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Mood and Mind

'I tried sensory therapy for my past trauma'

HEALTHISTA | HEALTHISTA WRITER POSTED NOVEMBER 09, 2015

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Our correspondent, Caroline Phillips, tried out sensory therapy to help heal the wounds from her childhood

There was that time my house was hit by a tornado when I was at home. And then there was my physically and emotionally abusive childhood, at the hands of my mentally ill mother. Yes, I'm a good subject for trauma therapy. But actually nearly everybody has suffered trauma. You don't have to be a war veteran or a survivor of incest or of a car crash. Even seemingly benign experiences can be traumatic for some – it depends on your attitude – from that nasty knee surgery to root canal treatment at the dentist or a ride on a roller-coaster.

“ the safe release of the energy connected with the original trauma, and the natural flow of energy is re-established ”

Enter Sheryl Close, Somatic Experiencing and Trauma Therapist. Sheryl offers a mixture of psychotherapy, addiction counselling, Gestalt therapy, Somatic Experiencing and massage therapy. Somatic Experiencing – a therapy that, anecdotally, is gaining a big following – is the primary focus of her work. It is a pioneering therapy that was introduced in 1997, based on American psychotherapist Dr Peter Levine's work – including strands from biology, neuroscience, indigenous healing practises and medical biophysics (X-rays, MRIs etc) – and observation of animals in the wild. Levine noted that despite wild animals being in life-threatening situations routinely, they don't suffer from post-traumatic stress.

How can this be? Massive amounts of energy are mobilised for the animals' fight/flight or freeze responses in the face of danger. However, once safe, they spontaneously discharge this energy with involuntary movements such as

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NATURAL HEALTH

shaking, trembling and deep breaths. This allows the safe release of the energy connected with the original trauma, and the natural flow of energy is re-established. Post-traumatic stress disorder, contrastingly, is the result of the natural process gone awry. Traumatic symptoms are not caused by the triggering event itself: they stem from the frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged.

“ Symptoms of traumatic events can remain dormant, accumulating over years. Then during a stressful period or as a result of another incident, they can show up without warning. Thus a seemingly minor event can give rise to a sudden breakdown. ”

The theory is that after a traumatic experience, the trapped energy then persists in the body and manifests as anxiety, depression and psychosomatic and behavioural problems. This includes everything from panic attacks to flashbacks, insomnia, repetitive destructive behaviours and violent unprovoked rage attacks. Symptoms of traumatic events can remain dormant, accumulating over years. Then during a stressful period or as a result of another incident, they can show up without warning. Thus a seemingly minor event can give rise to a sudden breakdown.



As I suffer from bipolar disorder and am also in long-term recovery from multiple addictions, I decide to give Somatic Experiencing a go.

“ The therapy involves listening to the “voice” of the body, “spoken” through physical sensations such as tingling and warmth ”

I meet Sheryl in her private practice in South Kensington, London. A slender and attractive woman with a ready smile, she greets me at the door of her treatment room. We start off by talking, catching up on how I'm feeling. Then instead of relying on words – Somatic Experiencing is not the therapy for you if you like something that is cognitive – she directs me to start tracking bodily sensations and then discharging this energy. ('It is unnecessary to dredge up old memories and relive their emotional pain in order to heal trauma,' says Sheryl later. 'The therapy involves listening to the “voice” of the body, “spoken” through physical sensations such as tingling and warmth.')'



During the course of sessions, I am guided by Sheryl to pay attention to my body. 'It feels numb here, blank, painful' I say. I sense my skin and the way my clothes feel against the fabrics. Pay heed to my throbbing ankle (it



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FITNESS

primarily, I feel the my skin and the way my clothes feel against the fabric. I get into my smothering arms (as was once broken), different body temperatures, twitching, my heart beat.....I get tuned into the nuances of my internal landscape. This is like trusting my gut. 'Contacting your instinctual self is like trusting your gut,' notes Levine in Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma. Or as D H Lawrence noted: 'Blood and flesh are wiser than the intellect.'

“Allowing frozen or stuck energy to discharge from the body via movements, sounds and visualisations. combined with talk therapy, the occasional touch (to bring me into my body) and her deep understanding of addiction prove very healing”

In one session when I feel very stuck and lacking in energy, Sheryl asks what would be the opposite of this sensation and whether there is an image that goes with it. 'A kangaroo,' I reply. I appreciate that this sounds absurd. But imagining that animal bouncing makes me feel suddenly lighter and freer: then I feel a tingling as the 'stuck' energy purportedly begins to move through my body and discharge. On another occasion, I experience a 'buzzy' energy in my arms, that I feel want to move outwards, as if I am swimming – so, at Sheryl's request, I do some breast –stroke-like movements, which seem to release the stuck energy and leave an easier, uplifting feeling in my body.



I have previously had years of psychotherapy and have tried a wide range of alternative therapies, all with some success. But after 12 sessions with Sheryl, I find myself enjoying longer periods of joy and contentment. She is also very supportive in dealing with the vestiges of my eating disorder, including very occasional comfort eating. Allowing frozen or stuck energy to discharge from the body via movements, sounds and visualisations. combined with talk therapy, the occasional touch (to bring me into my body) and her deep understanding of addiction prove very healing.

“Allowing frozen or stuck energy to discharge from the body via movements, sounds and visualisations. combined with talk therapy, the occasional touch (to bring me into my body) and her deep understanding of addiction prove very healing.”

The prevalent medical view, according to Levine, is that trauma is an irreversible disease: after combat or being in a hurricane, for example, the belief is that the victim will never be the same again and that only drugs can manage the resulting brain disease. 'Contrary to popular belief, trauma can be healed,' writes Levine. 'Not only can it be healed, but in many cases it can be healed without long hours of therapy; without the painful reliving of memories; and without a continuing reliance on medication.' It's looking likely.....



Caroline Phillips is an award-winning journalist who has written about health for publications from the Evening Standard to Telegraph, from the Express to The Times.



Sheryl Close is a therapist in South Kensington. Visit her website at Sherylcloze.co.uk. Email her at sheryl@sherylcloze.co.uk or contact her on her phone at 07968 159824.

For further reading see also seauk.org.uk or www.sosinternationale.org



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