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STUDY OF BODILY AWARENESS DURING A PSYCHOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

In the last few decades there have been an increasing number of studies on mental health and emotional well-being and their influence on physical health. According to this approach, physical problems often manifest unexpressed hidden inner conflicts. Psychologists increasingly apply their client's awareness of bodily sensations as a tool for therapy. In my paper I would like to present one of such psychological methods named focusing which I use in my practice as a clinical psychologist. Focusing method was elaborated by Eugene Gendlin, American philosopher, who collaborated with the founder of person-centered therapy Carl Rogers. Gendlin's research showed that positive change in psychotherapy depended on client's ability to experience bodily reaction of the topics discussed during therapy. In my practice I include Focusing method into my own system based on the idea that we can influence our healing process by discovering inner resources. It becomes possible when we get rid of feeling guilty and feeling of "being wrong" and overcome a negative self-image created as a result of adverse childhood. I have found that the awareness and verbalization of negative feelings facilitate the process of releasing emotional suffering from the memory of the body. Specific bodily responses can lead to discovering the true reasons of emotional conflicts. I would like also to show how I combine the Focusing approach with another psychological method based on the connection of body and mind, Recall Healing elaborated by Canadian expert in holistic approach to health Gilbert Renaud.

Keywords

Focusing, Emotional Conflict, Body Awareness, Felt Sense, Recall Healing

1. Introduction

What does the connection between the psyche and physical health really mean? How can we use bodily awareness for solving emotional problems? When we are talking about bodily awareness, we usually include into that notion our conscious perception of body sensations, our breathing, way of movement, posturing, sitting, gesticulation. However, it has a deeper meaning. We become aware of our body, when we feel it as a part of the self, and when we learn to read the signs of our body for the improvement of our well-being.

Deepak Chopra, the founder of the popular Center for Wellbeing, believes that mind-body connection is so flexible that it can be adapt not only to adversity, but also to perversity - the perversity of turning our back on what Nature has designed us to do, which is to remain in balance. Chopra underlines that when "we push our body to the point of exhaustion and ignore the body signals of distress, we are flouting the wisdom inside every cell" (Chopra, D. & Tanzi, R., 2015).

Christian Fleche, a psychotherapist and the author of best-seller "Your body knows how to heal you", suggests that "disease is a word expressed by body" (Fleche, 2015). When we reveal our emotional conflict on the level of words, gesticulation, symbolic activity, we are able to release ourselves from it.

According to Ewa Danuta Bialek, the founder of the Institute of Psychosynthesis in Poland, the particular parts of body that don't function properly, may represent the parts of our life which are connected with a great amount of negative emotions. (Bialek, 2013). Sometimes it's not difficult to find an analogy between tension headache of a woman and her complicated family situation which she perceives as an unsolvable problem and, therefore, unbearable for her.

"Our body is a kind of map of consciousness" - Ewa Bialek believes. When we discover and release tension in particular parts of our body, we can understand how to get rid of our negative feelings. It is an active process of bodily awareness and self-awareness, leading to wellbeing and life success.

However, trauma *in* childhood can affect both our physical and mental health and limit our self- and bodily-awareness.

Clinical professor of medicine Vincent Felitti claims that people who experienced childhood trauma are more likely to attempt suicide, become drug users and/or have eating disorders. (Felitti, 2015)

Dr Deborah Lee underlines that the main reason of destructive and profound influence of childhood traumas is the loss of feeling of safeness. (Lee, & James, 2012).

Most people who have experienced trauma confess to having problems with themselves, suffering from feeling ashamed, frightened, isolated, and useless. People affected by trauma tend to feel unsafe in their bodies (Lee, & James, 2012).

However, as many studies show, each of us has a hidden potential to contact natural resources we can use to heal our emotional wounds ((Frederickson, 2017). The problem appears when we don't know how to access them. Buddhism, for example, has elaborated sophisticated practice for developing consciousness. Nowadays, western psychology has found effective new ways to obtain the power of our inner resources (Smith, 2018). A key element of contemporary therapeutic practice is body awareness meant as an inseparable aspect of embodied self-awareness.

The purpose of this paper is stimulating the discussion on mind-body approaches, in particular, Recall Healing and Focusing method.

2. The Recall Healing Method

Among the contemporary psychological methods aimed at revealing emotional trauma which is related to childhood experience, it is important to mention Recall Healing. The author of this approach Gilbert Renaud believes that we express ourselves through our diseases. The reaction of our body can show us what kind of emotional problems we have. Renaud focuses on the healing power of expressing emotions: "In Recall Healing we work at identifying and solving the emotional trauma behind the condition or behavior" (Renaud, 2017).

Deep unsolved emotional conflicts, especially when they have roots in our childhood, cause suffering and illness often becomes the automatic brain's response to it. Due to Gilbert Renaud, most diseases appear as a result of the "biological correspondence" between the definite part of the brain that controls definite organ and the organ controlled (Gilbert Renaud, 2014).

When we manage to "recall" what has really happened with us and what our true emotional conflict is, we become aware how to find a practical solution for it. In that moment we stop feeling as a "subject" to our disease. Moreover, we start to observe how the reaction of our body reflects our negative emotions.

Practicing Recall Healing method, I am convinced that signs of disease and body sensations help to explain possible the emotional conflicts of a person.

As an example, my client, 29 years old woman had syringomas on her neck and couldn't get rid of it for 7 years, using all possible means. Syringoma is characterized by multiple small

bumps on the skin which is generally harmless; however it is visible and doesn't look healthy. My client complained also about a lack of physical power, low mood and unreasonable panic attacks.

