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## INTRODUCTION

### *Unspoken Topics in Psychotherapy and How This Book Can Help Break the Silence*

The practice of psychotherapy has an unfortunate history of maintaining silence around certain topics. Difficulty thinking clearly and speaking openly, honestly, and directly about these topics continues to plague the practice of psychotherapy. We—those of us who practice, teach, supervise, and study psychotherapy—may not often think about the “unspoken” topics. We may swerve around the silence as if it were a deadly threat. We may lapse into absurdly abstract language to keep these topics at a safe distance. We may fill the air with distractions and distortions. We may shroud the unspoken with familiar myths. We may simply keep our mouths shut, not saying what we know to be important, relevant, and true.

This book discusses how these various forms of silence undermine, stunt, and derail the teaching, practice, and profession of psychotherapy. It also considers how those of us who love the profession and have dedicated our lives to it can recognize, understand, and overcome the barriers to speaking about them frankly and realistically. We share information, approaches, and strategies for how to think about, reflect on, and engage with these unspoken topics regardless of our professional context and setting (e.g., university, professional

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*Speaking the Unspoken: Breaking the Silence, Myths, and Taboos That Hurt Therapists and Patients*, by K. S. Pope, N. Y. Chavez-Dueñas, H. Y. Adames, J. L. Sonne, and B. A. Greene  
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school, and continuing education courses; our individual practices of psychotherapy, counseling, supervision, and consultation; our research; our forensic work as expert or fact witnesses).

We specifically focus on topics that often fall prey to various forms of silence, including

- physical difference and disability,
- sexual and affectional (romantic) orientation,
- sexual reactions to clients,
- therapist feelings of anger,
- oppression,
- White supremacy culture,
- religion,
- money and fees, and
- death and dying.

The book comprises 18 chapters organized into five sections.<sup>1</sup> Part I introduces the problem of the unspoken in psychotherapy. Our ability to think clearly and speak openly, honestly, and directly depends on acknowledging and addressing the current social, cultural, and political contexts in which we find ourselves as individuals and professionals. Chapter 1 focuses on these external events and forces, including cancel culture, hyperpolarization, legislation to ban books and specific topics, and academics who report on anonymous surveys that they are afraid to address certain subjects in their teaching. These circumstances lead many of us to resort to self-censorship in one area or another. They choke off our impulse to speak up and speak out. They sap our ability to connect with our patients, students, and colleagues. We have difficulty expressing ourselves freely and listening respectfully to those who disagree about controversial issues.

Understanding how challenging topics came to be silenced also depends, to some extent, on viewing them in their historical context. However tempting it may be to gloss over historical details, an accurate view of how the profession has mishandled these topics can help us in our attempts to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. As Santayana (1905) famously wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (p. 284). Thus, Chapter 2 discusses historical examples of how silence and myths were harmful to clients

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<sup>1</sup>This book is different from (i.e., not a new edition of) but in the tradition of two prior books: *Sexual Feelings in Psychotherapy: Explorations for Therapists and Therapists-in-Training* (Pope et al., 1993) and *What Therapists Don’t Talk About and Why: Understanding Taboos That Hurt Us and Our Clients* (Pope et al., 2006).

and the process of psychotherapy. Chapter 3 examines cognitive cues for keeping quiet and how they fit in with systems of silencing and other barriers to speaking up. In Chapter 4, we explore in more detail the profession's bleak history of denial, resistance, and distortions in the realm of therapists' sexual feelings and behavior with clients. This history not only helps us understand issues involving therapists' sexual feelings and behavior and how the profession responds to these issues but also prompts questions about the extent to which the silence and myths may continue in different forms and settings.

Although, at least according to Santayana (1905), failure to remember this history guarantees that we will repeat it, learning this history and keeping it in mind can *help*, but it does not guarantee that we will not fall into the same traps. A character in a Kurt Vonnegut (1987) novel says that she's got news for Santayana: that we can be doomed to repeat the past event if we remember it because that's what it means to be human. Faulkner (1950/2011) had a different caution regarding our belief that we can easily or definitively escape the past and its mistakes: "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (p. 73).

Part II is designed to help prepare therapists to break the silence. Chapter 5 provides a self-assessment as a prelude to Chapter 6, which walks the reader through the process of creating practical conditions for learning and strengthening our skills at speaking up. That chapter also introduces the exercises provided in Part III along with suggestions about how to work on those exercises.

In Part III, Chapters 7 through 15 offer exercises for exploring and learning. Through these exercises, therapists can practice confronting and speaking openly, honestly, and directly about the difficult topics listed earlier.

Part IV takes us beyond the realm of psychotherapy. It addresses speaking up in supervision and consultation (Chapter 16) and throughout the profession and the community (Chapter 17).

Part V, the final section, discusses strategies for moving forward when things do not go as planned as we work to speak up.

Throughout the text, readers will find questions, vignettes, and scenarios designed to encourage deep reflection about these topics as they relate to psychotherapy. All vignettes and scenarios have been vetted to ensure confidentiality.

The purpose of this book is to promote *understanding* of (a) unspoken and silenced topics; (b) the profession's history around these areas; and (c) the relevant research regarding the cognitive and other internal factors that play a role in self-silencing as well as the social, organizational, and other external silencing factors.

In addition, we seek to promote *action* by presenting specific strategies for summoning and practicing the courage, confidence, and determination to speak more openly, honestly, and directly in the therapy office, the classroom, and the courtroom, and in the community. Each of us can do our part to break the silence and expose the myths and distortions that have plagued our profession. We can bring about more openness, curiosity, and frank, respectful discussion in our education and our clinical, forensic, and community work.

Let's begin the conversation! Ready to join us?