

Mental illness is as serious, if not more, when compared to any physical ailment – but society tends to look at one with sympathy and the other as a weakness.

Dr. Preeti Pandit, a practicing psychotherapist, seeks to promote a better understanding of mental illness in this book. She seeks to answer questions such as:

- How do experiences in childhood form a foundation for you later in life?
- What can you do to move past negative experiences from long ago?
- How can you overcome your most troubling fears?
- How does an imbalance in relationships create long-lasting impact on your psyche?

The author's ultimate purpose is to showcase that when someone is afflicted with mental illness, there are reasons why. Coming to terms with those reasons can help individuals confront bottled-up feelings and move forward to achieve their life purpose.

Join the author and a fascinating cast of characters as they go on a roller-coaster journey of intrigue, disbelief, and the unexpected – and leave with a greater awareness of the issues surrounding mental illness.



Dr. Preeti Pandit, a practicing psychologist, counselor and psychotherapist, has been nominated as one of the top fifty most influential women in Singapore and is affiliated with the Singapore Association for Counselling. Known to employ innovative techniques in her therapy, she has helped people around the globe. She is also a painter, entrepreneur, philanthropist, a Vipassana practitioner, and a passionate storyteller.

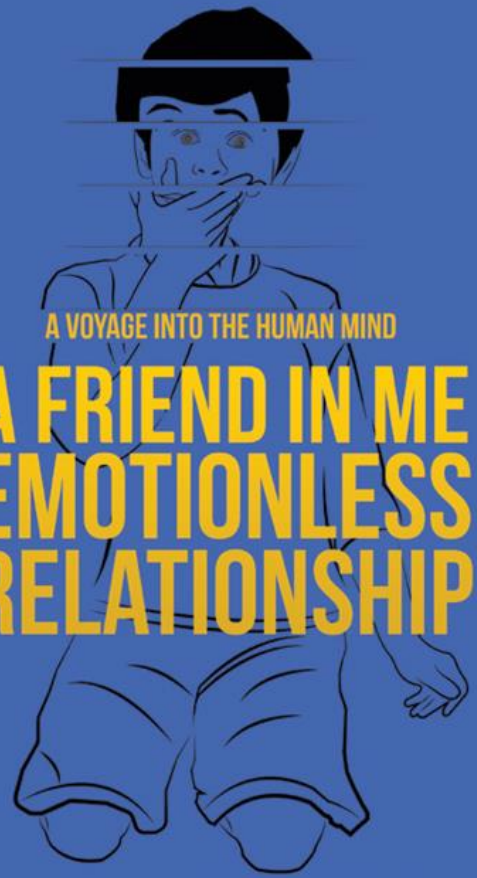


PARTRIDGE



A FRIEND IN ME
EMOTIONLESS RELATIONSHIP

PSYCHOLOGIST. PREETI PANDIT



A VOYAGE INTO THE HUMAN MIND

A FRIEND IN ME EMOTIONLESS RELATIONSHIP

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Emotion Less Relationship

A Friend in Me Emotion less Relationship

CHAPTER 1: The Cuban Diaries

The month of November brings a lot of rain to Singapore. Humidity increases, and everything is wet and sticky. I prefer the summer months, when everything is bright and even the most mundane tasks seem welcoming. It does feel depressing when lying on the bed—you get a glimpse of the dark grey sky through the little gap in the curtains, and you hear the constant drizzle making a seemingly never-ending sound as the drops of rain, slanted due to the light breeze, fall on the windowpane. Today was one such day. It did not help that I had only one therapy session to keep myself occupied. I finished the session and headed straight to the hotel. The sound of pleasing music, which I instantly recognised as the selection of Beethoven classics that I had ordered some days earlier, gave me an instant energy boost. Our family owns the Sandpiper group of hotels, which has branches in Singapore and Malaysia.

