

# My Psychotherapy Career: The evolution of a psychotherapeutic career

With UKCP member Melinda Powell

## Jenna

Hello, and welcome to My Psychotherapy Career, a podcast where we explore the different therapeutic settings our members work in, and how they came into their career. I'm Jenna Rashid, the digital engagement officer at UKCP. Our host Helen Willingham is the head of content and engagement at UKCP, overseeing all our communications to members and the public, as well as our policy and research work.

In this episode, Helen speaks to UKCP member, Melinda Powell. The evolution of her psychotherapeutic career has led Melinda to move to the non-clinical side of work. Utilising her psychotherapeutic knowledge and years of expertise, Melinda is focusing her time on writing a third book on dreams, as well as facilitating training and running dream groups for psychotherapeutic professionals and the public. She's also a senior advisor for the Dream Research Institute, a centre for dream studies in London, which she co-founded in 2012 with Dr Nigel Hamilton. Her focus on writing has opened up many new ventures for Melinda, including presenting internationally at conferences, speaking on her specialist topics, such as lucid dreaming, and podcasting and writing articles on the therapeutic application of dreams and dream lucidity.

In this episode, Helen speaks to Melinda about her specialism in dreams, and how she now applies her psychotherapeutic knowledge to her media and training work.

## Helen

Well, thank you very much for joining me today, Melinda. And my first question, the big question, why did you become a psychotherapist?

## Melinda

Yes, well, first thanks for having me today. It's a real pleasure to share about my evolution as a therapist. Yeah, I'll use the word evolution - it has been over time. I think it's been a long and winding road in my case. I think first, before I get to talking about that, [I'll] just frame my response by saying it's really one of the best decisions I ever made.

As I said, it took me some time to make. I had been teaching for a number of years in writing and language and literature. I was really interested in stories, people's stories. And I found myself wanting not to have a curriculum or a syllabus between myself and the person that I was working with, [but] to work with the stuff

of their lives.

So, I wasn't really sure what to do about that and I thought, well, there are these psychotherapy trainings. And there was a centre called WPF, Westminster Pastoral Foundation. And I thought, well, I'll start with that. It's psychodynamic. And I really enjoyed it. It was an excellent training. I thought I'd go along and do the entire diploma. But then I really wanted to have a therapist that worked with dreams. And they advised me that if that's what I really wanted, then to look for a place where that was more central.

I decided then instead, actually I went and did another MA in psychology of religion. That was pulling together my interest in psychology, obviously, and spirituality. And it was there I first heard of transpersonal psychotherapy, a more integrative approach, and one that also uses dreams, and I thought, ah, that sounds interesting to me.

I got into doing a PhD by that time, in the psychology of religion. And I was enjoying that. But unfortunately, my mother took ill with cancer. After her diagnosis, there were four months where she continued to live and so I went and stayed with her during those four months, which was an incredible privilege. But when I got back, I just thought, gosh, the research I'm doing feels a bit dry, disconnected from human life, and I wanted something more hands on.

So, I started looking around. I also started having really intense vivid dreams of my mother. And I thought, well, I've got to do something with these dreams. So I found another foundation course called CTP, Centre for Transpersonal Training. And I did an excellent foundation there with a woman named Jan Voicer.

I loved it, but they didn't offer any further training. So, I finally found my way to a centre called CCPE, the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education in London, in little Venice. I registered to train with that centre, and everything since has flowed out of that decision, including this conversation with you now Helen.

### **Helen**

That's great. And we're gonna pick up a bit more on your dreams work later as well. But what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

### **Melinda**

I think it means different things at different stages in my evolution as a therapist, really. I mean, when I started the psychotherapy training, I honestly didn't know much about it at all, or the UK system. I should say, I'm from originally from the States. I left my home state of California in 1990 – so, some time ago – and have been in the UK since the year 2000.

I wasn't very familiar with the system here, but I knew that it was important for me to have an accredited training. And I still remember taking the envelope with all my material to submit for final UKCP registration and handing it in to the reception at CCPE and feeling very, you know, pleased and proud and relieved to hand that in. It does give one a sense of accomplishment. It is quite a process and a life changing experience, which we'll probably talk about more as we go along.

But, when I finished my training – well, towards the end of it actually – I started directing a Counselling Centre in London. It was affordable counselling. But it didn't have a lot of policies in place at the time. So, I think my, my role, part of it, my remit was to set up safe and ethical practice for both clients and therapists.

They were mostly trainee therapists there; it was a placement centre. I don't know if I mentioned the name of it, it was called Help Counselling Centre anyway. So, then UKCP was really important for me in terms of helping me to understand the guidelines around that, and I very much appreciated that.

