

## The Tony Robbins Experience

What's the Takeaway for Therapists?

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Tony Robbins is up on stage, all 6 foot 7 inches of him. He claps his hands, jabs the air, jogs back and forth, and pumps his fist skyward like a giant boxing with God. “Come on!” he exhorts his audience of 2,500, who’ve gathered in the ballroom of the Boca Raton Hilton for A Date with Destiny, which is Robbins’s signature, six-day personal growth extravaganza. “Come on!” He pauses for a second, gazes out at his audience, and breaks into a titanic grin, looking suddenly like a college kid who’s showed up at a super-amazing party. When he spreads his arms out to welcome the crowd, you’re looking at a 7-foot wingspan.

“How’re you doing out there, ladies and gentlemen?”

They roar. They stand, clap, jump in the air, shout *whoo whoo*, and otherwise go crazy on him. He’s their rock star.

Tony Robbins, who will give a special session at the 41th annual Networker Symposium next March, is a pop psychology phenom. Over the last three decades, his work in the area of emotional growth and healing has influenced millions of people, most of whom will probably never see the inside of a therapist's office. According to his website, he's reached some 50 million individuals through his recordings, TV appearances, online offerings, and books, at least two of which made the New York Times bestseller list. Four million people have attended his live seminars. His 2006 TED talk, entitled "Why We Do What We Do," is the seventh-most watched TED talk ever. He's repeatedly appeared on Oprah's "Lifeclass" show and has chatted with Larry King, Amos Oz, Ellen DeGeneres, Charlie Rose, Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, "Morning Joe" Scarborough, and assorted other TV royalty about his tenets of personal change.

And Robbins doesn't appeal only to your average TV junkie. He's served as a "peak performance coach" to the likes of Bill Clinton, Princess Diana, Mikhail Gorbachev, Quincy Jones, Serena Williams, and a whole flock of Fortune 500 execs. He's also met with Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa (though it's not clear if he had anything to teach those two). He's been interviewed by CNN, CNBC, NPR, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. The bottom line is that when

Tony Robbins talks, a lot of people listen from a staggering range of backgrounds, expertise, and interests.

Yet many therapists are only generally aware of him. Upon hearing his name, clinicians are apt to say something like, “He’s that self-help guy, right?” Relatively few are aware of the way Robbins actually works---his beliefs about human possibilities, his specific approaches to healing, and the particular quality of his presence. If you attract thousands of people to each event you give, and keep attracting them multiple times a year, over four decades, it’s a good bet that you have something to offer. But what’s that elusive “something” that Tony Robbins embodies and transmits to people who seek personal change? And can therapists learn anything useful from it?

At first glance, it’s not clear. Robbins claims, after all, that people can transform their lives via his six-day seminar. He sometimes speaks in soundbites. “Biography isn’t destiny” is one. “Divorce your story and marry the truth” is another. He likes to wrap his messages in numbered groups: two master skills, three key decisions, four kinds of love, six needs.

Transformation is his brand, and his style is easy to lampoon, or even disparage. In a *New York Times* review of *Tony Robbins: I Am Not Your Guru*, a 2016 Netflix documentary, Jeannette Catsoulis wrote that Robbins

comes across like “a carefully honed combination of Elmer Gantry, Dr. Phil and David Copperfield.”

At the very least, Robbins’s vision is seductive. He promises something that nearly everyone longs for---the capacity to create the life they desire, instead of merely managing the one they have. In a CNN interview, he describes the core intention of his work with people as “finding that source inside of them that’s still alive and fanning the flames of that intensity. Give them a taste of who they are, and people start to change.”

It sounds like a worthy goal. But in six days?

For clinicians who toil conscientiously with their clients over a period of months or years, it may be tempting to write Robbins off as more super-salesman than healer, a captivating performer with a taste for fame. But a close look at the documentary *I Am Not Your Guru*, which covers his Date with Destiny (DWD) seminar, reveals a man who seems to be a lot of things at once. For example, he’s never trained as a therapist (and never claims to be one), yet he integrates several clinical approaches into his retreats, including cognitive behavioral therapy, psychodynamic strategies, Ericksonian principles, Internal Family Systems, Gestalt therapy, positive psychology, and narrative therapy. He cites Milton Erickson and strategic family therapist Cloé Madanes as major influences on his work.

