

FEATURE

Working with bodily knowing

Ariane Agostini on how we can learn to listen to the body and understand its expression



WORDS

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'Follow the lead of your symptoms, for there's usually a myth in the mess, and a mess is an expression of soul.'
James Hillman¹

The issues that bring clients to seek out help often come with strong embodied symptoms. Anxiety may be accompanied by severe physical unease. Depression may bring a variety of physical symptoms, and so forth. Of course, we may speak about these symptoms, but do we let the symptoms speak? Counselling and psychotherapy, traditionally being 'talking cures', often focus on talking about events, relationships, feelings and problems. While a skilfully facilitated retelling of one's story may contribute to change, more often than not, connecting to the lived experience and to the actual feelings are needed for deeper and lasting change to take place.

Inviting the body into the room

Could inviting the body into the room, and letting it speak, be a way of opening up to such experiences? I'm not alone in believing so. 'No words are so clear as the language of body expression', as Alexander Lowen,² a

pioneer in body psychotherapy, said. But how do we learn to listen to the body and understand its expression? That is the focus of this article, where we will explore how our body may be trying to tell us something and how we can work creatively with what emerges from paying attention to it.

Part of my work at the Association for Person Centred Creative Arts (APCCA)³ involves teaching counsellors and therapists to work with the body, using the creative arts. What then might be the ways in which we can invite the body into the room? How might we work with the messages of the body, symbolically and imaginatively? What would change if we truly listened to the stories of our body? What truths would be revealed?

Historical background

It is almost a century ago that Wilhelm Reich observed that muscular tension reflects repressed emotions and developed ways of working with the body to bring release and change. The field of body psychotherapy has since seen rich and multifaceted advancement. However, many of these psychologies and therapies have developed separately, and come with separate

trainings, professional recognitions and accreditations. While understandable, the drawback of this is that working with the body is not as integrated into the wider fields of counselling and psychotherapy as it could, and perhaps should, be.

Carl Jung reflected on the somatic basis of both the ego and the unconscious, and there is a branch of Jung-inspired body psychotherapies. Personally, I have studied and learnt a lot from the process-oriented psychology of Jungian analyst Arnold Mindell.

Our symptoms and us

Many of us, when experiencing strongly charged emotions, have the tendency to want to rid ourselves of the experience. Typically, we do this by externalising the experience; we explain it as being caused by someone or something outside of ourselves. While this may diminish the intensity of the emotions and allow us to get back to 'feeling in control', we inadvertently close the door to the deeper roots of the difficult emotions. An opportunity to transform the cause of our challenging emotions is lost. This is often the way we keep ourselves stuck.

A willingness to feel

If grasping for meaning keeps us stuck, then letting go of the need for meaning implies a willingness to feel and explore the felt experience. In the counselling dialogue, this may take the form of turning towards the emotions, developing an accepting and welcoming attitude towards them, and

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then beginning to investigate and explore our inner experience, in order to find ways towards change. For many of us (particularly if trauma is involved), this may be somewhere between too challenging and too dangerous. And as a practitioner, going down this path would require keen judgment and significant skill in facilitation.

In body psychotherapies, instead of facing the difficult feelings head on in dialogue, we look for the gateway to them in the bodily felt experience. This often feels much less threatening while, somewhat paradoxically, getting to the core issues more directly.

The body as dreamer

Arnold Mindell⁴ noted the many analogies between working with embodied symptoms and working with dreams. Both rely on tuning in to the layers of meaning expressed in the symbols and stories that may appear in dreams or bodywork. This is the approach we are taking here. The hope is that we will be able to find a way of eliciting the deeper roots of our difficult emotions through working with symbolic material provided by our symptoms. In addition to the symbolic material that may emerge from connecting to the body, Mindell also noted what he calls 'secondary signals', such as hand motions, head nods, physiological changes and other body symptoms as may be noticed by the practitioner.

Art as container

When tuning in to bodily felt symptoms, frequently images emerge associated with

feelings and memories. At times, we may even tap into images that seemingly come out of 'nowhere'. Instead of the sometimes challenging investigation through dialogue and inquiry, giving expression to these images and associated emotions and feelings creatively through visual art, writing or otherwise, not only enables us to work with the expression, but it is often experienced as a safer way of expressing challenging emotions. The art-making provides a safe container to hold the experience, and in a way creates a sense of safe distance between ourselves and the image. Rather than experiencing emotional pain directly, we can dialogue through the image. The art also leaves a visible record, which we can then further dialogue with and return to at a later date.