I think later on, I realised actually it's a professional body, it's a community and it's a little bit like anything in life, it is what you make it so it occurred to me or maybe I could write an article for the magazine. So, I asked about that and said I was interested in dreams. So, for a while was answering media responses, queries to UKCP about dreams. And then during the pandemic got asked by UKCP to do a blog, and then a podcast on dreams.

So, then it opened up a different kind of way of thinking about UKCP for me. You know, it's been around a while, it's quite a large organisation, and I'm always learning about its structure as it's evolved over time too, which it has. So as a non-clinical member very recently, it's just good to be part of a recognised and respected professional body. And to have a kind of platform and forum to continue development and sharing.

**Helen**

You mentioned about Help, the counselling service that you set up. And that was a low-cost bereavement service, wasn't it?

**Melinda**

Yeah, affordable counselling. So, it was really, bereavement was a component but that was something unusual as we were offering a wide range of issues people could bring. So, it was more generalist in that respect. Yeah.

**Helen**

And you worked your way up and then became the director of the charity. What drew you to it in the first place?

**Melinda**

Well, I mean, honestly, in terms of practicalities, I was doing a training and Help was on the list of placement centres recommended for counsellors or trainee therapists at CCPE where I was training. And secondly, very pragmatically, it was very close to where I was working as a research associate, still doing some research in Kensington Square. Help is on Portobello Road, or used to be, in Notting Hill.

So, I had been going all over London trying to get hours as a trainee therapist. I lived in North London, for example. And I went down to Trinity Hospice, in Clapham, to do bereavement training and bereavement counselling to accrue hours. So, I'd been covering the width and breadth of London, let's say. So, it was quite nice to have things in one area, that was a real blessing. So that was the practicalities around it.

But more personally, I liked the history of the centre. It was originally founded by Richard Branson, so I didn't really set up Help per se. But what I did was take it into charitable status. So got it registered as a charity and helped to get it more self-sustaining. So originally was supported through Virgin, Virgin Unite. And then eventually became independent of that.

So, I wanted to be a counsellor, though, and I was a counsellor for six months. And then the director at the time, Miriam Sherpa, lovely person, she asked if I'd like to help out in the office. And six months later, she asked if I'd like to be office manager, and I said yes, you know, are you kidding!

I had in the past directed programmes, so it wasn't as if I was going into that blind. I had directed, coordinated a department of a teacher training college for four years. And I had also worked for the United States Peace Corps, which is rather like your VSO [Voluntary Service Overseas], organising training programmes in the summer, for people who would be going off and teaching English or things like that. So, I had done that kind of coordinating work.

But I also liked the remit that I would then have. And when Miriam retired, in any case, I ended up becoming the director. Again, I was asked to make it a registered charity and more self-sustaining. And I thought, well, yeah, I'd love to do that. I had absolutely no idea how challenging that would be. I had none at all. But we did it with the help of an excellent board, fantastic volunteers who were at the centre, but also the volunteers who had been there in the past and were very supportive. CCPE was really supportive. And I'd say a lot of grace as well made that project come together.

## **Helen**

And alongside your psychotherapeutic work, we talked a little bit about dreams and said we'll pick this up again, and we'll probably weave through this whole conversation. But you also set up the Dream Research Institute. What inspired you to do this?

## **Melinda**

Yeah, so I mean, it's not unrelated to the work I was doing, it helped. Because when I started doing that work, I started also having intense dreams, but this time, they were lucid dreams. Those are dreams when you become aware that you're dreaming while you dream. And they were very profound, luminous dreams, very energising. And I really felt for myself that they were empowering me for the work that I'd been given, helping me to complete it because it was much bigger than I felt I had the capacity for.

So, alongside the work that I was doing, I think I was also developing this lucid dreaming capacity, they seemed to be in reciprocity. But I think I've always been interested in dreams, even since childhood. And I

mentioned I was looking for a training that incorporated dreamwork. So, I knew CCPE was the right place because when I started that, [on] one of the first trainings, the director Nigel Hamilton, asked for a volunteer to do the dream re-entry technique that he developed, so, the waking dream process. You know, I shot my hand up. I had this very challenging dream I hadn't got to the bottom of really, and I thought, well, I'd like to do that.

So, he took me through it, and it was a very profound experience. I do write about it in one of my books and might mention more again later perhaps, but lucid surrender, which is on lucid dreaming. Obviously, it was really life changing.

And I went on and did the diploma, and then the advanced diploma, which had a lot about dreams, a lot of dream work. And then, did a specialised training as a dream guide. And so now, of course, I'm facilitating now and doing a lot of more online dream work, and lucid dreaming.

