

## **Blog 10**

### ***Working with the sensory-motor experience to reduce bodily distress for people with unexplained symptoms***

#### **About bodily symptoms which are not explained medically**

Persistent bodily symptoms without a medical explanation are the presenting features in 25% (as a conservative estimate) of people visiting primary care and in about 50% of people being referred to secondary care. Common throughout the world, in all ages, they can cause disability as severe as those symptoms originating from organic, medically explained causes. The symptoms are difficult to manage due the variety and the uncertainty of any related diagnosis. People with these conditions may sometimes feel that they are not being taken seriously.

#### **Sensory awareness and changing the experience of the symptom**

Awareness of body sensation activates brain mechanisms. By using this knowledge we can help people with unexplained bodily symptoms, which usually have an inbuilt sensory message. There is the potential to modify the sensory-motor functions by raising awareness of the body.

Kinesthetic-sensory awareness can be developed through the exploration of movement. The use of movement in this context is founded upon physical expression and sensory-motor learning to promote embodied change.

The body has neuromuscular protective responses which act on it in reflexive, unconscious ways at times of emotional or physical trauma. These reflexive muscular habits are the result of 'tonus adaptation' which, in turn, connect with certain emotional states. For example low muscular tonus is found in depressive states whereas high tonus is present when we feel anxious. Muscular imbalances can arise from unconscious physical habits and reflexes

resulting in inefficient functioning overall. Consequently, symptoms such as incapacitating physical pain may be the result of a reduced attention to bodily signals.

Sensory-motor amnesia describes automatic and unconscious physical/movement habits which become physiologically ingrained over time in the sensory-motor system. This can lead to rigid and restricted movements, fatigue, and/or chronic pain. Injury to the body or its overuse/disuse, illness or a trauma (such as surgery) can result in repetitively activated muscular reflexes in reaction to life stressors, which in turn create habitual muscular contractions, chronic tension and bodily pains or other symptoms. Stress, which happens throughout life, can cause this trauma reflex, a reaction of the sensory-motor system in which muscles wince or cringe into trapped positions leading to disorders in movement and posture.

### **Movement patterns and physical symptoms**

All movement habits are largely in the unconscious, but by awakening awareness dysfunctional habits can be changed. Introducing new embodied ideas that disrupt the engrained patterns releases a space for the experience of new movement pathways to arise.

Learning new movement patterns is not about thinking through set sequences of action or directing specified movements. It is learning through sensory exploration and creative physical practice so the body learns a new habit which over-rides the previous one. Somatic practices such as sensory-motor learning can enable previous experience to be changed as a result of the felt experience of increased awareness. For example, breathing exercises and gentle mindful movement practices can help us in making new body-mind connections. This way we can be transported from inefficiency and pain to re-establishing homeostasis and harmonious functioning.

Somatic movement explorations can also connect sensation to its related intelligence in the mind for any system within the body to stimulate learning and healing processes. Sensorial information from the visceral receptors, vestibular senses and sensory neurons within our

blood vessels and organs is sent to our brain. Therefore, in addition to muscular senses within the kinesthetic and proprioceptive systems, all our bodily systems are accessible through movement explorations i.e. the skeletal, endocrine, nervous, respiratory, circulatory, lymphatic, muscular and fascial tissue, fat and skin, cerebrospinal fluid, and even cellular motion has its own expressive behavior. All unexplained bodily symptoms can be helped through somatic practices as they affect the body in a universal recurring iteration.

## **Summary**

Somatic work in Symptoms Groups using The BodyMind Approach® aims to bring an individual into embodied experience through experiential practices. When we are disembodied we lack a sense of wellbeing. There are many reasons why we become separated from our body including chronic fatigue, pain, injury, abuse, dissociation, seeing the body as shameful, powerlessness, physical and emotional reactions to stress, trauma from accidents/war/ death or loss. Somatic perception is therefore vital in order to become centered within our bodily experience. Personal change is possible by understanding and sensing what the body needs. This change is transformative in so far as it produces a new embodied habitual style.

Body-oriented approaches to change the experience of unexplained symptoms share the potential to create positive emotional and bodily changes as they take the individual from feelings of discomfort and/or irritation to that of pleasure and relief. A sense of wellbeing ensues, the self-management of symptoms and social relationships improve and symptom distress including the associated anxiety and/or depression decreases as a consequence.