Using Recall Healing method, I found that syringomas on the neck and the lack of life energy of my client were invoked by a repressed memory about a car accident in which her close friend died... due to broken neck. Another identified reason was the memory about her mother who often had red blemishes on her neck after quarreling with her husband. We come to the conclusion that the childhood of my client was connected with complicated parental relations, her phobias and feeling of loneliness. When she stopped feeling like a small girl who couldn't protect herself, she discovered additional energy within. We also worked on her trauma related to the death of her friend and as a result, she started to think about life with less fear.

The above mentioned Recall Healing method can be effective for discovering the symbolic meaning of one's health troubles and the connection between a definite disease, bodily reaction and an emotional experience. There are special tools for it such as a questionnaire, a life time line, genealogical tree and analysis of family resemblance in particular fields. I have noticed that Recall Healing method especially suits sensitive, attentive and thoughtful persons.

Working with clients suffering from depression, anxiety and fatigue syndrome I am often using, besides Recall Healing, Focusing method.

3. Focusing Method

Founder of that popular self-actualization technique Eugene Gendlin, was inspired with Western philosophical tradition (among others phenomenology) based on working with awareness in the present moment. Being an American psychologist and philosopher, he worked together with Carl Rogers, famous author of humanistic psychology.

During his longtime practice of psychotherapy, Gendlin noticed that the effectiveness of work with patients depends significantly on their ability to listen to their body. When he managed to teach especially stuck clients to "find their inner contact", he observed a big progress in their psychological treatment. That connection between mind and body he called a "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1998).

Eugene Gendlin suggests that when we cannot find answers for important questions in the mind, we can find them thanks to special sensations in our bodies. We know much more than we believe we do.

Gendlin elaborated the procedure how we can access bodily knowledge. Through applying signs of the body, asking the "right" questions and creating an appropriate atmosphere

Gendlin showed his patients the path to understanding their own true emotions. Finding "felt sense" is only the first step of Focusing technique. It is very important to bring any kind of inner experience - even when it is unclear - into expression in order to draw that experience into articulation.

According to Gendlin, clients should have enough time for concentration on body signs and searching for images or words that resonate with the inner "felt sense" of their life troubles (Gendlin, 2018). In the moment their emotions and "felt meanings" become clearer, they receive new insights, understanding and solution for their problems.

Sometimes we feel trapped with analyzing our complicated life situations. Involvement in deeper, bodily-felt inquiry about how those situations influence our well-being and where there are possible ways out, allows us to identify things which were "unseen" for us before.

As for example. My client, a 45 year old woman living with her husband, an aggressive psychological type, wanted to change her occupational field, but she wasn't sure about her choice. She was annoyed because her husband didn't agree with her decision and threatened her with divorce. She didn't know if she could manage to live alone. She was worried whether or not she "could allow herself" to change something in her life. She felt completely destroyed, had insomnia and suffered from frequent tension headache. When I invited her to "visit" her "helplessness" in her body, she noticed a "stuck" neck and strange weakness in her arms. When she remained with that sensation for some time, she felt loneliness and sadness. The word "isolation" appeared in her mind and it reflected the felt sense of her present situation, in particular her personal life. She found that the same word is appropriate for her attitude to herself. Then she remembered that in her childhood her father was often angry with her and made her sit down without movement and listen to him very attentively. She was a very shy and uncommunicative child. During our session she admitted that she had never talked about her true feelings, emotions and wishes. She even felt guilty when she had strong desires and usually she repressed most of them. She understood that she used to be "unmoved", passive and too conforming. However, when she discovered that she deeply disagreed with her condition and she suffered from loneliness in her marriage, she realized how important it was for her to change her life. She wanted to leave her accountant job position and work as a florist in her friend's flower shop. When she visualized that, she noticed a lot of energy and her body, as she said, wanted to move and to dance. That way Focusing technique helped her to discover what she was longing for.

During our session I also used Recall Healing method, showing my patient that both insomnia and tension headache reflected her emotional suffering due to her incapacity to make

decisions for herself. On the other hand, they manifested her inner "fight" with her father who, as she believed, didn't love her enough, and with her husband, who also didn't care about her. Following Recall Healing approach, we discovered the possible reason of her emotional block. Her mother being pregnant with her, felt trapped, because she didn't know if the father sincerely wanted to marry her. She also had doubts about if she really wanted to be with him. Discovering that she had almost the same feelings as her mother had during her marriage, my client was able "see" that she had a choice and could take responsibility for own life.

4. Conclusions

It should be mentioned that Eugene Gendlin didn't copyright the terms "Focusing" and "felt sense", because according to him that technique works especially well in combination with other psychological methods. Notion of "felt sense" is used, for instance, in Somatic Experiencing, elaborated by therapist Peter Levine for healing post-traumatic stress disorders.

To conclude, nowadays we are living under conditions that often create excessive stress. The only positive outcome of that is in fact that we become more sensitive to the signs of our bodies.

Indeed, bodily awareness has become the ground of mind/body psychological contemporary concepts and therapies, a key element for revealing hidden emotional blocks and negative emotions.

The effectiveness of such kind of therapy can be explained also by the effect of "surprising" which makes clients open to new body sensations and mental discovering. Depression, anxiety, fatigue syndrome and especially psychosomatic diseases often limit us to believe in ourselves and to find another approach to solving problems seems to be intractable. Experiencing new, unexpected psychological techniques can help us to reveal our profound emotional conflicts. As Carl Jung wrote, "Your vision becomes clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes" (Jung, 1964).

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