

FINDING WHOLENESS IN WHAT HAS BEEN SHATTERED

Integrating Focusing into a Holistic Medical Practice

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I am sitting in pathology class taking notes in my second year of naturopathic medical school. As I look at the outline of the list of diseases we are to go over today, their origin, their prognosis, the destructive and sometimes deadly effects they can have on the body, I see spinal meningitis on the list.

My heart speeds up. When I was 9, my 4-year old brother died from spinal meningitis. What I knew about the disease was what my father had explained to me at that time, in simple language that a 9 year old could understand. He said a germ had entered Patrick's body and caused his brain to swell, and he wasn't able to wake up again.

I sit up attentively on the edge of my seat with open ears, ready to hear the full detailed explanation, in real scientific terms. I am hearing that there are viral and bacterial causes, that the disease progresses quickly, and that immediate administration of IV antibiotics can usually prevent death. Then, less than five minutes later, the instructor is moving on to the next disease on the list.

My heart beats even faster. It wasn't enough. "Wait!" I almost stand up, "There's more!" But I remain seated and stay quiet, hunch over my desk and continue taking notes.

For me, the "more" was seeing my dad's normally calm and care-free face twisted up in pain and horror the night the medics came; how confusing and despairing it was for me at nine years old to learn of the possibility that a little boy whose brain didn't work right could turn into a vegetable; the new loving friendship I began feeling for God who seemed to be looking out for me when my parents, for a time, couldn't.

There was also the touch of Patrick's cold icy hard stiff fingers in mine as he lay in the small casket, letting me feel instantly that he wasn't just sleeping, letting me feel fully an absence of something in his dead body, and the presence of that something in my living body. I wondered for a long while about that *something* and that wondering led me to the practice of holistic medicine.

TRAUMA AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PHYSICAL ILLNESS

In the mid-'90s, the CDC and Kaiser Permanente discovered an exposure that dramatically increased the risk for seven out of ten of the leading causes of death in the United States. In high doses, it affects brain development, the immune system, hormonal systems, and even the way our DNA is read and transcribed. Folks who are exposed in very high doses have triple the lifetime

risk of heart disease and lung cancer and a twenty-year difference in life expectancy. And yet, doctors today are not trained in its routine screening or treatment. Now, the exposure I'm talking about is not a pesticide or a packaging chemical. It's childhood trauma. (Harris)

Nadine Burke Harris, M.D. is referring to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, which provided analysis on more than 17,000 individuals, and provided correlations between traumatic experiences within the first 18 years of life and adult physical and psychiatric disease. The ACE Score, determined by a patient questionnaire, attributes one point for each category of exposure to child abuse and/or neglect. The higher the score, the greater the exposure, and exponentially the risk factors are greater for development of future medical disease. Since the time of its publication in the 1990's several studies have replicated its findings.

The negative impacts to physical health in adult life as a result of trauma are attributed to two mechanisms.

1. Individuals attempt to help themselves with the use of nicotine, alcohol, drug use, high-level promiscuity. These on their own are associated with cardiovascular, immune system, and inflammatory risks.
2. Biomedical effects occur at the time of the trauma during important childhood developmental periods and later throughout the lifespan. These changes include increased production and release of cortisol, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis dysregulation, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, increased inflammatory markers such as C-reactive protein and cytokines, anatomical changes in the brain. In other words, the gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, immunological, reproductive, and musculoskeletal system, neuroendocrine functioning, and brain structure and functioning are all adversely affected by trauma and for several years following the traumatic experience. (Andrea)

Women were found to be 50% more likely than men to have experienced five or more categories of ACE's. It is suspected that these findings could be key to the higher percentage of women who have illnesses without a clear etiology such as fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, autoimmune disease, and chronic pain. (Felitti & Anda)

Startling to me was that boys who had an ACE Score of 6 or above had a 4,600% increased likelihood of later becoming an IV drug user, compared to a boy who has a score of 0. As one author points out "relationships of this magnitude are rare in epidemiology." (Felitti & Anda)

These findings may not be so surprising to those who follow holistic approaches to health and healing such as Ayurveda, classical Chinese medicine, homeopathy, Naturopathy, Anthroposophic medicine, or others who view the physical body, mind and spirit as one. From a holistic medicine point of view, disharmony may originate in the physical, emotional, or deeper realms of spirit.

