

The Bodywork-Therapy Connection in Healing

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"I can no longer imagine doing therapy without bodywork, too!" exclaims Carla, a restaurant manager whose therapist referred her for bodywork two years ago.

An incest survivor with anorexic tendencies, Carla had been in therapy for a couple of years. She would stiffen up, "space out," and have difficulty exploring painful incidents from her past. "My whole body was numb. I was in pain because I was too afraid to let myself move or breathe," she reports.

Carla is one of many sexual abuse survivors who have turned to bodywork as a complement to psychotherapy along her path to healing and recovery.

Bodywork is a broad field that includes Swedish massage, deep tissue work, acupressure, movement and breath-based modalities, among others. Many survivors have come to enjoy massage where they lie down and receive safe, soothing touch from responsible practitioners. Another important function of bodywork, described in this article, is somatic awareness-- that is, experiencing how one feels from within the body. Learning in this way what is safe and nurturing is vital to a survivor's ability to relax and be responsive to massage and other forms of touch, including sexuality.

Therapeutic bodywork can offer tangible support to survivors' work in therapy by helping them become conscious of messages from their bodies. Through body awareness, they can learn to pay attention to signals from their muscles, bones, and skin that they may have ignored for years. Using combined therapies, survivors can learn to ease such debilitating effects of ongoing stress as insomnia, chronic pain or numbness, eating disorders, and sexual discomfort.

Jeannine, a technical writer in therapy, noted that she started body therapy because "my friends in recovery were getting to memories from bodywork. I knew there was something in my body that I, too, needed to know and couldn't get at any other way." Through the desire to remember her abuse, she discovered how her body can be a place of protection and centering now-- not just a place of pain from the past.

Since touch was frequently the means by which sexual abuse survivors were traumatized, it is particularly important that their therapeutic bodywork experience be safe, skilled, and supportive. Trust builds as the practitioner allows the client's needs to determine the pace of each session while guiding the client gently to new levels of body awareness and tolerance.

During bodywork sessions, people can learn to distinguish different sensations in their bodies through guided touch, breathing exercises, visualization, movement, and discussion. By doing so, they learn whether they are fully present and in their bodies-- and under which circumstances. These concrete experiences help them trust their ability to feel reliably in their bodies and with their bodies. With their therapists' support, they are then able to extend this confidence to exploring deep emotions from the past. Kathy Carlson, a therapist in San Mateo, California, points out: "People have to learn to deal with the emotional level, how they've been hurt, their feelings. And they've got to deal with their body reactions. In healing from trauma, you'll often have the experience that your body will remember things the rest of you doesn't."

When Jeannine came for her first session, she was terrified of being touched. Initially, I used no touch while she explored where in her body she felt most comfortable. Soon after beginning bodywork, she went through several months of physical and emotional breakdown, experiencing spells of dizziness and nausea. However, during this time, she became increasingly receptive to light touch during our sessions; she could feel the fear and anger that arose as she released body tension. At the same time, memories began to arise. Her therapist and I stayed in regular communication during that time (with Jeannine's permission) to insure that she received all the support she needed from both of us.

Over the past two years, Jeannine has changed to a new, more satisfying, job, deepened an intimate relationship, and has continued to open creative paths to her inner self. When asked what positive changes she'd experienced because of bodywork, she remarked, "The biggest thing is the development of body awareness. This makes me feel that I exist, that I'm real. I feel more centered and integrated when I'm in my body." Echoing her, Carla adds, "I feel more present in the world. I take up space now. I feel safer, not so vulnerable."

A common thread that runs through these clients' experiences is that bodywork is a unique adjunct to their therapy and recovery process. Jeannine states, "Bodywork speeds up the process of therapy." Carla notes that "when I'm sitting in therapy, I can talk, then listen to my body and know whether I'm telling the truth."

Recently, when a memory surfaced, Carla-- though quite upset-- was guided by her body intuition. She reached out for emotional support, ate in a healthy way, and gave herself the space she needed to be with her feelings and take care of herself. Her work with combined therapies has helped her explore past fears that constricted her body and life, and experience present feelings separate from those of the past.

Skilled bodywork can enrich the process of therapy; it can help a survivor learn to connect experientially to the reality and vitality of her own body-- and move further along the path to well-being and recovery.

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