

Common Questions about Body-Centered Psychotherapy

What is body-centered psychotherapy?

Body-centered psychotherapy is a powerful type of therapy that utilizes the stories held in the body to bring about dramatic changes in outdated beliefs, overwhelming emotions, and chronic behavioral and structural patterns. Life experiences, particularly traumatic events, are stored not only in thoughts and emotions but deeply in the body at a cellular level. Body-Centered Psychotherapy weaves together traditional “talk” therapy with a continual checking in of how the body participates in and responds to various situations through changes in breath, posture and movement. This therapy works to access the tremendous wisdom stored in the body and integrate it with our emotions and thoughts. Through the integration of our thoughts, emotions, and sensory/physical experiences comes deeper healing and subsequently we become freer to live a richer, more fulfilling life.

How is this therapy done?

The office is set up like any other psychotherapy office except there is usually more room to move around. Experiential body awareness exercises are blended with the tasks of traditional “talk” psychotherapy. These exercises may include experimenting with movement, observing changes in physical sensations, working with posture, and working carefully with the breath. This work can be done without any touch. Considerable discretion is used along with permission from the individual before touch is used.

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I've tried so many other forms of therapy. How will this be different?

Traditional psychotherapy focuses on observing and changing thoughts and emotions. In addition to this, body-centered psychotherapy emphasizes the importance of listening to the body's story and learning to notice and modulate too high or too low levels of reactivity through *changes in the body*. We can tell ourselves we are safe or happy or that we have resolved bad experiences, however, the body still does not feel safe or free from these difficult experiences. It may be holding highly charged memories. It may also be continually in fight, flight or freeze patterns of reactivity. These are "defensive" survival action patterns rather than "reflective", conscious patterns. When we are in a state of reactivity it is difficult to make good choices or be flexible in our responses to events. Symptoms may keep surfacing year after year when the body is stuck in old stories or survival patterns even though we feel we have "changed" our thoughts. With a body-centered approach individuals find long-lasting relief even from highly traumatic events. That's because when there is a clearing in the body and integration at the level of our emotions, thoughts *and* physical experiences deeper healing occurs.

The thought of focusing on my body feels uncomfortable to me. How would we work with this?

When there is dislike or shame about one's body this usually means your body is trying to tell you something. We do not immediately work with physical sensations and movements, especially those connected to painful experiences. We start with becoming more mindful of information outside of your body. This could include focusing in on something you see or hear in your surroundings as a way to settle down and be in the moment. We are a very intellectual society so most of us learned to be more comfortable tuning out body sensations. Only with time and gentleness do we move towards difficult, unsettling or painful sensations and movements so that these can be healed.

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What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is being in the present moment with childlike curiosity and openness. Coming into the moment allows us to slow down and be able to choose how to respond to life circumstances rather than to just react to them. Learning to be in the moment allows us to be exquisitely connected to the richness and wisdom of life. One of the fundamental tasks in body-centered psychotherapy is learning how to be mindful of what is happening right now especially in our bodies so we can use this wisdom to grow and change.

I'm afraid I won't be able to turn off all the bad feelings (emotions, physical sensations) once I bring them up. How do you deal with this?

We practice with simple mindful and present-time awareness exercises before exploring painful emotions, sensations and memories. These exercises (i.e., feeling your feet, feeling your breath) provide powerful tools you can use anytime and anywhere to settle your emotions. Throughout the session I continually track your level of reactivity and give you feedback so as to literally teach your brain to slow down rather than get overwhelmed. We work within a healthy level of arousal for your nervous system so it can learn new information. When your reactivity level is too high (too anxious, angry, scared, etc) or too low (numb, emotionally flat, depressed) your brain cannot learn anything new (i.e., "I'm safe now"). It is my job to help you learn to feel safe and to teach you tools to move through intense feelings.

Individuals often come to psychotherapy to get away from bad thoughts and feelings or to learn ways to just manage them. Yet, expanding our ability to honor and move through the *full spectrum* of feelings allows us to live a richer life. Rather than avoiding them altogether or attempting to "get rid" of them we can learn to flow with them. Emotions, when worked with effectively, propel us to move, take action and feel alive.

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Sometimes there are situations in my life where my feelings get so intense I am fearful of what I may do.

This is very common for people with unresolved traumatic memories. The emotional “parts” of the brain no longer operate in an integrated manner with the rest of the brain. These areas literally “hijack” the rest of the brain thus interfering with the ability to think through things or even feel your body. In body-centered psychotherapy we use mindfulness exercises to slow the emotions down. There is a “meditative” area of the brain in the frontal cortex that once working actually “soothes” the emotional areas of the brain. We also begin to identify where the emotion is *in* the body and then get curious about the physical sensations of the emotion rather than staying with the emotion. So, for instance, you state you are experiencing overwhelming sadness. If you are comfortable feeling sensations in your body and you can stay present to your surroundings I will ask you where you feel the sadness in your body. Eventually you will be able to notice the physical sensations that go with your sadness. We then get more curious about the physical sensations of and possible movements that go along with the sadness rather than the emotional state of sadness. In this way, your brain starts to pay attention to something other than the sadness. The body becomes an “anchor” to catch runaway emotions. Sometimes I will have individuals sit on a fit ball while experiencing intense emotions. Because of the physical task of sitting on the ball their brain has to pay attention to more than just the emotion otherwise they might fall off of the ball. Again, we are working to get more parts of the brain to work together which will then allow deeper healing to occur.

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