The lovely Michelle was at the reception desk, and she gave a warm smile while greeting me. ‘Good evening, ma’am,’ she said with a gentle bow of her head. I reciprocated warmly. ‘Very good evening, Michelle. How are you today?’ ‘Very well, ma’am,’ she responded with her smile intact. Michelle had joined the hotel a couple of weeks ago, and I was instantly drawn to her smile. I walked to the lounge and sat on my favourite couch right in front of the big Sandpiper logo. ‘Ma’am, can I get a drink for you?’ Michelle enquired from behind the reception. My mood was already better just by being there, but who could refuse a nice cup of Darjeeling tea? ‘Could you ask for some tea please?’ I answered. As she picked up the house telephone to place the order, my attention was drawn to the television across the room from where I was sitting. CNN was broadcasting the news. While the presenter was sharing some facts about the world economy, my eyes were riveted to the bottom of the screen and the scrolling message ‘Fidel Castro dead’. I blinked a few times to confirm that I was indeed reading the message correctly, and there it was again. Since I could not increase the volume of the television in the lobby, I asked Michelle to give me the key to one of the rooms which we would always keep as an emergency spare for any special guest whom we might need to accommodate. My mind was racing as I took the elevator to the second floor and opened room 210. I switched on the

television, and it seemed like an eternity before it came on. I browsed through the channel list before I found CNN.

'Ex-president of Cuba Fidel Castro died in the early hours of the morning' was the headline that immediately greeted me. As if on cue, the presenter turned to the news item that had caught my attention. 'Cuban state television announced that Fidel Castro, the former president of Cuba, died last night. The cause of death is not disclosed to the media. His brother, President Raul Castro, confirmed the news in a brief speech ...' There was a knock on the door. I realised that the door was still open. It was Salim with my cup of tea. He greeted me, but I barely acknowledged him, as my eyes and ears were still glued to the television, listening to every word being spoken. Back home later that night, I had an early dinner and retired to my bedroom. I relaxed on my bed and picked up the book I had been reading. I removed the lovely bookmark with the image of a Sandpiper, opening to the page which I had been reading the previous night. As I stared at the page, my mind raced back to the time when I was a resident of Cuba, back in 1989. I could not believe that twenty-seven years had already passed. At that time, my husband was stationed in Havana for a couple of years as a guest of the Cuban government. Images of our lovely villa, with its foyer overlooking the garden, the beautiful Varadero Beach, the many diplomatic dinners that we had hosted, the couple of meetings with Papa Castro (as he was fondly called in Cuba), and Albert. Albert. Why did I suddenly remember Albert? I thought to myself as the images of a handsome young man flashed in my mind, as if they were a part of my life just a few days ago. Albert ... He was so different from my other clients. He was tall, almost six feet, but his slim frame made him seem taller. He had a pleasing personality and was always well groomed.

What was striking about him were his deep eyes. I could see them staring at me. The sound of the door opening brought me back to the present. It was my husband, Pankaj. 'Still awake?' he enquired. 'Just about to end the day,' I muttered as I kept the book aside and put off the reading lamp next to my bedside with the images of Cuba still occupying my thoughts. There was water all around me. I could see very clearly for miles as the water merged with the sky. I felt like a fish swimming along with the beautiful marine life around me. Little fishes were talking to me, telling me their tales. I could touch the corals. I felt like a child playing with a new toy. It was 1989. My first experience of scuba diving on my own. Pankaj and I had landed in Havana a month earlier. The initial days were spent in finding the 'perfect' house. Since then, with time at my disposal, I started exploring the island. I fell in love with Varadero Beach and the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean Sea. As I was lazing on the beach, the

charming Diego lured me into taking a lesson in scuba diving, and I took to it just like a fish to water. I got my licence within a week, and here I was, all on my own. I did not want the hour to end, but the loud voice of Diego reminded me that it was time to go back to the real world.

I quickly changed and made my way to Cubalise, a diplomatic store where we did most of our grocery shopping. I had planned a dinner for a few of the Cuban ministers and some dignitaries the next day. This is a protocol I had to follow once every month during my stay in that country. My maid, Benita, did our grocery shopping, but I wanted the dinner to be perfect in every sense and had decided to select the main ingredients. My maid had suggested a Cuban dish, ropa vieja, which is a lovely blend of shredded flank steak in tomato sauce, black beans, yellow rice, plantains, and fried yuca, with beer. I decided to add lobster and shrimp, which were my favourites. I made my way to the seafood section. There was a lot of variety on offer. It was at this point that I saw him. He was standing next to me, and I could see his reflection in the glass wall ahead of me. He had strikingly good looks, and I guessed he would definitely make heads turn when he walked into a room. After a moment, our eyes met the reflection of the other and paused. When realisation dawned, I quickly shifted my gaze and moved ahead. As I walked, I turned my head, and he was still there, probably still undecided on his selection. I went ahead and picked up the other ingredients and made my way to the cash counter. As I passed the seafood aisle, my head turned almost involuntarily, and there he was, still standing by the seafood counter. I was now intrigued for more reasons than one. He appeared to be an Indian. There were only a thousand Indians in Cuba. His appearance seemed so charming, almost like a movie star. Finally, seeing his almost stolid presence at the seafood counter, I decided to act. Walking up to him, I initiated a conversation. 'Hello, sir. May I help you?' I enquired politely. He seemed a bit startled at the sudden sound of a voice which seemed to be directed at him. He turned around to face me with an enquiring look on his face. 'Ahh' was all he could mutter. I suddenly sensed that my approach may have been too sudden, but I decided to continue, having already made the move.