He makes excellent money doing what he does. The DWD seminar costs \$4,995 a pop for up to 2,500 participants, and he does high-end executive coaching on the side, prompting *Fortune Magazine* to dub him the “CEO Whisperer.” He’s an outlandishly successful businessman, having owned or partnered in companies as far-flung as asteroid mining, credit cards, nutritional supplements, 3-D printed prosthetic limbs, a 5-star resort in Fiji, and a major-league soccer franchise. He owns six homes, including an oceanfront spread in Palm Beach, Florida, that encompasses a half-size basketball court, an infinity pool, and a bowling alley. *The Washington Post* estimates his net worth at \$480 million. He gives away some of it, partnering with Feeding America, a program that delivers tens of millions of meals to hungry families each year. Over the next eight years, he has publicly committed to donating a total of one billion meals. Even so, he remains a very, very rich guy.

But here’s the complexity. For all his wealth and prominence, it’s hard to believe that Tony Robbins is just a guy padding his bank account or celebrity status. When he talks about his mission---to help people identify the emotional forces that hold them back so they can begin to truly thrive---his passion is palpable. And yes, onstage he’s big and brash and pumped-up. But once he wades into an audience and begins to talk with an individual,

something else emerges. As that person begins to tell his or her story, you can see Robbins slow down. He palpably connects. You could swear he truly cares.

### **Diving into the Wreck**

The Netflix film *I Am Not Your Guru* offers intriguing glimpses of Robbins's complexity. Director Joe Berlinger, who's previously made hard-nosed investigative films such as *Brother's Keeper* and *Paradise Lost*, directed *Not Your Guru* after taking the DWD seminar himself in 2012.

Deeply affected by the experience, he went on to create what feels more like a celebratory concert film than a probing documentary. But if Robbins is a rock star, the film demonstrates that he's a talented and inspirational one---a kind of Bruce Springsteen of the human-potential business, a working-class guy who can reach the masses at a gut level.

On the first morning of the filmed seminar, following his rollicking onstage introduction, Robbins challenges people in the audience to stand up if they want to change something. "What's an area of your life that's not the way you want it?"

A slim young woman named Sienna leaps to her feet. She has long, glossy hair and large, gray-blue eyes. “My diet,” she says, flashing a wide, sweet-girl smile.

Robbins lets the statement hang in the air for a moment. Then, looking at her quizzically, he asks, “Your diet. What about your diet?”

She says she wants to be better to her body. Get healthier. Eat at “the most beneficial times of day.” She goes on like this for a little while, her smile twinkling at odd times. When she finishes, Robbins gazes at her for a moment. Then he asks, “So what are you doing all this for? What’s life about?” The other participants listen intently.

Sienna bites her lip. Finally, she admits, “It’s about finding love and happiness.” Robbins probes further: what does she have to do to be worthy of receiving love from people? The young woman hesitates again. Then: “I need to be responsible for their happiness.”

Robbins nods. He asks, “Whose love did you most crave growing up, your mother’s or your father’s?” This question reflects a basic element of his approach. He’s big on setting here-and-now goals, but he rarely starts there. He believes that you have to understand the grip of your past before you can actively shape your future. And he’s really asking this question of all 2,500

participants, who can see and hear the intervention on huge video screens at either side of the stage.

Sienna goes silent again. Finally, she says softly, “Since I didn’t quite get it, it was my dad’s.” She’s trembling slightly. Robbins presses, gently, “Who did you have to be for your father?”

Now she’s silent for a longer time. Finally: “Ignorant to his behavior.” A pause. “His drug abuse.” Then she laughs.