But I think it was, I don't know, 2012, I saw Nigel and I said, you know, it would be great to set up a Dream Research Institute. I'd been looking around and a lot of the research at that time into dreams really focused on the pathology of dreaming, you know, the kind of frightening and scary aspects of dreaming for the dreamer. It didn't look at dreams in relation to wellbeing. So, at the time it was quite novel an idea. We wanted to create a platform for that. And he said, well, I've been waiting a long time to set something up. So why don't we do that? And so, we co-founded that. And it's really a Centre for Dream Studies. There's also educational events for the public. That's how that idea unfolded.

And I did that for seven years. And then just before the pandemic started, I handed it over to Dave Billington, who's the current director. And, I still am on the team, as an advisor and consultant, and obviously, doing presenting and teaching, facilitating and writing. So yeah. That's the evolution of that one. That's the kind of the keynote word for this talk, I think, is evolution. Because again, that's over time. So that's looking back. What is it, 10 years now?

## **Helen**

Yeah, and I think there's probably lots of different things that we're talking about, lots of branches in that evolution, isn't there? Because you also set up in private practice and that's quite different to being in a counselling service or in the Research Institute, where you're around people. How did you find setting up on your own and having that side of things?

## **Melinda**

Basically, in terms of the private practice, what I did after being at Help, was take a year sabbatical, when I was pretty, pretty knackered as the English say, after my time there. And then, I did a training in supervision, not that I'd recommend doing a training during a sabbatical, especially if you're quite tired to begin with. But it was a very good training, of course I'm glad I did it. So, I ended up doing a lot of supervision alongside the client work for my accreditation, yeah.

I did find that I prefer being part of a community for the counselling work. So, I had been divorced and in the

ensuing years between 2003 and 2015 or so I had remarried by then and decided to move out to the country and to leave London. So, that was a kind of shift in my focus. And there was a counselling service called Riverside Counselling Service, which is still there. And I loved the idea of it because they have centres along the river in Henley, and you know, Wallingford, Benson, I think, Barron's Field. And they're offering also affordable counselling.

So, I was volunteering there, for my accredited hours with UKCP. So, I really, really enjoyed being part of a team. And of course, then the pandemic came along, didn't it? So, I stayed with them, we worked online through the pandemic. And then just before that time, I started really focusing on writing. Subsequently, that's been my main focus.

**Helen**

And how important was it for you to work in low-cost services? Because that's been the kind of theme among your work as well.

**Melinda**

Yeah, I think that that's always been important. It's always been part of my ethos. I mean, that was part of joining the US Peace Corps in my 20s, you know, just in terms of giving back. And also that people are just very open and responsive in those centres. So, I've always been engaged in charitable work, third sector work of one kind or another. That is one thing about psychotherapy, is that it can be quite expensive for the person who's trying to access it.

**Helen**

Yeah, that's it.

**Melinda**

That is it. Yeah. And I think, I just, people, whatever they can give, they're really giving from their heart to feel that. Yeah. When I was working at those two centres, Help and RCS.

**Helen**

And you said about moving more towards writing as well. And your dreams work led in 2018, to the commissioning of your book, *The Hidden Lives of Dreams*. Can you talk about this a bit more?

**Melinda**

Yeah, thanks for asking that. I had been writing quite a bit about dreams and giving talks, especially with the International Association for the Study of Dreams. And I was asked to write a piece for the London tube

magazine about dreams and an editor from Bonnier Books UK read it and contacted me about writing a book on dreams. And I was like, are you kidding? I'd love to do that, I've been waiting to do that. And he said, well, there's one thing, you need to write it within a year. And I thought, well, because I had been writing so much about dreams I'd kind of had a chance to distil a lot of my thinking around it.

So, it was a bit of a leap to trust that process. I mean, I had written educational books for the University of Michigan Press years before, in the US. So, I understood the kind of effort, let's say, and self-direction required for writing a book. But yeah, to do that in the year, it was quite an undertaking.

And it was published unfortunately, or fortunately, just as the first lockdown took place. But on the one hand, you may recall, that was the time at the pandemic dreams. People ... that was quite trending on social media. It really opened up people to being curious about their dreams and asking about them, and so that a lot came out of that. And actually, it was the right time for the book to come out. I mean, that book, I should say, is really written to initiate readers into a relationship with their dream life, and to bring people an awareness of the reciprocity between dreams and dream work and waking life. It's grounded in case studies, and also loads and loads of references to studies.

And then after I finished that, I started writing the book on lucid dreaming, *Lucid Surrender the Alchemy of the Soul in Lucid Dreaming*, and that was published on the winter solstice 2021.

### **Helen**

So, another short, short writing period.

### **Melinda**

Yes, we would say yes, but I had written many, many articles about lucid dreaming. So, I re-structured those and reread those and paired them back and put them together into this book. I guess you could say I got into a flow, because I'm doing a third book. It's called *Dreams My Mother Taught Me: Lessons in Lucid Dreaming from Beyond the Grave*. So, it's really about my mother's appearance in my dreams and lucid dreams, and what I learned from that. So, lots of writing alongside, you know, writing various articles and blogs and things like that.