In this paradigm, illness is understood as disturbances or blockages in the innate flow and harmony of mind, body and spirit. In other words, all illness (regardless of the cause) exists as imbalance in this system long before it manifests in the physical body. It can take many years for emotional imbalances to become embodied in the physical tissues as ‘disease’.

By the time that it has manifested in the physical body, it may be more difficult to treat. For example, if depression is suppressed with recreational or prescribed drugs or alcohol, over time this can perpetuate symptoms of imbalance and affect other systems of the body. If, however, the original trauma that led to the depression is addressed and treated appropriately, the root of depression and addiction is transformed, and the body can express itself in a healthy life affirming way.

WHAT IS THE LIVING BODY

Your physically felt body is a part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people — in fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from inside.
(Gendlin)

When I discuss health and illness with my patients, it is helpful for them to have an understanding of the human body. At the same time, in response to all of the information that is at one’s fingertips, I have noticed an interesting phenomena taking place. When I ask my patient about his activity level, I frequently get the numbers of steps he takes in a day. If I inquire into a patient’s medical history, I get her cholesterol numbers and previous blood pressure readings. If I ask about diet, I am often directed to a cell phone screen that shows a graph of what was eaten that day and includes the number of calories and grams of protein. Menstrual cycle? There’s an app for that too.

As useful as this information can be, I feel a sense of confident rightness when I read Gendlin’s quote above, where the body is seen as a constant interaction with the outside environment. No single part can be understood except in its relationship to a whole complex pattern or process, which includes the interaction within the body, as well as in interaction with the environment. Relationship and fluid interaction, rather than a linear concept of cause and effect, is the underlying basis of health and disease. Therefore the intention of medicine is to align and connect us with ourselves, each other, nature and all of life.

What I now do, feel, and think comes out of my body. This may sound odd, but where else does it come from? The mind? To separate mind and body deprives the ‘body’ of certain vitally important characteristics of living tissue....For us it is vital not to miss the fact that living bodies imply their next bits of life process. (Gendlin)

What we call the body is more than what is enclosed in the skin. As mind and body can be understood as one connected living process, the life process that is manifesting as symptoms and disease, has the potential to offer gifts of insight and healing. During times of illness we may find ourselves invited (or demanded, shoved, pushed, kicked, dragged) to explore this undiscovered territory.

In the West people are accustomed to think in units and nouns, and to attribute causality to individuals. “There is a boy over there” is an acceptable sentence; it is optional information whether he is running, or sitting. But one would not easily accept the sentence, “There is a running over there,” adding only later that the running is a boy. (Gendlin)

The name we attach to a disease, like spinal meningitis or cancer or depression has a specific purpose and can help facilitate understanding rather quickly between two people. However, we needn't get too attached to that name. It may give us reasons why we can't change. For example, I have ADHD — therefore I can't do such and such.

From an eastern medicine perspective, which is my background, I have been trained to see anatomical structures like the liver and lungs as more of the continual *processes* of change that the body goes through, moment to moment. I may point to the Liver and say, “There is regulation over there.” Or point to the Lungs and say, “There is dissension over there”. For me, this way of describing the body in verbs rather than nouns and units leads to a less permanent diagnoses and leaves the future wide open for healing and growth.

BENEFITS OF INCLUDING FOCUSING IN A HOLISTIC MEDICAL PRACTICE

By nature, practitioners of holistic medicine tend to be interested in the person more than the name of his or her disease. We recognize the connection between traumas experienced in the past and how they may be influencing health. Each person has a story that they come in with, and we make the time to listen. So why do I include Focusing in my practice?

Sheila:

Sheila appears to be an upbeat, joyful woman who tells jokes and within our first five minutes together has me laughing. She is 45 years old, 200 pounds over her ideal body weight and was recently given a diagnosis of diabetes and osteoarthritis. She came to me seeking more dietary recommendations and tips for decreasing her sugar cravings. Her physician had discussed the risks of her weight and told her to eat a low carbohydrate diet. She has tried, just as she had tried many other diets and exercise programs in the past, but over time, wasn't able to stick to any of them.