'Hello, my name is Preeti,' I said with a wider smile. 'I was just enquiring if you need any help.' He finally got hold of himself and reciprocated with a smile. 'Oh, hello. I am Albert.' That was our first meeting. I helped Albert with his selection that day and also exchanged phone numbers. The next day was busy. We were in a new country, and it took me a while to understand how the various services worked. Benita's husband, Carlos, came as a godsend. He connected me with the right people, and by the afternoon, the lawn was lit with bright lights; a row of tables had been arranged for laying out the food; a music system was in place

with a local DJ who, rather reluctantly, agreed to play a selection of my favourite Beethoven tracks; and round tables and chairs were arranged randomly around the lawn, with a bunch of flowers to add a touch of elegance. It all seemed perfect. The guests started arriving at 6 p.m. Pankaj and I were busy receiving them as they arrived and ushering them to the lawns. 'Hello, Mrs Pandit.' I turned my gaze from the personal secretary of President Castro, with whom I was having a conversation. I immediately recognised the short, portly gentleman who had addressed me. The voice belonged to Doctor Rehman Malik, a renowned neurosurgeon who practised at the Clinica Sistema Nervioso, reputed to be a very good hospital in Havana. We had met at a conference on mental disorders that I had attended during the last month. With his Indian parentage and reputation in the medical fraternity, I considered him an important person to be connected with during my stay in Cuba and accordingly had invited him to today's dinner.

I let Pankaj attend to the Personal Secretary while I went and greeted Dr Malik. 'Hello, Doctor. Glad you could come,' I responded warmly to his greeting. 'The pleasure is mine, Mrs Pandit,' he said with a slight bow and continued, 'You are looking lovely as always.' I acknowledged the appreciation with a coy smile. Doctor Malik continued, 'I need a small favour from you.' A little surprised with the request but always wanting to help, I replied, 'Sure, Doctor. Let me know what you have in mind.' 'I have a guest with me,' he said as he pointed to his car. 'He was my last patient today, and as I finished, I suggested that he join me for this dinner.' Before I could respond, he continued, 'There is a reason that I want him to meet you and thought this may be a good occasion.' I have always been very conscientious and believe in meticulous planning, which suggests that I am not a big fan of surprises. However, the second part of Dr Malik's request intrigued me. 'Sure, Doctor Malik. You can definitely ask your guest to join us.' 'That's so nice of you, Mrs Pandit,' the doctor said. 'This is not something I normally do, but something told me that you should meet him. I will go and get him.' I waited at the gates and could see the doctor walk back to his car and speak a few words to his guest as he opened the front door. Very soon, he and the guest were walking towards me. As they came nearer, I gasped in recognition of the person accompanying Dr Malik. The momentary break in his stride suggested that he too had recognised me. 'Hello, Albert.' I extended my hand towards him.

'Hello ...' He thought for a moment. 'Preeti. I hope I got the name right?' he enquired. 'Oh, you two know each other,' said the doctor, interrupting our exchange. 'Not really.' Albert turned to the doctor. 'I happened to meet her at the supermarket the other day.' 'What a wonderful coincidence.' I smiled as I

