Healing Trauma with Somatic Experiencing

Based on training and handouts provided by Dr Maggie Phillips (USA) held in Pretoria on the 18 to 25 May 2011

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Being as opposed to doing –
Becoming *human beings* as opposed to *human doing*
**Abstract:** This presentation is based on the first ever Somatic Experiencing certification in Africa, hosted by Dr Woltemade Hartman and presented by Dr Maggie Phillips (USA). The training, held in Pretoria on the 18 to 25 May 2011 (42 hours), focused on:

- Describing the physiology of threat
- Identifying the healthy autonomic responses to threat
- Explaining the importance of self-regulation of traumatic stress and practicing 5 techniques to regulate our own and clients activation
- Practicing the stream of life, TRIPOD and ROSE models for helping clients move through trauma to somatic healing.
- Practicing accessing, tracking, and containing sensation
- In this presentation the above objectives will be individually discussed, explained and demonstrated in a way that will be practically relevant.
Exercise
Exercise

• First connect with current position, current body experience. Feet on ground, then legs, trunk, arms, neck and head.

• Allow mind to wander over the day’s progression and focus on possible incidences of discomfort. Identify where in body. Perhaps can associate color, image to sense of discomfort.

• Now, open eyes and find a spot to focus on that draws attention. Perhaps color, smell, shape, movement draws your attention. Perhaps it creates an association linked to memory or not. Notice experience in body as you focus there and bring experience into body. Notice images and sensations you can bring into your body. Notice possible changes.
Somatic experiences

• **The issues are in the tissues** – Peter Levine, bio-physicist

• Our own self-perception includes thoughts, emotions, and sensations.

• In somatic psychology, a client would be encouraged to experience his or her body as a resource. In a session, being *'in the moment'* is vital, and by attending to what is happening moment-to-moment, a client gains awareness of his or her own experience. The body tells the truth, and by focusing on sensations, tensions, finding relaxation, using breath, a movement, inner wisdom can come to the surface. **Get in touch with what you are ‘holding on to’**.
How does somatic therapy work?

The sensations we have tell us something about what is going on within us. Those areas where we are tight are areas where we are in some way holding on to something. Whenever we have had some painful or traumatic experience, we carry not only the memory and feelings connected with that experience, but we "remember" it physically as well. It is expressed through a contraction of muscle or of tissue or a loss of freely flowing energy in an area of our body that is in someway connected with that event for us. Connections may be very symbolic. Perhaps we struggle with someone who is a real pain in the neck and we find that our neck becomes tight. Many times we may not be aware of what the connection is. It is not nearly as important to understand what the connection is as it is to simply be aware of what we are experiencing.
What do we do with our awareness?

• What do we do when we notice our sensations? Stay with them! Notice how we may want to move away or do anything but stay with what we are experiencing. Yet it is so important that we stay with it as best we can. If we allow ourselves to be curious about what is happening, to want to explore and to honor what comes up for us we are already involved in our healing. Even if we are only able to do this for a moment. It is a moment of healing.
The role of the therapist

- It is the task of the therapist to be very present in a supportive and caring way with the client. In being very present with and focused on the client, the therapist is also in a place to give the client feedback about what is observed with the client. This support and feedback helps the client in becoming more aware of their own experience and helps to validate the client's experience. This is an important aspect of the therapy.

- The client generally experiences this as having a good and caring rapport with the therapist. On the other hand, there are those times when the experiences that are touched on in the client may bring up anger or pain from the client's past that may become focused on the therapist. What is important to do here is to bring this up with the therapist.

- A good therapist will be willing and comfortable in helping the client to work through ALL of these issues. This is the opportunity to work them through and not just keep them buried and remain stuck with them.
Definition of Trauma

- Threat to life or integrity of self or others
- Common responses involves intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation
- **Trauma is in the nervous system, not in the event**
- Related to a breach in the protective barrier against overstimulation
- Traumatic events involve actual or threatened death or serious injury of threat to the physical integrity of self or others, also includes vicarious trauma
- The key to resolving trauma involves uncoupling/unhooking the fear from tonic immobility, allowing the energies bound in immobility to be released and transformed
- As children our parents need to regulate us, when this is breached in early life, a person later on can not regulate self.
Get the energy flowing

- 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; this residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits.** The long-term, alarming, debilitating, and often bizarre symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develop when we cannot complete the process of moving in, through and out of the "immobility" or "freezing" state. However, we can thaw by initiating and encouraging our innate drive to return to a state of dynamic equilibrium.
PHYSIOLOGY OF THREAT

• The ANS (Autonomic Nervous System) regulates all the basic involuntary body functions
• The sympathetic system prepares the body for action to stressful circumstances, both positive and negative
• Trauma can provoke chronic hyper-arousal of the SNS and/or over-activation of the PNS
9 important brain functions are associated with the **prefrontal cortex**:

1) Body regulation (monitors & alters sympathetic/accelerator & parasympathetic/ brake responses),
2) balancing emotions,
3) attunement to others,
4) regulating fear,
5) flexible response,
6) insight,
7) empathy,
8) intuition
9) morality.
The Triune Brain

Model

Neocortex

Speech
Logic
Higher thinking skills

Limbic System

Emotions

Reptilian Brain

Instinct
Survival
Senses

Chun-Hori 2007
Somatic Experiencing

- Nervous system operates like pendulum, e.g. wake up and go to sleep, heart beat increases and decreases. In order to heal routes of trauma we need to intervene in pendulum rhythms. Go to and forth between trauma and resiliency, synthesis occurs so that person enters new state. This allows for healing as people become stuck in their same old patterns.

