

BODY-MIND THERAPY

by Jeanne Reock

"What are you experiencing in your body right now?" "Where in your body do you feel the sadness?" "When else have you felt that sadness?" "If the pain in your back had a voice, what would it be saying?"

Modern science is now confirming what traditional cultures have known for eons: we are whole beings. Our feelings, our beliefs and attitudes, our physical well-being and our spiritual life are all one piece; what happens in one part, affects each of the others.

The father of the movement to recognize that body and mind are one, was unquestionably Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian psychoanalyst and student of Freud. One of Reich's primary contributions was the concept of "armoring". Reich believed that we all experience emotional and physical trauma to varying degrees and that, as infants and young children, we "armor" ourselves by constricting our musculature in order to deal with the pain and to protect ourselves.

For instance, the child who is constantly told not to touch things in the house may become the adult who walks and moves in a fearful, hesitant way. These are the physical manifestations of his constriction. On an emotional level, he is likely to be fearful of reaching out and trying new things; he feels unwanted and unwelcome. He sees the world as a dangerous place where it's easy to get into trouble; he wants to figure out the rules so he can do it right and be safe.

These constrictions remain throughout our lives and become so much a part of who we are that we lack even the awareness of them. They exist on several planes—physical, emotional and mental (in our beliefs and attitudes)—and limit our ability to live life to its fullest. They often distort our perceptions, our relationships and our bodies in painful and dysfunctional ways.

Reich applied very deep pressure to certain parts of the body and worked with the emotions, images, memories and sounds that were released. Through invasive touch, Reich was able to break through the armor and reach the underlying, unconscious beliefs, memories and feelings that had been locked into the muscles and the fascia (surrounding tissue) at the time of the trauma.

What the child takes in as trauma might not fit our normal definition of the word. Trauma includes subtle messages from significant others, even such commonplace ones as "Don't cry," "Don't be noisy," "Smile" or "Be nice." Whenever children are told not to feel or express what they are, in fact, feeling, they must exert an effort to suppress their feelings and the urge to express them. Failure to do so can jeopardize survival since children are dependent on the good will of their significant others.

Since feelings are literally felt in the body, they can be deadened by contracting the muscles surrounding the area. When this is done again and again or a major event causes a severe contraction, the muscles and the surrounding fascia remain contracted, frozen in place, even when the individual is as relaxed as he/she knows how to be. And so we have adults who are out of touch with their feelings and their bodies and who operate unconsciously out of belief systems they adopted long ago and that may no longer work for them. Reich's work inspired many to explore further and develop their own ways of helping people free themselves from their armoring so that their life force or energy can flow freely through their whole being. Some continued the focus on deep body work, adding new techniques for breaking down the armoring and helping the true self emerge. The use of sound, movement and breathing techniques were developed even further by others such as the Neo-Reichians, Core Energetics, Bio-Energetics, Rolfing, and Hellerwork.

Beginning in the 1950s, other forms of work developed that are premised on the body-mind connection, but are distinguished by their gentleness. These include the Rubenfeld Synergy Method, the Hakomi Method, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, the Rosen Method, and the Focusing Technique. Gestalt Therapy, with its emphasis on what is happening in the whole being and in the moment, was part of this body-oriented flow in the '60s and '70s.

Ilana Rubinfeld, the founder of the Rubinfeld Synergy Method, describes her work as “melting” the armor rather than breaking it down. Believing that we learn more through pleasure than through pain, she uses gentle, non-invasive touch as a way of communicating a caring and supportive presence. Rubinfeld’s “listening hands” also serve as a valuable source of information about what is happening with the client on the deepest levels; her hands are an important two-way form of communication. In the safety of that touch and with the use of visualization and light humor, Rubinfeld encourages the client to go deeply into the hidden places.

Although a Certified Rubinfeld Synergist starts with what the client is experiencing physically at the moment or what is happening in his/her life, the session often moves to the early years when the feelings and beliefs that undergird present experience came into being. The use of touch, helps the client experience rather than just talk about feelings, facilitates the release of old holding patterns in both body and psyche. Trusting the inner wisdom of the client is basic to the work.

Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, developed by Michael Lee, takes a somewhat different approach, fusing Yoga postures with elements of contemporary body/mind psychology to identify and release physical and emotional tensions. By combining a sequence of Yoga postures supported by the practitioner, with breathing techniques, visualization, meditation and dialogue, the process enables the client to recognize and dissolve habitual holding patterns.

Other body-centered therapies such as Focusing and Hakomi use special techniques to direct clients’ attention to their feelings, bodily sensations, breathing, muscular tensions, voice and movements. The Focusing technique, created by Eugene Gendlin, does not include touch and can be incorporated into traditional talk therapy with relative ease. In the Hakomi Method, as taught by Ron Kurtz, the therapist uses supportive touch at times to facilitate the client’s inward journey to awareness and release. First the Hakomi therapist creates a relationship that allows the client to feel safe and to establish an attitude of mindfulness, a special way of looking at himself and how he organizes experience. In the state of mindfulness, experiences are then evoked and processed to help the client understand and change. For instance, working with a client who has chronic shoulder pain, the therapist, after learning that the man carries a lot of responsibility in his life, has two assistants in the group take over the job of supporting the man’s shoulders, letting his muscles relax, so that he can experience what it is like not to shoulder so much responsibility. Then he might recognize that he has a choice, both in his body and in his life.

Empowering people to make conscious choices is what body- mind therapy is all about. This process is facilitated by recognizing that the choices we made long ago are locked into our bodies as well as our psyches and that change is most effective when it involves all levels of being- physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.