She describes a continuous strong hunger, so strong that it sometimes wakes her up. At other times she wakes in the morning, surprised to discover she has eaten during the night or that she has made a trip to the grocery store late at night in a fog.

I provide some recommendations, and I ask if at our next appointment we could spend the time doing a body centered mindfulness exercise that I think might be helpful. After requesting and receiving further explanation, she agrees.

During the Focusing session she finds her jaw wanting her awareness. As she opens and closes her jaw, I have the impression of a hyena languidly savoring its prey. She describes the feeling of gnawing and gnashing those who offend her. She describes this feeling of being able to bite and tear with her teeth as the most powerful sensation. (Months later she related to me that there was one person in particular that came to mind that day, but she was too embarrassed to discuss, an ex husband that had caused her much fear by stalking her for months after they divorced.)

We continue to spend time with that good powerful feeling that comes with the gnawing and chewing. Her back is straight and tall, shoulders back, hands flat and pressing on her thighs, both feet on the floor, her teeth coming together, mouth opening and closing.

She then becomes aware of a place inside that does not feel powerful at all, but feels small and helpless and dark. She slumps over and says, "I hate this part of me." At first she doesn't want to listen to the part that feels powerless. So we don't. Instead we start by listening to the part of her that hates that part.

After some time and some gentle and permissive guiding instructions, she senses that the powerless one is very young, around 6 years old, just a little girl. She becomes motherly toward her and inwardly holds her. The little girl tells her that she needs her to protect her, care for her in a way that nobody else can. There are tears, more words, more love given to the powerless little girl, and a series of deep sighs as if weight is being lifted from her shoulders.

Sheila's case illustrates how some illness, such as obesity, diabetes, food addiction, might not on the surface appear to be related to trauma. What is more important, however, is that a process such as Focusing is assisting/allowing/making space for the life process to flow in the patient which allows change to occur. This change is often associated with a felt shift, as occurred here.

That shift, the opening, the more breathing room that comes when the force of the body's innate knowing flows through the organism — that is what is needed to bring change.

Sheila reported after this session that she noticed she would eat when she was hungry and wouldn't eat when she wasn't hungry. This was no small change! She also said she was aware that she ate to soothe her emotions, but it was different to experience this knowledge in her body rather than just to know it intellectually.

There are times when I am tempted to point out connections, to excitedly express the answers as I see them. But mostly I hold back. I have learned that my understanding, even if correct, even if shared, really doesn't matter all that much. What matters is not me, but the patient experiencing fully the forward moving direction inside.

I do find it worthwhile to do lab work to investigate possible nutrient deficiencies, food intolerances, thyroid and adrenal dysfunction, and hormonal imbalances. This insures that we are not missing something that may be relatively simple to correct. However, if we had only worked with diet and exercise, possibly natural anti-inflammatories for her joint pain and botanical medications for lowering her glucose levels, we would have missed a crucial aspect to Sheila's underlying issue.

Safety:

When I took my first Focusing workshop in acupuncture school, I was struck by what a safe process it was. As a new and young acupuncture practitioner without a therapy background, Focusing helped me feel comfortable to just be a human being keeping another human being company. I worried less about hurting my patient with bad advice. With Focusing I'm not giving *any* advice. Also, I don't need to hand my crying distraught patient a business card of a mental health practitioner while I politely escort her to the door. I can be there in the vulnerable moment when help is needed.

The Focusing process helps me as a health care provider to feel safe inside, as well. I once referred a patient of mine to a specialist for more tests because the tests we had already ordered came back with worrisome results. At her follow up visit she said to me, "I didn't get that done. I've been listening to my body like you said, and it's been telling me I don't have cancer. So I don't need those tests." She waved her hand in the air like she was waving away a bothersome fly. I was able to use Focusing for all that came up in me and acknowledge all that was there — the part that wanted to be obeyed, the part that had no faith in her body, and the afraid part. Then peace came, and from underneath all of that — *Trust*. From the new field we shared together, I could hear her in a way that I couldn't before. We had a clear and direct conversation, each of us speaking and listening from a place of loving grounded respect for one another.

