

Trauma Neutralisation

A body ritual for affect discharge following narrative exposure

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Summary

First, the body ritual for affect discharge following narrative exposure is introduced. During the first stage the clients imagine drawing negative affects and emotional reactions to the trauma out of their bodies with their own hands and then, according to the principle of protective earthing, direct and discharge them into the ground. In the second phase, clients do a self-healing body meditation which brings about a realignment or reorientation. Finally, the testimony of a fugitive from East Africa is presented.

Keywords

testimony, narrative exposure, body therapy, meditation, human rights

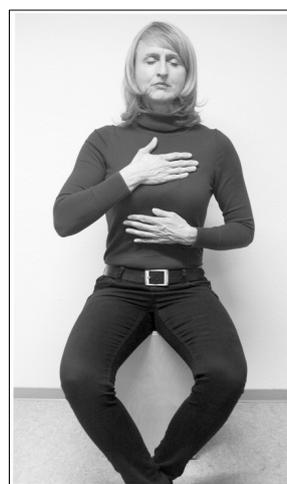
Introduction

In the last issue, we reported on the therapeutic approach of *testimonio* or testimony (Cienfuegos & Monelli, 1983), a method which uses narrative exposure (Neuner et al., 2009) in the treatment of survivors of persecution and forced migration (Regner, 2016). We described the procedure for therapeutic testimony as a psychological operation in which, as in surgery, the “traumatic memory capsules” (i.e. “hot” implicit memories) are brought to the surface, opened up and extracted from the inside of the self (“cool”, explicit memory, outside, in the form of a testimony). If we follow this analogy, then we must consider that the psychological

wound will need to be disinfected after the psychological operation and be treated with a suitable "ointment" until it has healed. An *imaginative body ritual for trauma-neutralization* is particularly suitable for this purpose since the living body is “the coagulated form of existence itself”, the densest and literally treatable manifestation of our “being to the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, p. 273). The procedure for this body ritual, which was developed in psychotherapeutic work with traumatized refugees, is described below.

First phase: Discharge of Affects following the Principle of Protective Earthing

After completing a session of narrative exposure therapy the client and the therapist remain sitting together in the room, not quite opposite each other, while the interpreter sits a little further away. They sit in a relaxed position on the edge of their chairs, with their backs straight and thighs slightly apart, their knees pointing slightly downwards. This allows them to breathe more deeply and their bodyweights are distributed in the best way to support their straight sitting posture. Their ankles are crossed. They then take up the *basic position*, with their left hands resting in the middle of their torsos, at the level of the stomach, and their right hand placed on their hearts (see Figure 1). We can say that these two areas correspond to the third and fourth chakras (the “solar plexus chakra” and “heart chakra”), i.e. the two middle chakras, which are particularly important for self-care. The chakras are referred to purely in terms of their physical health aspects, and the spiritual aspects are not over-emphasised.



In this basic position, which is called the “sun-heart position”¹, the patient is asked to imagine that the hands are like dry sponges and that the bad feelings connected with the traumatic memory, such as powerlessness, horror, fear and despair, are like a dark hot liquid inside the body. They are then instructed to imagine that their hands are sucking this fluid out of the body during the ritual and that they become warmer and warmer and heavier and heavier. (In the basic position this effect occurs spontaneously after a short time). After introducing this image, the therapist summarises the trauma narrative that the client shared earlier once more and repeats it. This should not take more than three to five minutes. The client is in a mindful and deeply relaxed state and will experience that the narration has now been actually understood and has become a memory that has been shared with another

1 The sun-heart position alone is very helpful for many clients and is shown to them after completing their first session so that they can use it to soothe themselves, for example to help them fall asleep or when they have had a nightmare. The inspiration to develop this basic position came from by Anne Höfler (2011) and her “Schule des Handauflegens” (School of laying on of Hands – www.anne-hoefler.de), which is also roughly oriented towards the chakra system. When asked about self-care strategies for traumatized refugees at a workshop in 2008 Anne Höfler said that patients could simply lay their hands on their solar plexus and that this could be done in the sitting or standing positions or when lying down, depending on personal preference. The self-soothing effect is perceptible after only a few minutes.



person. When this re-narration is completed and the hands have "absorbed" the "trauma fluid", it is then wrung out of the fingers as if it were being squeezed out of a wet sponge. This is done by pressing the middle of the palm of the right hand with the left thumb and then stroking it upwards across each finger, starting with the little finger and ending with the thumb (Fig. 2).