- Emphasis is on releasing the shock, freezing, and holding in the body that can ensue from trauma, and on teaching self-regulation of somatic symptoms using breathing, awareness of the felt sense, pendulation, and other tools.

- BREATHING, SLOWING DOWN, ORIENT TOWARDS A RESOURCE
Stream of life and trauma

- A metaphor representing our psychological life running like a river – trauma vortex of energy, counter-vortex (eddies – counter to trauma) places that look like gentle whirlpool – this is where resilience lies. Move between the vortex and counter-vortex a couple of times before going with the flow of the water. Touch on rim of trauma, back to resources and then visit trauma again. Begin with resource.
- The stream contains all of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and sensations
- The banks are the boundaries that protect against excessive stimulation
- Stones & boulders represent difficult developmental stresses, such as neglect, physical/emotional/sexual abuse, and shock trauma
- Trauma ruptures the river bank and a trauma vortex is formed; at the same time a counter vortex is formed.
- Both vortexes are needed for integration
- Pendulating back and forth facilitates integration
Playing dead for self-preservation – dissociation

TRAUMA responses

Elzette
• When faced with danger, it is as if you are looking in the face of danger - See e.g. *Clash of the titans.*
The bridge from hell to the heaven of healing

Somatic experience
Signs of the Relaxation Response

- Metabolism is in resting state
- Heartbeat is slow and muscles relax
- Breathing is slower and steadier
- Blood pressure decreases
- Herb Benson: “Repeated activation of the relaxation response can reverse sustained problems in the body and mend the ‘wear and tear’ brought on by stress.”
• BREATHING ,
• SLOWING DOWN,
• ORIENT TOWARDS A RESOURCE
• Create a sense of **SAFETY IN THE BODY**
• GROUND CLIENT
The felt sense – expand language
The Language of Sensation

- Optimism
- Serenity
- Love
- Acceptance
- Trust
- Submission
- Ecstasy
- Admiration
- Fear
- Apprehension
- Awe
- Vigilance
- Rage
- Terror
- Amazement
- Grief
- Surprise
- Distraction
- Disapproval
- Boredom
- Disgust
- Sadness
- Pensively
- Disappointment
- Remorse
Fundamentals of Tracking

- Language of acceptance in order to access resources.
- Ask for feeling and sensation words. How is “relaxation”? Is this pleasant, unpleasant or neutral? Painful, how? As therapist, keep an open mind.

- Body experience related to trauma. Clues: Language of fear ‘Uh-uh’; feelings of terror, helplessness, shame (keep head down, constrict body, blush, block, heart pounds more, lump in throat); somatic freezing or shock responses.
Trauma affects the cells, yet new experiences can change the cells as well, such as good attachment relationships, positive experiences etc.
Remember

• Move out of fixing mode
• Stay with client
• Be in the moment with body
• Get in tough with bodily feelings and use feeling words
• Ask question in different ways – to focus on the bodily experience
• Focus on resonance
• How to recognize sensations – focus on subtleties of sensations and see if you can find language. Look for pain, constriction, tingling (coming back to life out of freeze response)
Group activity

• Imagine connecting with self as animal
• Become animal, feel and emulate the movement.
• Then imagine threat and notice what happens.
• Confronted with the threat – what happens? Then see threat going away, what happens as you start moving again.
• Connect with other ‘animals’ and see what happens.
• SE Website: www.traumahealing.com


• dsm5.org – for latest info on PTSD

• http://traumaprevention.com/ - tension trauma releasing exercises – David Berceli
ISBN: 978-1-86156-430-6,

- This book brings attention to the interface of psychotherapy and psychological theory with the somatic practices of bodywork and movement therapy. To offer a client only psychotherapy, or only bodywork may subtly or directly reinforce the body-mind split from which so many of us suffer; in some cases this will be a reinforcement of a dilemma central to the client's problems. Hartley views body psychotherapy and transpersonal psychotherapy as building bridges between the once separated processes of psyche, soma, and spirit. Originally trained as a dancer, movement therapist and bodywork practitioner, Hartley continues to use movement and somatic process as an important foundation for her own work. Training in Dance Movement Therapy, the transpersonal psychotherapy of Psychosynthesis, and Process-Oriented Psychology have further deepened Hartley's awareness of the relationships between psyche, soma and spirit, and the need to respond to all levels of experience in therapeutic work.