looked at the handsome face, which seemed more alert today compared to the rather confused demeanour he had exhibited the previous day. I ushered them to the lawns and guided them to one of the tables. I got busy with my other guests, and as the guests were having a drink after dinner, Dr Malik came up to me. 'Mrs Pandit,' he said, 'may I have a minute?' In response to my nod, he continued, 'Would you be able to take some therapy sessions for Albert?' Dr Malik seemed to be an expert at throwing surprises, and as he had a few hours earlier, he again left me searching for the right response. Sensing my state of mind, Dr Malik clarified, 'Albert has been visiting me for the past few weeks. He is under severe depression. I have prescribed medicines, but I feel he may be better served by therapy.' My silence continued as my mind was trying to make sense of this new revelation. After giving me a few moments to ponder, the doctor inquired, 'Well, what do you think?' and looked at me to elicit a response. 'I would be happy to offer therapy if it helps,' I said after quickly gathering my thoughts. 'However, I don't have a license to practise here.' 'Nothing to worry' was the quick reply. 'In Cuba, you need a licence only to prescribe medicines. Therapy is fine.'

I immediately posed my next question: 'Where would I have the sessions? I do not have an office, and I have never been in favour of having sessions at home.' The doctor thought for a moment and said, 'You can use my office at the hospital. I don't use it when I am having surgeries.' 'No way, Doctor. That is not right,' the conscientious part of me responded. The doctor was not about to give up in a hurry. 'You can have the first session there and see how it goes. You can then decide what to do next.' 'Are you sure, Doctor? Won't the hospital mind?' I asked. 'Well, not exactly as per the rules,' he countered with a smile. 'But if a few harmless indiscretions can help someone, then we can always bend some rules.' The doctor seemed to have everything planned. Without even waiting for my response, he beckoned Albert to join us. 'Albert, I am leaving you under the good care of our dear lady here,' he said almost in a self-appreciatory mode. 'Oh,' Albert exclaimed, 'I did not know you are a therapist,' he said, ignoring the euphoria created by the doctor. My thoughts were mixed. I was happy that an opportunity to pursue my passion was presenting itself but apprehensive about the way things were panning out. Sensing that Albert was waiting for a response, I clarified, 'Well, I have been practising for many years now,' and I added, 'Would you want to meet me?' 'Dr Malik did mention that he was planning something very different for me,' he admitted with a tinge of excitement. 'I respect his opinion and will follow his recommendation.' The assurance made me feel better about the situation. 'That's good, Albert. When do we start?'

He thought for a moment and responded, 'My calendar is not too busy on Tuesdays. I can always take a break around lunchtime if it suits you.' 'How about 2 p.m. on Tuesday?' I asked. 'Done.' That was our second meeting. The very next day, I called Dr Malik to know more about Albert. Albert was working as a senior vice president in one of the foreign banks which had set up shop in Cuba. He had been posted in Havana a year earlier. He was originally from Singapore, with roots back in India. This was a huge coincidence. What would be the odds of two people of Indian origin, who were residents of Singapore, now being on a business visit to Cuba? Destiny can indeed surprise you. Albert was living with his wife in a plush apartment a few blocks away from where I lived. Dr Malik was treating him for severe depression and had put him on a high dose of medication. I waited for Tuesday with more than a tinge of anticipation. The dinner had been well received by the dignitaries. Some of them even called up Pankaj and thanked him personally. I had begun to enjoy my stay in Cuba. Tuesday arrived, and I reached Clinica Sistema Nervioso at 1 p.m. The hospital was a rather modest single-storeyed structure, surrounded by trees, which gave it the appearance of a hotel. I entered the building and made my way to the reception. 'Hola, señora. Puedo ayudarlo.' The lady at reception greeted me with a broad smile. I had picked up a little Spanish over the last month, and these were the words which I probably heard more than any others.

I made a mental note to prepare an appropriate response in Spanish. For now, I had to make do with my English. 'Good afternoon, señora. I want to meet Doctor Rehman Malik.' 'Cita?' (appointment), she asked. 'Personal visit,' I explained. She picked up the intercom and spoke to someone. 'Up floor, office,' she replied in broken English while showing three fingers and pointing to the right with her hand. I guessed this was an indication for number 3 on the right. With a polite show of gratitude, I headed to the stairs. The wall behind the reception was adorned with the names of the nineteen especialidades (specialities) that the hospital catered, which I thought was impressive for its perceived size. Even more impressive was the list of doctors, more than fifty of them, who were probably affiliated with the hospital. With an enhanced opinion about the stature of the hospital, I found my way to Dr Malik's office on the first floor. The third door on the right had the nameplate 'Doctor Rehman Malik (Neurologia)' affixed on it, so I did not have to rely on my guesswork anymore. I knocked on the door and entered. His office was bright, with sunlight coming from the big window right across the room. On one side was a huge cabinet filled with books, while a table with chairs occupied the other side. The wall behind the table where Dr Malik was seated had several framed certificates with the name 'Doctor Rehman Malik' prominently displayed on them while the man himself was seated on a leather chair behind the wooden table. Lovely artefacts

on the table were neatly arranged around a vase with fresh flowers, which gave an indication of Dr Malik's artistic tastes.