Then the right hand is shaken five times in a downwards direction, as if to shake off drops of water. The same procedure is then performed with the other hand.

As clients rub their fingers and shake their hands they can imagine that whatever affective tension is still left in the hands can be discharged into the ground or the Earth, in line with the Albanian saying "What the body cannot carry, the earth can carry"². We can also draw a comparison with principles of electrical engineering. One can speak of the *principle of protective earthing*, since working with the affective charge of traumatic memories is similar to handling a high voltage current! To prevent any harm from occurring, the high voltage must be discharged into the Earth (as with a lightning conductor) and neutralised. If we compare the body to a lightning conductor, we can neutralise the excess energy by assuming a squatting position and laying both palms on the ground (Fig. 3). As clients do that, they can imagine, similarly to the idea that the hands extract the dark fluid like sponges, that the Earth is drawing the residual stress and tension out of their hands and at the same time supporting and carrying them. This positive symbolic body image concludes the first phase of the body ritual, i.e. the phase in which overwhelming affects are discharged by earthing them.



2 I am grateful to a client of mine from Kosovo for sharing this saying with me while I was developing the "Rain Exercise", see below.

Second Phase: A Body Meditation to Reorient the Self

For the second phase of the ritual the client returns to the sun-heart position. The hands are now “neutralised” and the affects have been discharged (Fig. 1). However, now the attention



is no longer directed towards the trauma narration, but turned meditatively towards the breathing throughout this entire phase. It is helpful to suggest that the client say "in" to themselves on every in-breath and "out" on every out-breath. This synchronizes the breathing rhythm with the movement of the mind which is represented as an inner voice. If the mind strays, as is its nature,³ it is gently directed back to the breath. Thus the idea is not to replace the traumatic memory with a positive image, since according to the dialectical symbol of the scales which is our main guiding principle (Regner, op. cit.) this creates a negative counter-movement that could be problematic. Rather, the reorientation of the self should be seen in analogy to the transcendent

centre-point of the scale where it is at rest, and which is the psychological equivalent of the *inner observer* of the breath and the movement of the mind (cf. Kabat Zinn, 2011). In the next step, the hands are placed one on top of the other “like butterfly wings” (Fig. 4) on the neck, which is assigned to the fifth chakra in the traditional chakra system.

Traumatized women often have discomfort, such as tension, hardening, feeling a lump in the throat and difficulty swallowing in the neck area. This position helps them since it activates



self-healing powers specifically for these unpleasant sensations. The attention should then be directed towards the *sixth chakra* in the middle of the forehead, which is traditionally associ-



ated with clear thinking, insight and visionary capacities. This energy point is particularly important for (politically) traumatized people because from a psychosomatic point of view the trauma “goes to their head”, where it creates excess pressure which results in severe headaches, intrusions and rumination. In order to direct mindfulness and self-healing powers towards this

³ It is important to avoid, as is commonly done, conveying the idea that meditation is about calming the mind or even bringing it to a halt. I think there is some confusion here. The peace or silence which is often associated with the meditation is related not to the mind, whose nature it is, on the contrary, to be constantly in motion, but the transcendental centeredness of the *inner observer*. Observing the rhythm of one's breathing helps to direct the stream of thoughts and sensations towards this inner observer. This is experienced as a healing inner anchor.

chakra, the left hand is placed lightly on the back of the head while the index and middle fingers of the right hand are placed on the centre of the forehead (Fig. 5). Finally, for the *seventh chakra*, the “crown chakra”, the fontanelle is gently massaged (Fig. 6). The hands move downward in a stroking movement over the hair, face, neck, arms, upper body and thighs, and then finally briefly return to the sun-heart position.

