



How to Do the Work

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

By Nicole LePera

15-minute read

Synopsis

How to Do the Work (2021) is a hands-on guide to healing our bodies and minds. The physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of our health are all interconnected. By changing how we eat and exercise, engaging in mindfulness and tackling past trauma, we can heal ourselves and transform our relationships.

Who is it for?

- Spiritual seekers looking for new ways to connect with the world
- Children of emotionally unavailable parents looking to heal past trauma
- Anyone who's tired of feeling sluggish and burnt out

About the author

Dr. Nicole LePera is a clinical psychologist who studied at Cornell University and earned her PhD from the New School for Social Research. Her hugely popular Instagram account, @the.holistic.psychologist, has a following of over three million people from around the world.

What's in it for me? Learn how to do the work of SelfHealing.

Dr. Nicole LePera was getting serious warning signs from her body that something was wrong. She suffered from chronic gut issues, constant headaches, and had even fainted for no apparent reason. She also suffered from brain fog and constant anxiety.

She took antidepressants and popped paracetamol, but treating these conditions with medication and traditional therapy just wasn't working. LePera embarked on a journey to heal herself that involved completely expanding her practice as a psychologist, incorporating physical and spiritual elements and becoming truly holistic in her approach to health.

Do you also want to learn how to heal from burnout, trauma, and dissociation? Then you've come to the right place.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how childhood trauma affects how we behave;
- why boundaries are so important for creating loving relationships; and
- how our gut health affects our brains.

Dr LePera hit rock bottom, and realized that something in her life had to change.

We often hear of spiritual awakenings happening on mountaintops. Or in ashrams, temples, mosques, and churches.

But for Dr Nicole LePera, awakening came in a seemingly mundane way. She started crying over a bowl of oatmeal, and just couldn't stop. She'd gone on holiday with her girlfriend, and instead of relishing the peace and quiet, it just made her realize how burnt out she'd become.

LePera had a very successful life. Or it looked successful from the outside, at least. She had her own psychology practice, a loving partner, and a great home in Philadelphia. But on the inside, she felt awful. She woke up exhausted, and felt detached from herself and the people she loved. She was frustrated and irritable at work. And her physical health was suffering – she experienced persistent brain fog and problems with her gut. She realized that something in her life just wasn't working.

The key message here is: Dr LePera hit rock bottom, and realized that something in her life had to change.

What was it? LePera had spent years trying to heal herself and others as a clinical psychologist. But she'd long been missing something in her practice of mainstream psychology. It felt too limiting. She realized that to truly be able to heal herself, she needed to take a

more holistic approach – to embrace a practice that allowed her to heal her body, mind, and soul simultaneously. Because, in fact, these things are all connected.

The author started to tackle her physical well-being, working out every day and eating well. She also embraced regular sessions of breath work and meditation. At first, keeping up the routine was a hard slog. But after a few months, her body began to crave it. LePera also started dealing with her childhood trauma, learning to process negative emotions from her past and starting to heal her inner child.

The results of all her hard work were that she felt better than she had for years – emotionally and physically strong. Via Instagram, she started to document her journey as a “holistic psychologist.” As thousands of people started following her account, it became clear that she was tapping into a much greater need. Today, over three million people follow her work, and identify as *SelfHealers*.

To heal our minds, we have to heal our bodies, and vice versa.

Imagine being given a pill and told that if you take it, all your feelings of depression will disappear.

You take it and start feeling better, only to discover later that you've been taking a sugar pill all along. This is a common experience that has been termed the “placebo effect.” Experiments have found that people experience dramatic improvements in conditions ranging from Parkinson's disease to depression just by believing that they're receiving treatment.

Why does this work? Because our minds and bodies are connected.

Here's the key message: To heal our minds, we have to heal our bodies, and vice versa.

For more than 400 years, people have believed in the so-called *mind-body paradigm* – the idea that our minds are completely independent from our bodies. This way of thinking has created an approach to medicine that sees people going to a psychologist to “fix” their minds, and other doctors to cure bodily ailments. The problem? Our minds and bodies are intimately connected.

Innovative research has shown that our gut health has a striking influence on our mental well-being; even severe conditions that we believe are determined by our genes can be influenced by our environments. This emerging field of epigenetics posits that while we may be dealt a “hand” of genetic cards, genes will be “turned on” or “off” depending on diverse factors like stress, how much or little we sleep, what we eat, and the health of our interpersonal relationships. So by changing how we live

our lives, we can have a lot of influence on whether a predisposition will turn into a full-blown illness.

