

SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN MIDWIFERY

SALLY PEZARO • KAREN MAHER



WILEY Blackwell

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Written by

Sally Pezaro

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This edition first published 2025
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John Wiley & Sons Ltd, New Era House, 8 Oldlands Way, Bognor Regis, West Sussex, PO22 9NQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Applied for
Paperback ISBN: 9781119881001

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Images: © Fly View Productions/Getty Images, © bibikoff/Getty Images, © Iwaria Inc./UnSplash

Set in 10.5/13pt STIXTwoText by Straive, Pondicherry, India

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The Ehlers-Danlos Society bestowed Dr Pezaro with the 'Outstanding Consortium Member of the Year' award in 2022. In 2021, Dr Pezaro also won a 'Midwives Award' from the Iolanthe Midwifery Trust and a 'Partnership Working' award from the Royal College of Midwives. In 2019, Dr Pezaro was honoured with a first prize award from the Royal Society of Medicine in 'Leading and inspiring excellence in maternity care' and was also the first runner-up for the British Journal of Midwifery's 'Midwife of the Year' 2019.

The overriding vision for Dr Pezaro's ongoing work is to secure psychologically safe professional journeys and excellence in healthcare. Follow her on social media @SallyPezaro

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Foreword

When I was given the title of this book, I couldn't help but smile at the catchphrase survive and thrive. Survive and thrive, some days it feels like we hang on by our fingertips to sanity, oftentimes fuelled by lack of sleep, an overabundance of work, rage, hope and despair and joy in equal measure. We are midwives!

Survive and Thrive was an alliance of government, professional health association, private sector and non-profit partners working with country governments and health professionals to improve health outcomes for mothers, newborns and children through clinical training, systems strengthening and policy advocacy funded by the United States Agency for International Development. Survive and Thrive then went on to become Survive, Thrive and Transform impacting millions of lives over the years of the project and beyond.

Though the programme has ended I must say that true words have never been spoken, interestingly, the campaign also dealt with addressing shortfalls in maternal health and child healthcare, sounds like this was written by and for midwives, doesn't it?

The key to survival in midwifery is truly about just that ability to adapt, evolve and grow.

More than twenty-five years later, I can say although the sayings may sound tried and true that is exactly true. When I look at my career there is pretty much no aspect of women's sexual reproductive health that I have not tried on for size and I am grateful that we have so many competencies from which to choose.

How we survive doesn't have to look like how anybody else does it, as we are all rooted and grounded in the philosophy of midwifery which says and reminds us that we have a grounding and are rooted in the normal biological and psychosocial definitions of reproductive health across the lifespan. Sometimes surviving and thriving is about letting go. Letting go of myself and images of what it should be like. I'll never forget a particular couple that I worked with. This couple was special to me in that I was working in the expanded scope of midwifery practice and working with couples through artificial insemination to become parents. Needless to say, we succeeded and had a series of amazing antenatal visits and close to three years had gone by. By this time, I have been working intensively with this particular family for over two years. The pregnancy progressed while the couple were glowing. They were financially comfortable, supportive family all around them, things couldn't be better. And then one day she walked in at 36 weeks for her normal routine visit, and we could not find foetal heart tones. I was devastated and ran to get the sonogram machine from the next-door. The sonogram machine confirmed my worst fears which I refused to believe because these things just don't happen. Within the hour the radiographer confirmed our worst fears the much-loved little boy had passed on to his next journey before ever taking a breath in this realm. The difficult decision was to move forward with an immediate

induction of labour which turned into a long two-day process. The mother who had previously planned for an epidural now opted to have an unmedicated birth. Though it seemed simple, it was somehow complicated by the fact that most of the new nurses were uncomfortable with supporting an unmedicated mother. And so, I stayed by her bedside until this beautiful baby boy was born into our arms three days later. We cried together. Bereavement boxes, handprints, footprints and little locks of hair cut to be cherished. And the mother sat in the chair and rocked, and I sat on the couch and cried, and we all cried together. Forget the stiff upper lip; I could not hold it together. I did not think that I could go on, we had come so far together and now this. I wanted to quit midwifery altogether. The rollercoaster of emotions was just too much and so we grieved together, we got through and we stayed connected for years thereafter, even after I had changed jobs. Thus, I survived and thrived in a new environment leaving fertility care behind and my care was transformed by adversity.

One of my greatest concerns, like many others, is how to maintain the midwifery workforce of the current and into the future. We can all attest to the trends of textbooks that are being written as we continue to advance the evidence behind midwifery practice. Textbooks that provide the core of our practice. However, sadly lacking are the stories. Much of what we hear about our profession is shaped by a media that does not always understand us and really is made to sell different kinds of stories that are dramatic, feeding the public adrenaline rush. There are also the novels that romanticise reality often serving to paint a false paradigm of the day in and day out. This has left a gap. A gap in the narrative, and this is truly where I feel the beauty of this particular book can shine through. There will be good days and there will be bad days, there is simply no getting around that. This is why we need more of these kinds of books to add to our own mythology of midwifery. It is the stories of how to move on in trying times, the learning from the Aunties, the elders and the sisters to teach, to inspire and to keep us going.