Robbins doesn’t flinch at her giggle fit. He doesn’t make empathy eyes, nor does he seem at a loss. Quietly, he continues to probe her relationship with her father. Does she love him? “I struggle,” she says, “but at the end of the day, I do.” And then Robbins makes a proposal that very few therapists would try 15 minutes into the first session. “What if you called him?” he asked. “What if you said, ‘I’ve blamed you, but...you’re also to blame for the good.’” Sienna looks stunned. He explains that out of any suffering, compassion and strength can blossom, and that it can be useful to acknowledge that mixed gift---definitely to yourself, and maybe also to the person who’s caused you pain. “I’m not asking you to stop blaming,” he tells her. His voice has a fervent, listen-up edge. “But blame at the level of your soul.”



Sienna pledges to call her father---and later that day, she does it. The following morning she's back on camera, reading from a text she'd received from her dad shortly after their phone conversation. "Sienna, you will never know in a thousand lifetimes what that call meant to me," she reads out loud. "I could not be more blessed to have you in my life." She glows. Then she shares a second text that her dad sent just an hour or two earlier. It said, simply, "I love you."

### **Phoenix Rising**

Robbins makes no bones about his own early suffering. In fact, he wants people to know that he is Exhibit A of his own core message---that you can sculpt the person you want to be with whatever raw material you have available, so long as you acknowledge the early forces that shaped you. When Robbins wants to jolt people out of their habitual ways of thinking, he sometimes uses profanity. Onstage at the DWD seminar, he booms to his audience, "I constructed this fucking Tony Robbins guy. I created this motherfucker!"

Robbins was born in North Hollywood, California, in 1960, the oldest of three children. His parents divorced when he was seven; his mother, Nikki, remarried twice. A photo shows a petite, glamorous woman with

platinum hair and pink sunglasses. And at some point, she seriously lost her way. In the documentary, Robbins tells director Berlinger, “I didn’t realize she was alcoholic and addicted to pain meds. I had to be the person who did everything for her. My mother wouldn’t go out of the house.” So she sent her firstborn on her dark errands. “I had to go to the pharmacist and convince him to give me more Valium because she’d lost her bottle of Valium,” he recalls. It was years before Robbins realized that his mother had never “lost” her meds; she’d just been desperate for more of them.

At 17, when Robbins announced plans to leave home, his mom flipped out. “She was only five-foot-one, but she could come down and grab my hair and smash me against the wall,” he says. “Or tell me I was lying and pour liquid soap down my throat until I threw up.” He shakes his head. “Just some crazy shit.” He left home and spent the next day or two in a 1968 Volkswagen. Then, following a series of short-term jobs, he hit bottom, a 19-year-old kid holed up in a crummy apartment near Venice Beach, spending his days fending off bill collectors and watching soap operas. “General Hospital---I can tell you the whole story,” Robbins told a CNN interviewer. “I know Luke and Laura. I know when they got married. I was there.” And as he spent more and more time in front of the tube, he put on 38 pounds. He doesn’t mince words: “My butt was bigger than Chicago.”

As Robbins tells it, at some point during this dismal period, he realized he couldn't stand it anymore---his flabby body, his miserable relationships, his serial joblessness. He vowed to make himself anew. He ran on the beach. He wrote in a journal. "I was dirt honest with myself," he says. He began to read widely in psychology. He looked for, and found, mentors in the fast-growing business of motivational speaking. By his mid-20's, he'd begun to a make a decent living as a "human-development trainer."

But Robbins's career didn't explode until the late 1980s, when he saw the potential of the then-new TV "infomercial" platform and began to storm the airwaves, touting his Personal Power audiotape and a suite of other products. By his early 30's, he'd begun to build a self-improvement empire that included personal-growth seminars, motivational speeches, books and tapes, and one-on-one "peak-performance coaching" to the well-heeled. By then, the self-help business had become a crowded, elbow-jostling field, with dozens of stars and hundreds more wannabes. But by dint of Robbins's instinctive understanding of people's emotional needs, his electrifying personality, and his sheer, indefatigable will, he began to separate himself from the pack. It wouldn't be too long before Tony Robbins would become a household name.