Of course, we can't control all aspects of our lives. Some trauma comes from systemic oppression, like the covert or overt racism, discrimination, and economic injustice that people of color experience every day. Holistic psychology doesn't deny that reality. Rather, it asks how people can practice SelfHealing within their own lived experiences and unique situations.

Too often people are treated as if they have no power to affect their own medical conditions. They're encouraged to follow a doctor's instructions passively to suppress their symptoms. Holistic psychology takes a different approach. It believes that we can all take steps to heal ourselves and our bodies. There are no quick fixes or magic pills. The journey will be uncomfortable, and a slog at times. But on the other side is the enormous satisfaction of knowing you've taken your well-being into your own hands.

Become aware of your thoughts.

Jessica was about to marry her longtime boyfriend. Sometimes she felt sure that this was the right decision – lucky her, to end up with such a wonderful guy! At other times, she decided he was a jerk, and couldn't stand to be around him. Jessica lived on a rollercoaster, blindly believing whatever her thoughts were telling her.

Like Jessica, we all have thousands of thoughts racing around in our heads every day. As soon as we open our eyes in the morning, we start worrying, planning, and reflecting. Our thoughts can be savagely critical or serenely content. There's nothing inherently wrong with these thoughts. But we need to remember that they're not always true, and they don't constitute who we are.

The key message in this blink is: Become aware of your thoughts.

Most of us spend our days on autopilot. We hustle through our routines without really stopping to examine what we're doing and thinking – and why. In fact, brain scans have shown that we're only really conscious for five percent of the day. For the rest, our subconscious minds run the show. We become trapped in familiar habits and thought patterns because that's what we're used to. Any divergence from the routine creates mental resistance – we become uncomfortable and antsy.

But the problem is that living on autopilot isn't truly comfortable either. We're trapped in childhood patterns, held hostage by our beliefs, and feel powerless to change. So how do we really wake up and cultivate awareness of ourselves and our world?

For Jessica, starting a yoga practice was the key. Through the discipline of practicing hard poses and making time for herself, she also had more space to

examine her own thought patterns. She became less reactive, and identified the deep grief and fears that were fuelling her ambivalence about her relationship.

Cultivating awareness can start small. Taking a minute in the day to become really aware of where you are, for example. If you're on a walk, take in the trees, the cracked sidewalk, and the people you encounter on your path. Then pay attention to your senses: What does the breeze feel like as it touches your face? What do you hear as you walk along? You've already interrupted your familiar experience of autopilot. Do this every day. It might feel uncomfortable at first, but as you practice, it will yield enormous benefits. You'll start to *have* thoughts, instead of feeling like you *are* your thoughts.

We need to identify childhood trauma in order to heal.

When the author tries to remember her childhood, she comes up with lots of fuzzy half-memories. She doesn't remember a lot of key moments in her life, and struggles to identify faces.

She now knows that this is because she was dissociated for most of her childhood and young adulthood. That means that though she was physically present, she was mentally completely checked out. She couldn't tap into her own emotions or tune into what she was feeling. People become dissociated as a coping strategy when they feel overwhelmed and powerless. So what exactly happened in LePera's childhood to make her feel this way?

This is the key message: We need to identify childhood trauma in order to heal.

From the outside, LePera's boisterous Italian family looked happy and "normal." But the house was full of tension and bickering. LePera's mother had a lot of untreated anxiety, and her mother and siblings suffered from chronic illnesses. LePera couldn't express her feelings, and she didn't really feel seen. Her solution was to go underground, in a dissociated "spaceship" of her own making.

Many of us have these kinds of childhood traumas. They may not be what we even think of as trauma, but the truth is they can have serious consequences for our emotional well-being later in life. Children are like sponges. They soak up their parents' fears and anxieties and model their coping strategies.

Did your parents acknowledge your feelings and affirm your reality when you were a child? Or were you told that "it's not so bad" and you should suck it up? Did you feel seen and heard for who you were? Children whose feelings and opinions are ignored often end up dissociating, or acting out to try to get attention.

Childhood trauma can be caused by parents who have no sense of boundaries. They invade their children's

privacy and share inappropriate information with them. Parents can also have trouble regulating their emotions, meaning that they can be volatile, flying into rages or becoming detached and distanced as a coping mechanism.