Listening in relationship:

There is a sense of equality that I feel with Focusing. I am able to listen to how it is for another person. During this process I am not listening and trying to assess the imbalance or diagnosis. I am just listening. This is how it is. I am not giving instructions or educating or offering advice, even well-meaning advice. I am listening, receiving, taking in, and reflecting to make sure that I have it right. If I don't, I try again, until I really 'get it'. This kind of listening allows a patient to feel really heard and understood, which can be the most healing aspect of the entire visit.

Trauma:

The past and the present cannot be understood if we think of them only as two different things in two different positions on a time line. The present is a different whole event. The past functions in every present.

(We can) say that past and present are both occurring now, and the present goes on in the remains of the past, and lives them forward... Yes, there is a past that is now, and this past is being altered now. Of course this is a different past than the dead and gone past which was recorded on someone's video, and functions no longer. For some purposes we will want to keep the usual notion of that all gone past which happened long ago. But there is also the past which is inherent in any present experience, and which can function in it in various ways. (Gendlin)

My brother's death was like a bomb going off in the center of my family's home. It had its ripple effect on me, my parents and siblings, our relationships with each other, and future relationships with others. For years afterward, it felt like we were shrapnel shooting out in different directions as we each found our own way to live. Some of us accumulated our own disease names in the aftermath. For me it was alcoholism and clinical depression. Years later, with the help of Focusing I could find my way back to the center of the bomb site, pick up the shredded pieces, place the ones I no longer needed to the side, and hold onto the ones I wanted to keep, to tenderly share with my family.

In the mind we can get stuck in an endless maze of critically analyzing what went wrong, who is to blame, how to make sense of tragedy. Focusing keeps us in the body, in the here and now where the past is being lived forward. It is from here that we can change course and steer forward with the wind at our sails.

Empowerment:

When people have been through trauma, are trapped in their addiction, or have become accustomed to living outside of their bodies, Focusing is the most gentle way I have found to coax that person back in, to where their inner knowing awaits them. People are frequently surprised that they have their truth already inside of them. After learning basic guidelines of the Focusing process, they can go inside again and again and continue to receive guidance and insight into life situations. They do not need a drug or a book or a doctor to do this for them. They can do this on their own or better yet, with their Focusing partner.

LIVING FORWARD

*Aboriginal people don't think in terms of "I" as much. We don't think about things as **my** trauma. It's more about **our** trauma... It's the trauma that occurs. It's what we have our hands in trying to set straight. It's more than that thing that happened. There is something that you know. There is a knowledge that you received from your life experience and that you have a responsibility to.*

Grieving and complex trauma breeds compassion and social change. If a horrendous experience occurs, it is what teaches you how to be compassionate and to be the activist that you need to be to create the social change that is needed. (Turcotte)

Trauma, whether a single episode or multiple events over a period of time, can have deep and vast effects, not only for the person who sustained the trauma but for his or her community as well. We all feel the effects of the violence in the home, sexual abuse, childhood neglect, and the loss of dear friends in combat. Emotionally, physically, socially and economically we feel the hurts done to neighbors and loved ones, to our tribe. We also feel the shame and pain of the ones responsible for doing the hurting, often themselves reacting from the place of their own traumatization.

It is understandable why people in pain from past or ongoing experiences would want to feel better by using drugs, alcohol, self-harm, eating disorders and other behaviors. It is understandable how those of us in the health care system would want to help their patients feel better by offering antipsychotics, antidepressants, and opioids or their natural equivalents. But there can be no doubt that these methods of numbing the appropriate response of the human organism to trauma have the possibility of worsening and deepening the problem and making it more difficult for the body to develop an appropriate response to stressful events in the future.

By integrating Focusing into a medical practice we can address those places where one gets stuck, where processes get stopped. We can listen to the language of the body as it directs our patients to the next steps of healing. Illness can be a passageway into a new territory that couldn't be arrived at in any other way other than through that illness. With help one is able to safely and lovingly navigate through the passageway while discarded and separated parts come together and unite into something far greater and more powerful than before.

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