Why BodyMind?

by Meg Blanchet, M.A., L.M.T. and Howard Cole, M.A.

In this jointly written article "Why Body/Mind?" Howard and Meg offer a concise, helpful response to those clients or therapists who ask why and in what way should the body be integrated into psychotherapeutic work. Howard A. Cole, M.A. is a psychotherapist, educator and consultant who does workshops and counseling in a variety of areas. Meg Blanchet-Cole, Ms.T. has training in a wide variety of body-centered as well as mind-healing therapies. Together, Meg and Howard are co-directors of The Heart in Hand Wholistic Counseling Center in Chicago, and co-coordinators of Hakomi of Chicago.

When we talk about bodymind therapy, we are talking about a process that invites the client to study the "interface" between the body and the mind. This "interface" refers to the link or relationship between two aspects of ourselves which are intimately related. The mind gives life and meaning to the body's experience; the body keeps the mind honest and informed as to desires and beliefs of the unconscious. It is not at all unusual for each of us to be noticing this relationship on a daily basis; it is when we don't listen that problems arise.

A bodymind orientation can occur in talk therapy or bodywork; it is not the vehicle of the work that is important, but the intention and focus of the therapist in working with the client's issues. In order to work with the "bodymind," a therapist needs to regard information from both as equally important. They are mirrors of each other simply speaking different languages: the body speaks through sensations, and the mind uses visual images, words, and thoughts. Working back and forth across this interface allows the meaning of unconscious material to emerge. With this information new understanding regarding our life orientations can be explored and integrated at the very source of the "problem." Intellectual understanding alone often leaves the "mind of the body" untouched.

The unconscious speaks to us all the time through the tissues of our bodies. The way that we learn to hold our bodies as children not only affects how we carry chronic tension as adults, but how we unconsciously experience and respond to the world around us. As children, we develop a "posture" to protect ourselves and/or to create an image that allows us to get our needs met within our family system. Many of these beliefs are true in the context of the family environment in which they were formed, but do not necessarily hold true in the outside world. Through time, the coping strategies the child develops for survival in that family become ingrained in the unconscious and color all of his/her future experiences. As adults, we live within an outdated "body mold" that continues to echo these old messages through our nervous system and our mind, and to reaffirm the worldview that we held true as children.

You may ask, "What's wrong with seeing the world as I did as a child?" Mainly this: the limited behavioral strategies we create to get our needs met in our family environment do not necessarily apply to the whole world. It is analogous to taking a multiple choice test and answering all of the questions "A." Unconsciously we lack the insight to see that the same strategy does not work in every situation.

This is also true on the physical level. The muscular "armoring" that we developed at that time also limits our experience and our choices. When unable to cope with painful feelings, we intuitively stop our breathing, and in the process of trying to avoid the pain we actually lock it up in our body—our connective tissue, organs and muscles.

This avoidance of painful feelings is paradoxically the source of much of our pain. It creates what is often referred to as the "body-mind split." Since our body feels the sensations of pain, both physical and emotional, we learn early in our lives how to numb or cut ourselves off from our pain and therefore from our bodies. Over the years, these "holding patterns," based on the decisions we have made about the world, become "embodied" in our posture.

Our bodies—posture, physical structure, internal experience—are thus a reflection of our mind, of who we are, and of how we perceive(d) the world we live in. It screens out what we crave—what we have been seeking all our lives. When we blow ourselves up to make ourselves look more powerful or more competent, we lose touch with our vulnerability and desire for support and contact. When we collapse into our chest and shoulders in despair, it invites the very depression that we so desperately are wanting to escape. When we dig in to resist others' manipulation, we can often become stuck, loosing sight of what it is we want for ourselves.

It becomes clear that body and mind are not separate—that this "split" lies at the heart of our problem. If we were to go and see a bodyworker to relieve some of our accumulated stress and tension, we may get considerable relief or even change. We may not be able to sustain that change, however, if we do not get to the heart of the matter; until we gain insight into the core issues and beliefs from which the problem arises, the body will recreate the protection it percieves is needed.

Likewise, if we show up at the therapist's office to see in what ways we contribute to our problems, we may gain the insight necessary to change lifelong patterns. The body, however, will continue to repeat the unconscious messages still manifested in its tissues. Our original beliefs die hard because the body recreates the same old emotional patterns and solicits the same old reactions from people as they react to how we look. Thus our bodies hold us back because our insight has not been integrated fully throughout our being.

Recognizing the importance of the bodymind interface in order for deep and lasting change to take place, more and more people are looking for therapists who have this integrated focus within their work. Some psychotherapists are recommending that their clients have massage for adjunct therapy. Many are using body awareness to access and to integrate insights into the client's experience. Hakomi, Bioenergetics, Focusing and movement therapy all invite clients to study their experience and to explore how they are unconsciously orienting themselves to the world around them. Each does this in their own particular style. Many bodyworkers have also received training in processing the emotions and issues that arise; e.g. the Rubenfeld Method, MariEl, and Hakomi Bodywork are three very different methods that attempt to create healing and integration each in its own way.

What all of the above methods have in common is an attitude that embraces the whole person. What is most important to the healing process is an attitude that allows the client to have their feelings and their process without judgment. In feeling connected with all the different parts of ourselves, we are better able to make life choices which are balanced and nourishing, and to be more the way we really conceive of ourselves.

The bodymind is willing and waiting to participate in self-exploration, discovery and healing; it is giving us cues all the time just hoping that we will listen. When we tune out the cues its only choice is to talk louder; when we listen, the body no longer needs to communicate to us through pain. We can include its information in our experience and our approach to living, and in this way become more congruent with our "core" self.

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