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Body Sense Magazine for the Visually Impaired - The Body Remembers

[Back to Body Sense Issue List](#)

Spring 2013 Issue

[Back to Spring 2013 Article List](#)

The Body Remembers

Address and Relieve Traumatic Stress Through Massage

By Leslie Korn

[Feature]

We benefit from massage and bodywork in so many ways. We may seek the help of massage to address pain and discomfort, or to relax from the stress of daily life. But bodywork can be just as effective in addressing traumatic stress, whether recent or long past.

Sometimes during a session, when a practitioner touches specific areas of pain, emotions arise; these might include anxiety, fear, or sadness, or you even might experience flashback memories or images. If this happens, it is useful to have open communication with your practitioner to determine if you feel comfortable proceeding with the session. You may want the practitioner to stop the session entirely or work somewhere else on the body, or you may feel ready to process the feelings that arise.

It is important to communicate with your practitioner, sharing any current symptoms, along with a history of injury or discomfort, and discuss whether the practitioner can provide touch therapy techniques to relieve these symptoms. Addressing symptoms that are related to long-held trauma can initiate a deeper experience of healing.

The Body Tells a Story

I began my career as a bodyworker and massage therapist in 1977, and have been privileged to deliver more than 40,000 hours of therapy since then in all kinds of settings: urban and rural, private practice and hospitals, for physical health and mental health. I found that touching painful, numb, or otherwise problematic areas of the body often led people to remember, and sometimes talk about, traumatic experiences they'd endured.

I once worked with a 65-year-old Brazilian woman who had terrible pain in her shoulders. As we worked together, she began to remember—for the first time in 50 years—an experience from her childhood. In order to correct her posture, the nuns in the convent she attended placed a broomstick between her elbows, pulled her arms behind her back, and made her sit still for several hours. She had forgotten this experience until we touched an area of pain, allowing her to listen to the story her body had to tell.

People who have chronic pain often have underlying issues, such as anxiety, chemical dependency, chronic depression, fibromyalgia, or a history of exposure to trauma. The body tells the story that the psyche cannot find words for. My work in this area led me to the study of psychology, and I have spent much of my career identifying how different massage and bodywork methods can address the physical

and mental symptoms of trauma. One of these ways is to allow the body to reestablish its natural rhythms, which are often disrupted by trauma.

Rhythms of Recovery

We are rhythmic, pulsating, vibrating human beings governed by nature's rhythms. Many physical and mental illnesses can be understood as a disruption of these psychobiological and physiological rhythms. For example, we are attuned biologically to the rhythms of light and dark. This is called the circadian rhythm—the 24-hour sleep/wake cycle. This rhythm can be disrupted by trauma, leading to chronic insomnia and chemical dependency. Disruption of the circadian rhythm is also seen in depression, fibromyalgia, and sleep disorders.

The circadian rhythm governs the stress hormone cortisol, which follows a 24-hour cycle of peaks and valleys and which is also severely disrupted by trauma. Normally, cortisol levels should be highest in the morning and slowly drop during the day so they are lowest at night. However, in depression and traumatic stress, the opposite is often true; they might be lowest in the morning and highest at night. Bodywork for these conditions often focuses on stress reduction; when someone relaxes, their autonomic nervous system resets, as do all the rhythms it modulates.

For example, peristalsis is a natural rhythm that can be regulated by gentle abdominal massage. Peristalsis is the undulating movement of the colon required to eliminate food, which can be disrupted when a trauma cannot be “digested” or eliminated.

The rhythm of our breath—inhalation and exhalation—is another of our most basic rhythms. Disordered breathing is a common symptom accompanying anxiety, asthma, panic, and chronic or acute pain. This is why methods like gentle massage of the diaphragm and yogic breathing, such as specialized rib expansion breathing, are so effective. The ancient yogis said, “If you control the breath, you control the mind.” A Stanford scientist demonstrated the same connection that yogic science asserts, that the right and left brain rhythmically switch dominance every 90 minutes, correlating with which nostril allowed more breath through at any one time.¹

The Power of Touch

I have witnessed the benefits of all types of massage and bodywork therapies, ranging from the very light touch of reiki, to moderate-depth acupressure and Swedish massage, to deep-tissue massage, and all types in between. Touch is the primary language of bonding and attachment between infant and caregiver. A disruption of this essential developmental milestone can contribute to a lifetime of depression and anxiety, as well as the inability to balance or regulate emotions, so it makes sense that we never lose that psychobiological need for healing touch.

In addition to improving circulation and lymphatic flow, massage and bodywork lead to deep relaxation that is mediated by the autonomic nervous system. This state of consciousness is called parasympathetic dominance, and also results in improved digestion and sleep, plus a sense of well-being. As we do this more and more, we recondition the nervous system so that it is not as hyperreactive to stress stimuli.

For clients who have experienced some sort of trauma, letting the body relax and regain its natural rhythm can be a powerful experience. While it is outside a bodyworker's scope of practice to venture into processing emotions, they can facilitate this type of release, bringing another layer of benefit to your bodywork sessions.

Leslie Korn, PhD, MPH, NCB, RPE, has practiced massage and bodywork, specializing in polarity therapy for the treatment of chronic physical and mental illness, since 1977. She is the author of two books, Rhythms of Recovery: Trauma, Nature, and the Body (Routledge, 2012), and Preventing and Treating Diabetes Naturally, the Native Way (lulu.com, 2010).



[Back to Body Sense Issue List](#)

[Back to Spring 2013 Article List](#)

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