All of these archetypal experiences are so painful because they cause children to become alienated from their own intuition and authentic selves. They second-guess their beliefs and feelings, and contort themselves to fit what they think their parents want from them. When she was healing her trauma, LePera had to go back to that primal wound. In confronting it head-on, she was able to create new adaptive coping strategies that really supported her. You can, too.

We must learn to disarm our survival systems.

Imagine you're a rabbit in the wild, being chased by a hungry fox. Your heart is pounding, and you're running as fast as you can.

Animals have what is known as a fight, flight, or freeze response when they perceive a threat to their survival. Adrenaline surges through their bodies, their heart rate speeds up, and their breathing becomes shallow.

We humans have these responses, too. In the face of a perceived threat, our brain's "fear center" – the *amygdala* – lights up and instructs our autonomic nervous system to switch to survival mode. These instincts are key to keeping us alive. They give us the superhuman strength to outrun an attacker or protect our loved ones. But people who've experienced trauma sometimes start to perceive threats everywhere, even when they're not in real danger. That means that their survival systems stay on high alert all the time, wreaking havoc on their bodies.

The key message in this blink is: We must learn to disarm our survival systems.

When you're chronically stressed, your brain floods your body with the hormone cortisol. As a result, the people around you might seem more threatening, and you may find it harder to connect and form relationships. You also stop being able to think clearly.

Our survival systems are involuntary – we can't consciously turn them off. But we can take steps to calm our bodies down. For example, we can control our breathing. Taking deep belly breaths when we're stressed has an instant calming effect on our bodies.

Physical exercise is another effective way to reduce stress. Exercise releases feel-good hormones like dopamine into our bloodstream. This has wondrous benefits for our health. In fact, people who exercise are much less likely to develop heart disease or dementia. Yoga is even more effective as a de-stressor because it simultaneously engages mind and body.

We know by now, too, that our mental health is intimately related to our gut. In fact, there are 500 million neurons in our gut that are talking to our brain all the time. Inflammation caused by too much sugar and processed food has been linked to severe conditions like depression. Eating nutritious whole foods, as well as fermented foods like yoghurt, will reduce inflammation and support our gut health.

One of the very best ways to reduce our stress levels is to focus on getting enough sleep. When we sleep, our brains flush out debris and our cells regenerate. So get to bed on time!

Reparenting can reprogram our core beliefs.

Have you ever thought to yourself, "I don't matter"? Or "nobody cares about me?"

These are examples of core beliefs – formed in childhood – that come to define how we see ourselves and our lives. Our brains are powerful engines, filtering information and stimuli from the outside world. When we have a negative core belief, our brains select evidence that supports it. This is known as confirmation bias.

If we believe we're worthless, then we'll fixate on criticism and ignore praise, or dismiss a job promotion as a fluke, instead of something we earned. We'll bring that insecurity into our relationships, and start testing our lovers. Negative core beliefs can affect every area of our lives.

The key message is this: Reparenting can reprogram our core beliefs.

If we're aware of our negative core beliefs and do the work to heal, then we can start to shift the ways we think, and filter, the world.

One of the best ways to alter our beliefs about ourselves is to go right back to the source. Usually, these beliefs form when we're very young. In order to heal them, you need to engage with your inner child. What were you like when you were young?

Our inner children often carry deep wounds from the parent-child relationship. Attachment theory indicates that when children feel secure in the bond with their parents, they're able to develop emotional resilience, as well as the confidence to explore independently from parents. But when parents are unavailable, or inconsistent in their affection, children start feeling desperate and clingy. Or, alternatively, they shut down and stop seeking connection altogether.

It's at this vulnerable stage that we start forming key beliefs about ourselves. Some children may become *caretakers*, believing they have to earn affection by being useful to others. Or they may become *overachievers*, believing that their value is dependent on their accomplishments.

One of the most powerful ways to heal these wounds is to start *reparenting* yourself. When you're reparenting, you apply loving discipline by making small promises to yourself and keeping them. You also prioritize self care and emotional regulation. Your wise and loving inner parent can witness and validate your authentic needs and feelings.

All these actions help you to earn the trust of your inner child. By acknowledging him or her, and his or her fears and survival mechanisms, you can start to shift your once-held painful beliefs.

Cultivating strong and loving boundaries will improve your relationships.

Susan felt like a doormat. Her friends called her at all hours to dump their emotional drama on her without ever asking how *she* was feeling. Her family also barged into her home whenever they felt like it.