### **Helen**

And that's now the focus of your work, isn't it? Training and writing speaking rather than the clinical work? How did you make that transition?

### **Melinda**

Hmm. Well, again, I think it was just quite a natural process over time. I just felt that was the thing to do. And more and more training opportunities became available online with Zoom for me, which again, I never thought I'd be doing, as many listeners will say. But it's proven a fantastic portal, especially as the people

who are, let's say, overtly interested in dreams, especially lucid dreaming, are dispersed. You know, getting access to them, it's more helpful with the online capabilities as well. So, it's just as I said before, it's always good to remain part of a professional body. I like the word body in that sense of kind of supported by a larger community. It is a kitemark, a recognition of quality.

### **Helen**

And then I'm going to ask you to think a little bit back to training when, like you said, there were lots of different points in your training and that evolution. But looking back now, is there anything you wish you knew before you started your psychotherapeutic training?

### **Melinda**

If you're making that change from clinical to non-clinical, make haste slowly. It's no rush and take your time and actually, thinking about it, what I did do was phase out over time. So, you know, working fewer and fewer clients, less involved directly in the clinical aspect of supervision, things like that. So it was, again, a devolution in that sense, a process over time.

So, I don't know. I think, in some sense, it's been good not knowing exactly what to expect, because it couldn't have expected what did happen. It does change your life when you do a training in psychotherapy. Certainly.

I might practically have known a bit more about how the UK system works really, I, you know, I had no idea of the difference between BACP, UKCP and BPS, you know, all the organisations. And that might have been helpful, but I think the main thing for me it was the type of training I wanted, and I was willing to put in the time to try those foundation courses. I think that's really important, you know. Extra expense but I was working alongside of those courses and everything you learn on them is valuable. It all gets integrated into who you are, into your toolkit as a therapist and as a human being really. So, nothing goes to waste. And that's one thing about psychotherapy, even moments of your life that you think, gosh, I really took a detour there, you know, well that detour is going to enrich your knowledge base, your experience.

### **Helen**

And as you were working whilst you were training, how did you manage the logistics and the time, you know, balancing your work and studies? Also the cost? And we talked about location as well, I think?

### **Melinda**

Right, exactly. I think I look back and asking myself that question. I think a lot of it, maybe the energy of my youth. I don't know how I managed. You know, having a couple of part-time jobs and doing trainings. I mean, I unfortunately, didn't have small children, family, I wasn't able to have children. So, I didn't have that. And I was always incredibly admiring of people who did manage the training and, you know, juggling families, especially young families.



And the fees, it's true, they're expensive. If I had to pay it all at once, it would have been quite overwhelming. But of course, you're paying overtime for this and that. I suppose if you kept records, that would be quite shocking, in the end. One pays the price for things that are of great value so, it's weighing up that cost while being realistic about it as well.

It is a challenge. And I think it's a challenge for the profession to consider the ongoing costs that are also associated with being a psychotherapist. Supervision and CPD and all of that, which is, you know, necessary and important, but also a cost, right? Especially if you want to, you know, offer people low-cost work as much as possible. You know, then that's a challenge, I think, for the profession. But yes, so that's the reality. I had my work, I had savings, my partner helped, and I did have some inheritance and that helped. And, you know, it all goes into the pot over time.

**Helen**

And you've actually said a couple of times how much your work has changed you, and your training has changed you. And that was going to be one of my questions, actually, my last question: how has psychotherapeutic training changed you?

**Melinda**

Yeah. It's probably easier to think how hasn't it changed me. I mean, every aspect: personal, professional, and spiritually, it's been completely transformative. So, it's touched on every aspect of my life. I'm definitely very grateful. It's allowed me to go deeper into the dream work and into dreams. It's like going into one of those courtyards in Spain, you know, it just reveals itself in more beautiful ways, really. I feel very fortunate to be working in this way with people. So yes, very, very grateful to have had the opportunity. And it's lovely to have had this opportunity to reflect on it with you. So, thank you, Helen.

**Helen**

No, thank you. It's been great talking to you today Melinda and hearing about your evolution. And thank you very much for that.

**Melinda**

My pleasure. Thanks.

**Jenna**

That was UKCP member Melinda Powell speaking to Helen Willingham, our head of content and engagement.

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If you'd like to know more about dreams and working therapeutically with them, see the Dream Research Institute's website [www.driccpe.org.uk](http://www.driccpe.org.uk).

To learn more about Melinda's work in Dream Studies, visit her website, [www.melindapowelldreams.com](http://www.melindapowelldreams.com).

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