifesting? I knew intuitively that the way back would start with nutrition and movement. I enlisted Lolly, who I call my Energizer Bunny of self-improvement, to help keep me on the path to honestly dealing with how I was mistreating my vessel. She kicked me out of bed in the morning, shoved dumbbells into my hands, and forced us to consciously move our

bodies several times a day. We dug into nutrition research and found that many of our ideas about what was “healthy” were debatable. We began a morning ritual incorporating breathwork and meditation—again, every day. Though I participated somewhat begrudgingly at first and there were missed days, tears, sore muscles, aching souls, and threats of quitting, after many months a routine took hold. I began to crave this new routine, and I felt stronger physically and mentally than I had in my entire life.

As my body began to heal, I began to question so many other truths that I had once felt were self-evident. I learned new ways of thinking about mental wellness. I realized that a disconnect among mind, body, and soul can manifest as sickness and dysregulation. I discovered that our genes are not destiny and that in order to change, we have to become consciously aware of our thought patterns and habits, which have been shaped by the people we care for, and have been cared for by, the most. I discovered a new, wider definition of trauma, one that takes into account the profound spiritual effects that stress and adverse experiences in childhood have on the body’s nervous system. I realized that I had unresolved traumas from my childhood that continued to affect me every single day.

The more I learned, the more I integrated what I was learning into the new daily choices I was consistently making. Over time, I adapted to those changes and began to transform. Once my physiology began to heal, I went deeper, harnessing some of the insights I’d learned in my diverse range of clinical experience and applying them to the knowledge I was building about the integration of the whole person—our physical, psychological, and spiritual Selves. I met my inner child, learned how to reparent her, examined the trauma bonds that were holding me hostage, learned how to set boundaries, and began to engage with the world with an emotional maturity that I had never before known was possible, as it had been an entirely unknown state to me. I realized that this inner work didn’t stop inside me but extended beyond myself into each and every relationship and into the greater community at large. This revelatory understanding of mind-body-soul wellness is encapsulated in the pages that follow, which set forth the basic tenets of Holistic Psychology.

I write to you today from a place of continued healing. My symptoms of anxiety and panic have largely disappeared. I no longer relate to the world from a reactive place, and I am able to access more awareness and compassion. I feel connected to and present with my loved ones—and I am

able to set boundaries with those who are not active participants in my journey. I am conscious for the first time in my adult life. I didn't see it when I hit rock bottom. I didn't see it a year later. Today I know that I would not be here writing this book if I had not accessed the depths of my despair.

I launched *The Holistic Psychologist* in 2018 after deciding that I wanted to share the tools I'd discovered with others. I *had* to share. Soon after I began sharing my story on Instagram, letters of trauma, healing, and emotional resilience began pouring into my inbox. My messages of holistic healing had resonated in the collective mind, crossing age and cultural lines. Today more than three million people follow my account and have taken on the identity of #SelfHealers—active participants in their mental, physical, and spiritual wellness. Supporting this community has become my life's work.

I honored the one-year anniversary of *The Holistic Psychologist* by hosting a West Coast inner child meditation to thank my community for their support and to give an opportunity to connect in real life and celebrate our shared journeys. Days before, I googled “Venice Beach locations” and haphazardly picked a meetup spot. I offered free tickets on Instagram and crossed my fingers that people would be interested. Within a few hours, three thousand people had signed up. I couldn't believe it.

As I sat under the hot sun in the middle of the wide expanse of Venice Beach, joggers and various characters from southern California bobbed by. I set my sights on the waves lapping against the shore. The warm sand under my toes and the chilly wetness of my ocean-soaked hair made me acutely aware of my body in space and time. I felt so present, so alive as I lifted my hands in prayer, imagining the various life paths that had brought each and every one of the remarkable humans around me to the beach that morning. I scanned the crowd and briefly felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of eyes on me, a person who has always hated being the center of attention. Then I began:

Something brought you here. Something inside of you came here with a deep longing to heal. A longing to be the highest version of yourself. This is something to celebrate. We all have a childhood that is creating our current reality, and today we've chosen to heal from our past in order to create a new future.

The part of you that knows this to be true is your intuition. It has always been there. We have simply developed a habit of not listening to or trusting what it says. Being here today is a step in healing that broken trust within ourselves.

As I said those words, I locked eyes with a stranger in the crowd. She smiled at me and touched her heart, as if to say “Thank you.” Suddenly, tears filled my eyes. I was crying—and these were not the same tears that I had shed into my oatmeal all those years before. These were tears of love, of acceptance, of joy. These were tears of healing.

I’m a living testament to this truth: Awakenings are not mystical experiences that are reserved only for monks, mystics, and poets. They are not only for “spiritual” people. They are for each and every one of us who wants to change—who aches to heal, to thrive, to shine.

With your awareness awakened, anything is possible.

Introduction

A Primer on Holistic Psychology

How to Do the Work is the testament of a revolutionary approach to mental, physical, and spiritual wellness called Holistic Psychology. It's a movement of empowerment that's committed to the daily practice of creating your own wellness by breaking negative patterns, healing from your past, and creating your conscious Self.

Holistic Psychology focuses on the mind, body, and soul in the service of rebalancing the body and nervous system and healing unresolved emotional wounds. This work gives you the power to transform yourself into the person you've always been at your core. It tells a new, exciting story, where physical and psychological symptoms are *messages*, not lifelong diagnoses that can only be managed. It's a story that gets to the root of chronic pain, stress, fatigue, anxiety, gut dysregulation, and nervous system imbalances that have long been dismissed or ignored by traditional Western medicine. It helps explain why so many of us feel stuck, detached, or lost. It offers practical tools that will enable you to create new habits for yourself, understand the behavior of others, and release the idea that your worth is determined by any person or thing outside yourself. If you commit to doing *the work* every day, there will come a time when you will look in the mirror and feel awestruck by the person looking back at you.