Susan had no real boundaries. She was so desperate to please everybody that she'd lost touch with who she was and what she wanted. She traced the dynamic to her childhood. She'd grown up with an emotionally-controlling mother who invaded her privacy by reading her diary. She realized that in order to save herself – and her relationships – something needed to change.

Here's the key message: Cultivating strong and loving boundaries will improve your relationships.

Many of us have grown up in families like Susan's, where togetherness is seen as the ultimate form of love. But loving relationships are actually built on a foundation of good boundaries. We have to be allowed to prioritize our authentic needs, even if they don't suit other people. If we don't do that, we'll grow resentful, and our well-being will suffer.

There are three kinds of boundaries we need to cultivate. The first is physical boundaries. These relate to our bodily autonomy, how we like to be touched, what food we want to eat, or what self-care practices we find important for our bodies.

The second kind of boundary is a resource boundary. Susan's friends were unthinkingly eating up one of her most precious resources: time. But we can be intentional about whom we allow to spend our time and money.

The third boundary is mental and emotional. In *enmeshed* families, children are discouraged from developing strong personal boundaries. They're often made to feel responsible for their parents' emotional needs. They're also encouraged to participate in *groupthink* – for example, to go along unthinkingly with the family's religious beliefs. Asserting your personal boundaries means being able to make space for your own feelings, opinions, and beliefs.

Creating and maintaining boundaries can be hard work. People react badly to change, and may try to guilt-trip you into maintaining the status quo. Make sure you prepare in advance, and do the work to regulate your emotions beforehand. Assert the boundary in an emotionally neutral moment – the middle of a fight is never the right time! It may be scary at first, but boundaries will only make your relationships stronger.

SelfHealing allows you to surround yourself with a loving, supportive community.

As humans, we're wired for connection. Our well-being depends on the support of our communities.

That's why embarking on a healing journey is so scary. When you change the status quo and challenge how things have always been in your relationships, you risk being ostracized by family and friends.

That prospect is so terrifying that it stops many people in their transformation. They'd rather stay stuck in their old patterns than risk being alone. But here's the thing: healing yourself actually allows you to become more connected to other people.

This is the key message: SelfHealing allows you to surround yourself with a loving, supportive community.

When we're suffering from trauma, our survival systems keep us on high alert. We're more likely to perceive other people as threatening, and will find it harder to connect. The relationships we do have will often mirror our internal state of emotional dysregulation. For example, many people form *trauma bonds* with others who have suffered similar wounds. These relationships follow a painful rollercoaster of periods of closeness followed by crushing rejection. These extreme emotions feel strangely comforting to a traumatized brain. After all, they're what you know. But a trauma bond isn't truly fulfilling or affirming; it simply feeds an emotional addiction.

Through SelfHealing, you'll gain the ability to tolerate difficult emotions – your own and other people's. Instead of trying to fix, change, and distract from how you're feeling, you'll be able to process your emotions. The wonderful thing is that when you're feeling calm, loving, and clear, you'll help the people around you to feel the same way. That's how co-regulation works. In an almost imperceptible process, what you put out into the world is mirrored back to you.

When Dr. LePera cut off contact with members of her birth family, she felt terrified. But she knew it was necessary to get some distance in order to heal her childhood traumas and find her authentic voice. By doing so, she was later able to reestablish a healthier relationship with them. She was also able to strengthen her relationship with her partner and friends, creating

loving, *interdependent* relationships. Best of all, she created a whole new community – a global family – of millions of people who are committed to SelfHealing across the world.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

We all have the power to heal ourselves. The physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of our health are intimately connected to each other. Exercising regularly, eating well, and sleeping enough will help our bodies grow stronger, and calm our autonomic nervous systems. That will, in turn, give us mental clarity, and allow us more space to tune into our authentic thoughts and feelings. Dealing with childhood experiences of trauma will give us the space to change old patterns that are no longer working, and to start our recovery from emotional addiction.

Actionable advice: **Change one habit at a time.**

It can be tempting to try to change your life all at once. But we're creatures of habit. We like to stick to what's familiar, even if it's not really working for us. Dramatic change comes gradually. Try making one small commitment to your well-being, and sticking to it. Create a daily practice of drinking a glass of water in the morning, for example, or taking a short walk. Sticking to your commitment will help you learn to trust yourself. Once that habit has become second nature, you can add another.

Got feedback?

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