Our stories are our lessons to the next generation. I am often asked how have you made it for so long? How did you do that. Well, the answer is simply survive, thrive and transform, harking back to the title of this book. With a solid basic foundation, we can do anything. Midwives can and must do everything if we are truly to change the face of maternal health nationally and globally. Not just sticking to the viewpoint from the perineum, but truly evolving into other spaces. The beauty of this book is that through a narrative tale, it gives us a pathway by which we may evolve into other spaces that we may not have been previously shown.

Thriving in midwifery is also about finding joy in the little things. It's not just chocolates and flowers and thank you's, but the gentle smile, the gentle touch. It's the ability to find a midwife friend who gets it even if she is half way around the world and you don't talk to her every day. On the days you can't find that friend, pick up this book. Pick up this book and know that you are part of a vital profession with a legacy of strength. Midwifery is ancient as wisdom, modern as time.

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Preface

SALLY

I have wanted to become a midwife ever since my sibling came into the world and I saw what the awesome human body could do. I have practised as a midwife in the United Kingdom, The Gambia and Ethiopia. Yet it has been over a decade now since I almost did not survive midwifery. After a turbulent time with ill health and incivility, I went where I was celebrated and could grow from my experiences. Now each day, the research and academic work I do in midwifery is me working not just to survive like I did back then, but to thrive.

I wanted to share my personal story throughout this book in the hope that it may give light and solidarity to other midwives in darkness, or those who are unsure how to maximise their potential.

When we deny our stories, they define us. When we own our stories, we get to write a brave new ending.

– Brené Brown

I am a Tall Poppy. Yet making sense of the world around me does not come easy, and I must work hard to push to new levels of understanding every day. In this book, I share what I have learnt over the years in the hope that it will enable other midwives not just to survive but thrive in the profession more easily than I have. Nevertheless, success requires more than just one person. As such, this book draws from several diverse voices in midwifery to bring surviving and thriving in the profession to life. I also draw upon the wisdom of my dear friend, colleague and co-author Dr Karen Maher in this book, to gain perspective from the field of occupational psychology.

This book is the gift I want to give to my earlier self.

KAREN

Over the years, I have reflected on why some work leaves me energised and other work leaves me drained and came to the realisation that, if what I was being asked to do did not align with my core values, over time it would deplete me. The longer this goes on the more likely I am to feel symptoms of stress and strain. My core value is about supporting people to navigate challenges, both internal and external, to become the best versions of themselves, which was why I was so happy to be invited to be part of this book.

Part of becoming the best person we can be is about looking inwards; pick up any self-help book or wellness manual and it pretty much centres around the individual and how they can change. However, helping people become the best version of themselves sometimes involves challenging the system, the structural issues that create barriers to thriving. This is very much the way Sally and I have approached this book, providing the tools to be able to help you navigate the system you are working in whilst calling out those things that need to change and how you can be part of that.

Prior to becoming an academic, I worked in occupational health with frontline workers in the emergency services and noticed the toll their work has on their well-being and their families. Whilst still working in occupational health, I retrained as a psychologist as it was the psychological part of my job that fascinated me. However, my experience working in practice still shapes the research and psychological work I hold dear, and I strive to support those who carry out a critical role in society. I very much take an evidence-based approach to address practical issues and want my research to have a societal purpose. For me, academic work is only useful if it makes a difference to those we include in research, rather than being lost in an academic journal for all eternity. That involves sharing our knowledge in ways just like this book, where it will be read by exactly the people who may benefit.

It is important to add that I am not a midwife so my voice may feel different as you navigate the book, but hopefully you can see the value in bringing a psychological perspective to the world of midwifery.

We are on this planet for such a short time so let's do what we can to thrive and flourish!

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has been a culmination of conversations and collaborations engaged in by both of us over the course of our careers. Firstly, we would like to give heartfelt thanks to the midwives across the globe who have contributed their comments and thoughts for inclusion in the book. For ethical reasons we have kept these contributions anonymous but we value the richness these voices bring to the concepts under discussion in each of the chapters. We are also grateful to all the colleagues and contributors (too many to mention but each are credited alongside their contributions with mutual agreement) who have inspired the direction of this book along with the themes and sections within it.

Throughout this book, we use many retrospective examples to outline the concepts and ideas we explore. As such, we must also express gratitude to those who shared their examples and acknowledge the vulnerability and openness that allows for the learning to happen from these experiences.

We are also inspired by the many midwives and student midwives who demonstrate passion and enthusiasm for their profession, and the desire and determination to survive and thrive despite adversity every day. This book is predominantly written for you.

Lastly, we understand that our lived experience has shaped our writing of this book and acknowledge the privilege it brings to our experience of midwifery, academia and navigating the world. Through this position we seek to challenge injustice and promote equality, diversity and inclusion through collaboration and public acts of advocacy. These values have guided our exploration of topics within the book. We may not always get it right, but we remain committed to learning how we can best elevate the voices of others.

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