In contrast to the dialogue-driven, 'direct' approach to the difficult emotions, when working with body awareness and art-making, it is through exploration of the artwork that meaning and healing emotional experiences are reached. The facilitative skills for this are what I teach in my courses. The following example will serve as an illustration.

Case study: Sophia

Sophia, a very bubbly and talkative client, brought up some challenging issues in her personal life around conflicting feelings that she experienced about taking on a lot at work. While she found her work very meaningful, at the same time she was

wanting to spend more time at home with her son. She was also in the process of divorcing her husband, and the relationship had become very strained. Work had become a way of avoiding being at home.

As she was talking, I noticed that her body became tense and her breathing became shallower. Talking about conflicting feelings evoked a lot of strong emotions for her that she was trying to hold at bay (as mentioned before, bodily tensions are a way of cutting us off from feeling). When she touched her chest, I reflected this back to her and inquired if she would be willing to explore her feelings and emotions by turning her attention inwards. She agreed.

At first, I simply invited her to close her eyes or to soften her gaze and to drop her awareness inwards, all the while gently encouraging her to stay with her emotions and to become aware of the feelings and sensations in the body. I encouraged her to pay particular attention to any places of tightness and discomfort and to explore what those places felt like, noticing tightness, temperature, textures, size and shape.

I supported Sophia in staying with her experience and to tolerate the feelings and sensations. As we stayed with her inner exploration, she became aware of a lot of sensation in the chest area, and as she stayed with these sensations, there was an increasing sense of pressure in the chest. It was then that an image arose, and I invited her to express this on paper.

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I invited Sophia to tell me what she had drawn. She started with the image on the left (above), which represented a water dam ‘to stop the flood gates’. She could easily connect that to her current feelings of emotional overwhelm. The dark blue of the water represented the unknown and ‘things coming at you’. When we explored the image further, she noticed that she had drawn gates. The gates were there to regulate the water and ‘make it clear’. From this, she was able to see that there were resources there for her, helping her to ‘see things as they are’ and ‘being OK with not knowing’.

We explored the white flowers on the paper, of which there were 10 (her son’s age). But the white flowers also reminded her of the stars, and this helped her connect with earlier memories of spending time on her balcony with her friends looking at the stars. There was a recognition of the importance of sharing with friends. With some further facilitation, Sophia also realised that she felt a deep connection to the stars and felt that she could connect with an ancient wisdom that the stars represented.

We then moved onto the image on the right (above), which she described as a pillar. The bricks represented the support and resources from many others. For Sophia, the shape of the pillar evoked a sense of something ancient, that could withstand time. She spontaneously picked up the image of the pillar and experimented with putting it in different positions relative to the dam, until she found the position where she felt the pillar could serve as a way of being able to cope with the unknown waters. The message for Sophia from this session was that she recognised she had the inner strength to deal with the unknown, while



also being reminded of the external resources that she could draw on to support her. She emerged from the session feeling more resilient and visibly relaxed and relieved.

I have often noticed that in working with images, the image will not only point to the problem, but will also show the resources a client has that they may not have recognised. At the heart of working creatively with bodily knowing is an intention towards greater conscious awareness, which may lead to an increased sense of vitality as well as greater creativity and choice.

Deepening the engagement with the body

In addition to one-on-one work combining body awareness with creative expression, I also run dance movement workshops based on a practice called Dance of Awareness™ (DoA), while incorporating visual art and embodied writing. DoA⁵ is a group movement practice, based on psychodynamic theory and developmental psychology, which differentiates it from other movement practices, such as 5Rhythms and Authentic Movement. The phases of the workshop follow the themes of human development from pre-birth to around five years. Our formative experiences during this time lay down an embodied imprint for later patterns



in adulthood. The movement practice provides the mover with the opportunity to re-experience their formative years of early development, explore old imprints, and discover and experiment with new patterns of moving and relating. Combining art and writing allows participants to give expression in outer form to the experience of the inner realm, discovered through movement, and the combination of DoA with the creative arts provides opportunities for deep healing and change. ●

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