Part of his success can be attributed to the staggering number of things he can do in a day---*loves* to do in a day. In a 2014 interview with *The Washington Post*, he admitted, “I’m a massive action guy.” He’s out of town more or less constantly, traveling to several continents a year to give seminars, speeches, and coaching sessions, whatever’s on tap. In the *Not Your Guru* film, during DWD seminar breaks or back home in Palm Beach, he’s shown in perpetual motion, running on the beach, working out with huge weights, jogging in place, or lowering himself into his pool---which, by the way, is set at 57 degrees Fahrenheit. And he’s not afraid of risk, whether it involves investing in a start-up or, as he told CNN, “riding my Harley like a bat out of hell or dive-bombing in my helicopter.”

He encourages seminar participants to take risks, too. Back in 1991, Cindy Shapiro, a therapist in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, took a multi-day Robbins training on the Big Island of Hawai‘i. Midway through the program, Robbins announced a surprise assignment: each participant would travel to *another* Hawaiian island, where they’d manage on their own for 24 hours---without a dime. She recalls, “He told us to make our way however we could, with other people’s help, and to give something back to those people.” Shapiro did both, learning in the process that she could navigate the world far more successfully than she’d ever believed. “I then knew that

whatever I put my mind to, I could do,” she says, and that conviction continues to push her into new territory. “Just recently,” she adds, “I spoke at a rally supporting the Affordable Care Act. I’d never done anything like that before in my life.”

Robbins’s faith in the benefits of risk-taking has occasionally cost him. During a multi-day “Unleash the Power Within” seminar in Dallas last summer, he invited participants to walk on hot coals in order to directly experience their courage in the face of fear. *The Washington Post* reported that rescue units were sent to the site, five people were taken to the hospital, and 30 to 40 people were medically evaluated after “sustaining burn injuries to their feet and lower extremities.” In the wake of national media coverage of the incident, a spokeswoman for Robbins described the so-called “fire walk” as a voluntary activity that “has been a celebrated part of this event for 35 years.” Later, in an interview with *PsychologyToday.com*, Robbins said, “Of course, I feel bad when anyone gets hurt, but all attendees know there’s that small risk.” He added that all volunteers sign a document in advance that says they’re aware of the possibility of injury.

Inevitably, the fire-walking incidents have spurred questions about the nature of Robbins’s influence on people. Is he merely a pop psychology star, or is there a cultlike quality to his leadership? Robbins has heard the

accusation numberless times, and he insists that he wants nothing to do with guru-dom. “If you’re coming here to be a follower, you know, get out of here,” he says in his introductory, large-group session of the DWD seminar. “*You’ve* got to be able to identify what *you* want.” Nonetheless, when Tony Robbins encourages an activity, many participants are primed to say yes. They trust him that much. At the very least, anyone with that much authority needs to be extremely careful with it.

### **“I’m the Why Guy”**

And so we arrive at the complexity of Tony Robbins. The boisterousness, the flash, and the sizable errors of judgment---they’re all there. But so is attunement. The man seems to possess a remarkable therapeutic intuition. Cloe Madanes, a renowned strategic family therapist who cofounded a coach training business with Robbins, says she decided to work with him only after repeatedly witnessing him “create a soul-to-soul connection with people. Sometimes, with Tony, words aren’t even necessary.” For 15 years, they’ve collaborated in Robbins-Madanes Training, a program that’s trained almost 10,000 therapists and coaches in their Strategic Intervention Method.

In the film, when you see him work with individuals, this quality of attunement is hard to miss. On the spot, he listens to a person’s story while

watching him or her closely, and appears to readily grasp the murkier conflict behind the words. In a crowded ballroom, he manages to connect with the suffering person---not with canned empathy, but with a kind of steady compassion, the kind that makes a person feel seen. Then, after a few moments of silence, Robbins makes an in-the-moment intervention that seems to startle the person into a new way of viewing him- or herself, and to generate a measure of hope for not only that person, but the whole room.