These holistic methods—exercises that harness the power of the physical (with breathwork and bodywork), the psychological (by changing your relationship to your thoughts and past experiences), and the spiritual (by connecting to our authentic Self and to the greater collective)—are

effective because the body, mind, and soul are *connected*. They work because they are both based in the science of epigenetics and the reality that we have far more impact over our mental wellness than we may think. Healing is a conscious process that can be lived daily through changes in our habits and patterns.

So many of us exist in a state of unconsciousness. We navigate through the world running on blind autopilot, carrying out automatic, habitual behaviors that don't serve us or reflect who we fundamentally are and what we deeply desire. The practice of Holistic Psychology helps us reconnect to our inner guidance system, which conditioned patterns learned in early childhood have taught us to disconnect from. Holistic Psychology helps us find that intuitive voice, to trust it, and to let go of the "personality" that has been modeled and shaped by parent-figures, friends, teachers, and society at large, allowing us to bring consciousness to our unconscious selves.

In these pages you will find a new paradigm for an integrative approach to healing that incorporates the mind, body, and soul. Please note that I am not advocating for a tearing down of the old model; I'm not suggesting that the tools of conventional psychotherapy and other therapeutic models don't have value. Instead, I'm proposing an approach that embraces aspects of various modalities—from psychology and neuroscience to mindfulness and spirituality practices—in an effort to cultivate what I believe are the most effective and integrative techniques for healing and wellness. I have incorporated lessons and insights from traditional models like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and psychoanalysis, while also bringing in holistic aspects that are (as of this writing) not entirely embraced by mainstream psychology. It's important to understand that the practice of Holistic Psychology is rooted in freedom, choice, and ultimately empowerment. Some things will resonate, others won't; the objective is to use the tools that work best for *you*. Just the act of choosing will help you connect more deeply to your intuition and your authentic Self.

Learning to heal yourself—SelfHealing—is an act of self-empowerment. SelfHealing is not only possible, it is our reality as human beings, because no one outside of us can truly know what is best for each of us in our uniqueness. Problematically, for far too many of us, quality health care, especially mental health care, is out of reach. We live in a world where there are gross inequities in access according to where we live, what we look like, and who we are. Even those of us who are privileged enough to

afford the type of care we need often encounter the eye-opening truth that not all care is created equal. And if we are lucky enough to find a truly helpful provider, we are confined by the limited amount of face-to-face time we get with that person. This book offers a self-directed learning model that contains the information and prompts that will enable *you* to do *the work* of healing yourself each and every day. Truly comprehending your past, listening to it, witnessing it, learning from it, is a process that enables deep change. Change that lasts. It enables true transformation.

How to Do the Work is presented in three parts. The first part provides the foundation as we become aware of our conscious Self, the power of our thoughts, and the influence of stress and childhood trauma on all the systems of our bodies. It allows us to understand how physical dysregulation in our bodily systems keeps us from moving forward mentally and emotionally. In the second part, we will peel back a layer and enter “the mind.” We will explore the workings of the conscious and subconscious, learning how powerful conditioning from our parent-figures shaped our worlds, creating thought and behavior patterns that persist today. We will then dive a bit deeper into our mind and meet our inner child. We will learn about the ego stories that protect us and keep us repeating relationship patterns we began experiencing in childhood. In the final part, which I consider to be the essence of *the work*, we will learn how to apply the knowledge we’ve gained to achieve the emotional maturity that allows you to connect more authentically with others. No person is an island. We are social creatures, and it is not until we are able to truly embody our authentic Self that we become able to connect deeply with the people we love. This creates the foundation from which to cultivate a sense of oneness with the collective “we,” or something greater than ourselves. Along the way, I’ve included prompts and tools intended to meet you wherever you are on your journey.

All you need to begin this transformation is your conscious Self, a desire to dig deep, and an understanding that change is not easy and the road ahead will sometimes be rough. There are no quick fixes here, which is a difficult fact to come to terms with especially for the many of us who have been conditioned to believe in the illusion of the magic bullet solution. I will be the first to say that *the work* is just that: work. There are no shortcuts, and no one else can do it for you. It can feel uncomfortable or even downright scary to become an active participant in your own healing.

Ultimately, learning who you are and what you are capable of is not only empowering and transformative, but one of the most profound experiences we can have.

Some people who follow my work tell me that I deliver truths wrapped up in nice, comfy blankets. I take that as a compliment, and I'm going to get real for a second: There is such a thing as getting *too* comfortable. Healing rarely comes *without* difficulty. It's painful at times and terrifying, too. It means letting go of narratives that hold you back and harm you. It means letting a part of yourself die so that another part of you can be reborn. Not everyone wants to get better. And that's okay. Some people have an identity tied to sickness. Others fear true wellness because it is the unknown and the unknown is unpredictable. There is comfort in knowing exactly what your life will look like, even if that reality is making you sick. Our minds are familiarity-seeking machines. The familiar feels safe; that is, until we teach ourselves that discomfort is temporary and a necessary part of transformation.

You will know when you're ready to begin this journey. Then you'll second-guess yourself and want to quit. This is when it's the most important to stay committed and keep repeating the practice until it becomes a discipline. Eventually, that discipline becomes confidence, and confidence becomes change, and change becomes transformation. The real work has nothing to do with anything "out there." It has everything to do with what's in you. It comes *from* you.

The first step, a surprisingly challenging one, is to begin to imagine a future that looks different from the present. Close your eyes. Once you are able to envision a reality alternate to the one you're living, you're ready to move forward. And if you can't yet envision that reality, you're far from alone. There's a reason for this mental block. Stick with me; this book is written for you, as I was that person.

Let's get started.