

## **Creativity & the Body's Role in Psychotherapy**

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Body-centred psychotherapy is a type of therapy that can access our psychological and emotional wounding at a level that may not be reached or healed by the use of literal language in “talk therapy”.

Non-linear or symbolic language is required to affect certain shifts in consciousness and healing. This is because specific areas of the brain which deal with symbolic language, such as poetry and even music, receive and interpret symbols in ways profoundly different from other areas of the brain which deal with literal language.

For example, if I say, “it sounds like your mother wants to prevent you from separating out from her and having your own life,” or if I say, “it’s as if your mother has stuck a stick in the spokes of your bike just as you’re learning to ride away,” both reflect the lack of support by your mother for your independence but one has an image attached to it whereas the other does not. This image is received by another part of the brain which is attuned to symbolic language and activates creative connection and assimilation.

The use of symbol and metaphor in therapy allows the individual to interpret, connect to, integrate and “own” their healing process on a more personal, creative, and complete level. As well, body-centred psychotherapy offers additional channels of healing for the client when the time is right.

Having said that, some clients will find creative, body-based work to be a very foreign, scary process, too overwhelming for them in the beginning of an already frightening journey. Not all people will be comfortable with non-linear or symbolic language or body work and may need simple, straightforward talk therapy to help them feel safe enough to go deeper.

The therapist builds safety with the client through the therapist-client relationship, recognizing, for example, the verbal clues from the client which indicate a readiness for body work. Often a client will say, “I understand that, but I still have ‘a band of tension across my forehead’ or ‘tightness in my throat’ or ‘butterflies’ or ‘an uncomfortable, shaky feeling’.” That is the time when therapy can make the shift from an intellectual, talk-based approach into a body-centred therapy. One enters the levels of felt sensation in the body which the intellect may or may not understand or against which it may have set up defenses in order to override or disconnect from uncomfortable feelings, physical and/or emotional. Felt sensations are feelings in the body which inform the individual of how she or he is doing in relation to her or his surroundings or moment in time. The question, “what are you feeling in the body” versus “what are you feeling” or “what do you think about” elicits different responses from different areas of the brain.

There are three different areas of the brain which function in different ways and on different levels: the thinking brain or intellect, the emotional brain, and the instinctual brain.

The instinctual brain, first to develop in utero, is the part of the brain which is directly hooked up to fight, flight or freeze responses when the individual senses danger. This part of the brain reacts to trauma and therefore needs to be accessed to resolve trauma. The most effective process for healing trauma is to work with the felt sensations, engaging the instinctual brain, working from the bottom up rather than from the top down.

How we interact or react to any situation or to people in the present is strongly influenced, positively or negatively, by our past experiences. This is especially true of traumatic experience. Everyone experiences traumatic events in their lives. To try to mend these levels through talk therapy alone may create an even deeper

sense of frustration at the lack of access or a sense of division or split or a feeling of not being seen. At some point in the healing process, especially for some clients, talk therapy needs to be augmented by or transition into body-centred therapy for a more complete healing for the client.

Body-centred psychotherapy is able to work with the issues or injuries at a physical level, speaking the language of the felt sensations, meeting them on their ground. This resolves trauma at its source. Past injuries, psychological or physical, are stored in the connective tissues running throughout the body so to work with the injuries from where they reside only makes sense.

One common response to trauma is to shut down and suppress the natural flow of energy in order to control or numb the intensity of feeling in the body. The problem is, when one numbs the negative feelings for self-preservation, the capacity for pleasure and fulfillment also gets numbed, leaving the individual operating at a lower capacity for healthy, happy experiences.

Addictions such as alcohol, drugs, television, sex, shopping, computer games, etc., further rob the individual of health while being used as a means to control or self-medicate or numb the overwhelming intensity of feelings in the body which may be too frightening or painful to feel. Body-based psychotherapy can assist the individual to unpack the blocks, re-direct the body to its natural state of equilibrium where it is not overactive or shut down or dependent on substances or behaviours to regulate or control it.

A typical session begins by talking with the client and then moves gently into working with the body when the client feels safe to do so. The bodywork may begin with a suggestion to breathe into the belly, possibly with the client's hands on her or his belly. If this is comfortable for them, have them imagine their fingers spreading open on the "in" breath, visualizing a balloon in the belly filling up on the "in" breath and emptying on the "out" breath. It is my experience that most people will breathe opposite to this, sucking their belly in on the "in" breath. This limits the amount of breathing space. People will also often lift their shoulders as they take a breath in, which builds tension.

To further engage the individual creatively, I may ask them what colour their balloon is or if it has any writing on it or what the qualities of the air is inside the balloon. Is it moist, dry cloudy, steamy, dark, light, fluffy, etc.? What are the weather conditions within the balloon?

This process takes the individual deeper into their creativity. Emotions are accessed and experienced through the lens of this creative, body experience. There are no wrong answers, no mistakes possible, just an invitation to the client to connect with and experience the self at these deeper levels. The timing of this must be right for the client in order that they feel safe and held in their process.

With these prerequisites in place, there is often great relief in experiencing the self from this creative, body-centred, deeply personal level.

It sounds simple yet it is quite profound and moving. Clients are often moved to tears by the experience. It has been described to me as a feeling of "coming home" for them, a bittersweet experience as they recognize that they live or have lived separated from the self for so long or are living a life which is separated from the self so much of the time.

For additional information, visit Peter A. Levine on YouTube, <http://www.traumahealing.com> or

<http://www.somaticexperiencing.com>.