Granted, the film documents only highly effective interventions; we don't get to see Robbins flop or flail, as he admits he does sometimes. Perhaps more importantly, we don't learn enough about how the people he works with fare over time. The film ends with a "where are they now" report on how several of them were doing post-seminar, and all seemed to be thriving. One became a life coach, another recommitted herself to a boyfriend, and still another began to work with traumatized women like herself. Sienna stayed in good contact with her dad until he died, several months after they'd reconnected. We get these facts, but we find out little about the participants' states of mind and heart. Perhaps they're happier and more fulfilled. But nobody knows better than therapists that people can function at a high level and still be suffering mightily. Robbins advises participants to lock in their gains by means of daily self-awareness practices

and by using the services of a life coach. Nonetheless, the long-term impact of the seminars remains unknown. Cloé Madanes compares him to innovators like Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir, who focused on clinical creativity rather than measuring outcomes. She adds, “Research is our next step.”

Still, watching Robbins in action, it’s hard to deny that he has a talent for facilitating change.. At a very personal level, he seems to understand how powerfully one’s past experience can shape present difficulties. As he tells a roomful of high-powered people in his celebrated 2006 TED talk, “I’m the ‘why’ guy. I want to know *why* you do what you do.” He goes on: “My invitation to you is to explore . . . the needs, the beliefs, the emotions that are controlling you,” because if you can do that, he says, you’ll free up energy to make new, enlivening decisions. Whether Robbins has ever availed himself of psychotherapy to address his own early trauma isn’t clear; it certainly isn’t part of his public story. What is clear is that he understands how terribly an adult can wound a child, and how that cringing child still lives in every adult.

## **Theater of the Intimate**



On Day Three of the DWD seminar documented in *Not Your Guru*, Robbins ups the ante. After his ritual, high-voltage onstage introduction, he slows the tempo. “I’d like to bring somebody up who is suicidal,” he says. His tone is sober. “And I know you’re out there, because in any room of 2,500, there are, on average, 12 people who are suicidal.” He scans the crowd.

A woman named Dawn stands up. She’s almost impossibly beautiful--high cheekbones, flawless skin, gleaming blond hair in a perfect bob. But almost immediately, her prom-queen persona dissolves. She’s crying, hard. Robbins dives into the crowd; in a heartbeat, he’s standing beside her.

Dawn tells him that she was born into a community called “Children of God.” Already, you know this is going to be bad. “Kids growing up, we were taught that God’s love is sex,” she says, her voice faltering. “Since we were six years old, we had to have sex with people.” She watched her mother and brothers being sexually abused, too. Robbins’s brow furrows; his mouth opens slightly. He looks unprepared for this. The young woman continues to weep as she talks, and Robbins makes no move to cut short her distress. In a strangled voice, she adds, “And you grow up, and you have no life.”

Robbins continues to look at her, his gaze steady. Finally, Dawn says, “I believe that there is love, but this is not it.” She takes a shuddering breath.

“All---all of my family wants to kill themselves. I’m always there, positive, trying to do things to help them. I’m the one who says, ‘Everything is okay.’” And then she crumples. “I don’t know what to do with so much pain,” she sobs. “I’m 26, and I’ve never had a relationship. Her voice rises into a kind of wail. “I don’t know what love *is*.”

Robbins wraps his arms around her. He lays his big head on top of hers, and they stand like that for a while. When he tries to speak, his voice breaks, so he has to start again. “You’ve been through pain that most people couldn’t imagine in their lives,” he tells her. “You haven’t deserved any of it.” He continues to hold her. Tears stand in his eyes.

Then, the critical pivot. “But out of that pain comes unbelievable strength,” he tells her. “You’re tired of being strong.” He swallows. “But you still are.” She looks up at him, meets his gaze. “You’re going to make sure this stops with you,” he tells her. “With you it *stops*. And real life begins.” Dawn smiles, a small tremulous thing. The intimacy of the moment is piercing.

