



Using Massage Therapy In Healing The Mind Body Connection

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People receive massage therapy for the same reason that audio equipment employs the Dolby Noise Reduction System: to smooth off the rough edges

and distortions that are created by repetitious wear and tear/stress and strain. One needs only to look at an elderly person to see how this accumulation of stressful events, nutritional imbalances, injuries and gravity has, over time, re-patterned the physical structure.

The neuromuscular memory of our physical existence is connected to our emotional experience as well. Consider this hypothetical example: a shy and sensitive 'high-schooler' has finally succeeded in making the honor roll. At the awards ceremony the student trips and falls in front of the entire student body. An injury to the base of the spine is sustained.

A decade later, the now chronic pain in the hips and coccygeal region is being relieved along with the emotional memory, the tearful traces of embarrassment and hurt from ten years past. Often, when the client comprehends the emotion surrounding the events that led to tension in the body, the physical pain and stress will more easily, and more completely resolve. Ideally, both psychotherapists and massage therapists empower their clients to respond functionally to stress and related imbalances. The psychotherapist enters a client's world primarily through the psyche (Greek: mind) while the massage therapist interacts with the client primarily through the soma (Greek: body).

Since the mind-body, the psycho-soma, is interrelated, it is sometimes necessary to approach a client/patient from one direction or the other; from the mind to the body (psycho-somatic) or from the body to the mind (somato-psyche).

In the early 1900's physician Wilhelm Reich, a former student of Sigmund Freud's, pioneered a greater understanding of body-mind healing. Reich discovered "character armor;" that is, the way emotional energy is locked in the tissues of the muscles in specific ways according to character type. He suggested that character armor resulted in rigidifying the healthy flow of feelings through the body-mind.

"Body armor" the physical counterpart of the theoretical, intrinsic "character armor" was presented by Reich as the

gross manifestation of chronic mind-body tension. Body armor served the function of encasing the person in a protective muscular shell. These blockages were responsible for both physical and mental dysfunction. Reich's early creative work involved bringing to consciousness pent up rage and grief. When not addressed, these issues block the healthy functioning of the body and the mind. Facilitated pounding and screaming were often used for reconnection and balance.

BIOENERGETICS

A later contribution to this type of work, Bioenergetics, was made by Alexander Lowen, M.D. Bioenergetics is a specific form of psychotherapy based on the Reichian theory. It emphasizes the importance of grounding oneself and breathing properly. Patients become cognizant of muscular holding patterns and develop self awareness to restore vibrancy within the

body. Deep breathing, massage and other Bioenergetic movements combine to break through somatoemotional shielding.

PRIMAL THERAPY

Primal Scream, developed by Arthur Janov is another related form of body psychotherapy which brings emotions to the surface through directed screaming and pounding.

In the early 1960's, Dr. A.D. Speransky, imminent neurophysiologist wrote, "the nervous system keeps a record of the history of the organism." He was referring to the physical memory of stresses and traumas that each individual possesses of every event that they have ever experienced. These memories of pain, as well as remembrances of pleasure are recorded like grooves on a record or imprints on an audiotape, as the neurological history of our lives.

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REBIRTHING

Rebirthing is a method of integrating the mind with focused, connected breathing and was developed by Leonard Orr.

THE BODY/MIND CONNECTION

While some psychotherapists have moved toward the body, a number of massage therapists have moved their work into areas centering around the mind. Innovative insights and techniques pertaining to body-mind healing developed by Reich, Lowen, Janov, Orr and others are being incrementally absorbed into the massage therapy field.

A client, let's call him Michael, came to see me when he was suffering with chronic low back pain. Michael was a self conscious young man in his early twenties who was going to college and working nights in a pizza restaurant. He was unusually tense and rigid in his general movements.

As a Neuromuscular Therapist, I conducted a clinical intake interview, structural evaluation and assessed his pain patterns to determine how to proceed with his treatment. During the first session the tightness in his back was addressed directly with Neuromuscular Therapy (NMT).

In the second treatment, it became clear that his low back stress and strain were due mainly to tightness in the muscles of the hip. These muscles were so tense that his lower spine was locked in a fixed spasm. In other words, his hip and gluteal muscles would have to relax in order for his low back to release and stop hurting. Unfortunately, Michael would tighten his muscles more when I applied steady pressure to calm the spastic reflex.

He was able to relax and stay focused with specific breathing exercises. I observed that his muscles would relax momentarily, and then fear seemed to grip him and the spasm returned. We took a short break. I suspected even more strongly that the problem was due to deep seated pain, fear and anxiety as the "gripping" reflex was involuntary.

Michael's resistance to the work was the "body armor" Reich had described; the armor against the world, which was a manifestation of the internal "character armor". This

inner armor was the shell over his emotional vulnerability.

"Michael," I said, "This is really difficult for you, isn't it?" He answered, "I guess so", his voice now quivering. Then I asked, "Were you beaten as a child?" He let out a big sigh, his shoulders relaxed and his voice broke. He was silently weeping. Suddenly, he spoke up, "No, but I would hear my father as he whipped my two older brothers with his belt. He never hit me, but each time he punished them he would yell and I could feel myself tense up!" He finished crying and seemed to let go. He told me that he was ready for me to work. His muscles released without resistance, his spine repositioned and the pain was gone. Later he mentioned that he worked with a critical boss who screamed at all the employees. Each time the employer exploded, Michael would tense up. Now he understood why. After two more visits, his sense of vulnerability eased and the pain was completely gone.

Massage therapists are not junior psychotherapists. Most massage treatment sessions bring remarkable relief from stress and pain with few spoken words. Yet over time, massage therapists, like nurses, teachers, hairdressers and doctors garner wisdom through working closely with people.

Scientific studies confirm that hands-on contact establishes a powerful facility to motivate. With this ability comes the duty to know ones self. Massage therapists must remain integrated within themselves: body, mind and spirit. A balanced frame of reference is necessary to help clients who are seeking wholeness. Training for touch practitioners continues to increase in scope as the public demands a greater breadth of services.

It is a clients responsibility to choose a massage therapist as carefully as one would select an accountant, attorney, hairdresser or doctor. Massage therapists who work with those suffering great distress are often in professional relationship with mental healthcare providers. We work together for the benefit of the person who seeks our services and so it should be.

~Jim Gabriel, LMT, SET, NMT, BA