The little apprehension that the fastidious me had before coming here about the room not being suitable for therapy was laid to rest within those few seconds. My visual survey was interrupted by Dr Malik's deep throated voice. 'Hello, Mrs Pandit, please take a seat.' 'Thank you, Doctor,' I responded warmly and added, 'You do have a nice office here.' 'Glad you liked it. It will be your office for the next hour,' he said with a chuckle. 'That is your privilege, Doctor,' I said with respect. 'I am just using it for some time with your permission.' Dr Malik got up from his chair and walked to the coat stand to pick up his coat. As he put it on, he beckoned me to take his chair, which I did reluctantly. 'I will inform the receptionist that you will be in my office doing some paperwork for me,' he said. As he shut the door behind him, I surveyed the office once more. It looked even better from this chair. I created a mental picture of how I would want the furniture arranged. Accordingly, I moved the guest chair to the other end of the room and turned it to face the wall behind me. Someone sitting there could now directly see the sky through the big window. I ensured that there is a fair distance between the chair and the wall in front. I then moved the chair that I was sitting on from behind the table and positioned it such that I would be able see the person without any physical obstruction. I sat on my chair and visualised the scene. I covered the window with the curtains, allowing only a small opening right in front of the chair that Albert would sit on, for a little sunlight to come in. The perfectionist in me gave a thumbs up. It was now a matter of waiting for Albert.

The clock above the door showed 1:47 p.m. Albert entered a few minutes before 2 p.m. I was immediately drawn to his striking features as well as his overall demeanour. He was dressed in a formal white shirt and black trousers, probably because he was coming from work, with a black jacket completing his professional look. I beckoned him to sit on the chair, which I had so carefully arranged. I offered him a glass of water from the jug kept on the table, but he politely refused. In a soft tone, I said, 'Albert, be comfortable. I suggest that you relax for a few minutes.' A few minutes silence followed, during which time his gaze was initially fixed on the ground, then towards me. As I looked into his deep eyes, I realised for the first time that they seemed to contain an ocean of sorrow and were waiting to pour their contents on an eager recipient. He finally spoke in a hesitant voice. 'I was looking forward to this session.' He paused. He ran his fingers through his well maintained mop of hair and shifted his gaze to the window in front of him. I sat in silence while resting my hands on the armrest. As a therapist, I had learnt the value of silence as a wonderful tool to let the person

go deep within and reach places where he had never gone or was afraid to go. 'I don't like to share my personal details with anybody,' he continued as he rolled his upper lip, looking for the right words. 'When I met you, I was initially blown away by your beauty and then by your very calm and soothing persona.' Another important trait of a therapist is the ability to focus the discussion on the subject at hand. 'Tell me more about yourself?' I changed the subject.

He paused as he was required to change his train of thought. 'I don't know who I am and how I feel these days. I haven't genuinely smiled or felt joy at home for such a long time. I don't even know how that would feel.' He sighed. I gave him the space to continue. He appeared nervous, almost tense. His gaze was on the floor as he was attempting to break through his own barriers and open up to someone. 'My life has been a hell right from my childhood. I have grown up watching the explosion of emotions when Mum would see Dad come home drunk. She would feel so helpless every time Dad would come home smelling of alcohol. Mum would either coldly stare at him or start shouting at him. That would lead to an argument, and she would talk about the past and how fate had been cruel to her. If she happened to be angry with my brother and me that day, she would say mean things to us.' It was a genuine outpouring of his emotions. 'Due to these daily squabbles in the family, I started smoking at the age of 12 and drinking by the time I was 16. I also got into antisocial behaviour, like flirting with girls. I gravitated towards people I can always depend on. I gained pleasure in certain ways.' I just nodded in acknowledgement and maintained a neutral expression. He immediately clarified, 'I gave up smoking two years ago because it was affecting my health, and I drink occasionally, in social situations. I also got into many relationships, but none have been good. I get very intense in the beginning, but within the matter of a few weeks, I tend to lose feelings. Probably the process of getting to know the person is what attracts me the most,' he confided.