“If you want to know what love is, it’s called you,” Robbins continues. “You’re love. You’re incredible.” He puts his hand on his heart. She’s nodding. “Now you can choose,” he tells her. “You take the power

back. Today. You consciously decide.” A moment later, he adds, “And here’s the cool thing---you’ve already decided.”

Many participants are now crying, their faces shining with sympathy, or perhaps empathy. Robbins sees this---he’s always aware of the other people in the room---and he asks Dawn to hop onto a chair. Once she’s up there, he asks her to look around and find “three men in the audience who, when you look in their eyes, you know that they really are sending you love, and there’s no agenda.” She gazes around, taking people’s measure, and eventually points to three men. They are ordinary-looking guys: a teddy bear of a man with a white goatee; a 30-something dude with blond dreads; and a very young, earnest-looking man. They wade through the crowd toward Dawn, each looking raw, wide open. Each of them hugs her.

Now, Robbins stands in front of the men, looking at each in turn. “I’m going to ask if you, and you, and you will become her new uncles---the ones she can trust---for the next 10 years of her life.” His tone is dead serious. He gets more specific: for the next six months, he wants each of them to get in touch with Dawn at least once a month, just to see how she’s doing, see what she might need. Better yet, “Anticipate what she might need.” The men nod. Their eyes, too, are filmed with tears.

“You were chosen,” he tells them. “You chose yourself. Something inside you was pulled to let her know how loved she is.” Robbins’s voice is thick with emotion. “This is what you were made for. You were made to love unconditionally.” He takes a long breath. “And the more we do, the more we experience our true nature. And we feel deeply alive.” He’s talking to the three guys but, clearly, he’s also speaking to the entire group, skillfully weaving his larger message into his individual intervention. He’s good at this, the art of leveraging one person’s story into powerful takeaways for thousands of people.

But as he executes this balancing act---talking to the guys while simultaneously educating a huge crowd---he somehow manages to stay with Dawn. Turning to her, he invites her to enter the coach training program he runs with Madanes; he thinks Dawn could be a fantastic coach, if she wants to be one. (She does go on to take the training, gratis, and is now a coach and public speaker in Brazil.) Robbins tells Dawn that she clearly cares for people---especially those who are hurting---and that he believes compassion is the source of all healing. “My power is my caring,” he tells her, choking on his words. “I can pierce anything because I’m the real fucking thing. And so are you.” Dawn’s face has come alive. She nods. And clearly, we’re

meant to feel pretty good about things, in part because at this moment, music starts to swell: “Tiny Dancer” by Elton John.

It’s a piece of theater. It also feels powerfully real. Robbins is a consummate performer *and* he seems genuinely moved in the presence of a person’s pain. Shortly after his intervention with Dawn, the film’s director interviews him, in private, about what had just taken place. How had he managed to connect and intervene with Dawn---a profoundly traumatized, weeping woman---right on the spot like that? Robbins shakes his head. “I knew something had to be done, *now*,” he says. “And I just said to myself, there’s a way. It just comes through me. Nothing genius there.” He looks spent, and then suddenly fierce. “I will not fail her.”

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There remains something opaque and unknowable about Robbins, perhaps even to himself. A bit later in the film, director Berlinger pushes him to articulate why he does the work he does---not the celebrity coaching, not the acquisition of this or that business, but *this* work---helping ordinary people open themselves to their pain in order to encounter their essential aliveness. “Why do you do it?” Berlinger presses. Robbins responds with a general statement about his own childhood suffering, but Berlinger doesn’t entirely

buy it. “That doesn't tell me *why*,” he says. “I mean, I had a difficult childhood. I’ve suffered. But I don’t have that capacity.”

Robbins looks stumped. He goes quiet. “It’s my obsession,” he finally says. “An obsession to help. It makes me feel like my life has deep meaning.” He struggles to maintain his composure. At length, he says, “Everybody’s got their thing. And this is my thing.”

He looks away. For the moment, he has no words.

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