I made a note to delve into the relationships in one of the sessions. For now, I wanted to let him kill his own demons, and the first thing is always about bringing these demons out into the open from the dark corners of his mind, where they become parasites and influence his thoughts. He continued slowly, almost halting after every word and searching for the next. 'I feel choice-less, even though I can see I have so much freedom. I find myself not doing things for my mum, my girlfriend, my dad, and my brother. Yet, I imagine in my thoughts all the actions I should or want to do for them.' He seemed forlorn on that chair and so vulnerable. As a therapist, I had trained myself to control my emotions and always have an invisible veil between the client and myself. His monologue continued. 'We are the best and the worst of our parents. In a restrictive home,

we are always told that everyone is dangerous and we should not be friendly with others. We learn the habits of our parents. I fear that I am looking at everyone with suspicion. I felt the same kind of fear when my dad was angry with me, and I didn't want to approach him about it. I felt the same kind of fear and confusion that I imagined my brother must have felt when we were younger, and I was angry with him for looking at me in the mornings.' His shoulders were stooped, head low. His face had despondency written all over it. 'How much responsibility should I take? How much do I have to pay? When can I stop feeling guilty? How can I provide a reprieve to my fear, anxiety, and guilt?' Lots of questions which we needed answers to over the next few sessions. I offered him a glass of water to wet his parched throat and to help him come out of the flood of negative emotions that he Black over White background 16 Psychologist. P reeti P a n dit seemed to be drowning in. He drank the water and shifted in his chair. He looked at me and started on a different track. 'There is this band that I have liked since long, but I lost touch over the last few years. Recently, I got an opportunity to connect with them again. I listened to their songs in a language I barely comprehend. Yet the stories, the music videos of the songs they sing, make me really appreciate what I have or want to have.' There seemed no link between what he had been talking about earlier and his last revelation. 'I think about how one of their original singers—there were three—committed suicide. And now they have a new singer replacing him. I feel so angry inside. How could they replace him? I feel so sad he is no longer around. I hope they know the joy and gratefulness their band has brought to people who feel like I do when I listen to their songs.' I finally interjected, 'Albert, what did you learn from this incident that you just narrated?' He did not seem to hear me and continued, 'Death is so close to us. Nowadays, I imagine myself watching someone I love die. My girlfriend, I watch her coffin enter the fire at the crematorium, and I see myself standing there without any reaction. When I go to my room, I break down. Sometimes, I would imagine, during the "entering the fire" phase, that I would break down, and my brother would always be there. I would tell him I don't want people to console or touch me, and he would listen and follow my instructions. He would prevent people from coming near me. Then I would cry while placing my hand on the glass. It would shatter and burst into flames. I would float down to the coffin and lie with it as it entered the flames. No one would get hurt when it burst into flames. It would be like a sacred fire, warm and red.'

Albert was not in the room anymore. He was in a world where everyone seemed to be against him. In that world, people he loved were dying and leaving him all alone with his sorrows. It was time to bring him into the real world. I was a little louder this time. 'Albert, how can you come out of this situation?' He turned

towards me and after a pause responded, 'For a long period in my life, though I can't recall when it started, I had begun hoping that something inspirational would occur to me, so that it could drive me towards something. It would make me ambitious. However, this has not occurred. Sometimes, I would go so far as to imagine perhaps if someone died or someone left me, maybe then I would get myself together and move. This thought would probably have come from watching too many "hopeful" movies, where the protagonist would always find themselves in the lowest points of their lives. Then suddenly something would occur, and they would pick themselves up and go.' I seized the moment. 'Albert, let's talk about the movies that you mentioned. When the protagonists are in real trouble, you said something would occur. What is this something?' His eyes were focussed on me as if waiting for me to continue. 'Albert, it is the protagonist's will, inner strength, and resilience which help him come out of the situation. It is only in fairy tales that a genie appears and grants you three wishes.' I wanted to make him understand that he is responsible— not for the situation he finds himself in but for doing whatever is necessary to come out of the situation. That is the awareness which opens the mind to therapy.

Dr. Preeti Pandit

Psychologist.