Follow-Up Treatment

This concludes the approximately fifteen-minute body ritual for trauma neutralization and the “psychological operation” as a whole. Generally speaking this ritual is well received by the clients and they are keen to start practising it right after they have tried it for the first time. The immediate effect of this exercise is to stabilise clients both physically and psychologically. They will therefore not leave the session in a reactivated state without any means of protecting themselves. However, as emphasised in the previous article, reactivation of traumatic experiences through narrative exposure in a therapeutic session initially leads to a noticeable increase in their level of stress in five key areas (see Silove 1999, for a description of the *stress continuum model*). In the next few days this results in an intensification of their symptoms (e.g. sleep and/or mood disturbances, anxiety) or the formation of new symptoms (e.g. fever, skin rash, bodily pain). It is important to warn clients that this may happen. However, the trauma neutralization exercise consists in a body-oriented process that begins at the top and works downwards and should be taught to patients before they begin the trauma narrative so that they can repeat it at home during this critical post-exposure phase. It can also be supported by other physical exercises that clients have learned previously, such as the “Rain Exercise”⁴ or “Empowerment Dancing”⁵. This practice is based on the observation and idea that after the

4 This 10 to 20 minute “*Rain Exercise*” was developed by the author some years ago for a psychosocial group as an intervention specifically for recurring tension headaches. The procedure is as follows. (1) While in the standing position let your hands dangle at your sides and begin to rock your hips slightly from side to side. (2) Place both hands a little below the navel and continue the rocking movement, as if you are your own child. (3) Imagine a warm summer rain. Raise your arms up, stretch your body upwards and welcome the sky and rain. (4) Massage your head vigorously as if you are washing your hair, face and neck. If it feels appropriate, produce pain in your scalp from the outside that is equal to the internal pain of the headache by pressing down with your finger nails. (5) Vigorously shake your arms and hands in all directions as you would do to shake off the water during a summer rain shower. (6) Return to the basic rocking movement (see 2) to collect yourself. (7) Repeat the head massage and shake your hands again. (8) Repeat the basic movement again. (9) Massage your arms, torso and back from the top downwards. Tap them with your fingers and stroke them in a downwards movement. (10) Repeat (5). (11) Repeat the basic movement. (12) Massage your thighs and legs, tap them with your fingers and stroke them in a downwards movement. (13) Crouch down, touch the ground with your hands and like greeting the earth. (14) Repeat the basic movement. (15) Make a gesture of gratitude.

5 *Empowerment dancing* is an approach developed by the author which is based on somatic experiencing therapy. The founder of somatic experiencing, Peter Levine (1998), observed that after threatening experiences many animals tremble violently for a while to calm their terror. This natural processing mechanism should also be promoted in human beings, so that the trauma does not rise to the head and intrusively take control of the thinking. Empowerment dancing consists in an approximately fifteen-minute routine, which should preferably be performed in the evening. The rules are simple: (1) dance - preferably without music - for yourself and in your own rhythm, following your

“trauma capsules” have opened their affective content disperses across the surface of the body like acid and thus produces a negative surface tension. This can then be directed downwards and neutralized using washing off, wiping, tapping and shaking movements, while simultaneously re-centring the body. It is therefore explained to clients that the post-exposure phase is an opportunity finally to shake off of traumatic affects that have become encapsulated and to rid themselves of them to a certain extent. The temporary increase in tension (“it’s as if we had stirred up the mud on the bottom of a pond with a stick, and all of a sudden all the water is cloudy”) is usually successfully overcome (“The mud will sink again on its own, and then there will be much less of it”). In the medium term the exercise leads to a relatively enduring relief and reduction in the stress level.

The narrative exposure must then be repeated in a second round at a subsequent therapy session, in which the therapist reads out the narrative obtained in the first round sentence by sentence and the client corrects and supplements it. Only then does the ego realize that the traumatic memory that has been floating around in the psyche is now actually externalised, i.e. brought out into the open from the interior of the self into the intersubjective exterior and recorded in an oral history report. This second round is also concluded with the trauma neutralization exercise. In this brief therapy model, if the *dark therapeutic path* (trauma exposure, including trauma neutralization) is balanced with the *light path* (work on activating resources) and the *mindful path* (meditation) is practiced in a human rights context – if necessary with the support of medication – in the majority of cases a *basic level of stabilization* can be achieved, clients experiencing a reduction in symptoms and problems of at least 70 %⁶. This was true for an East African client who gave the following testimony (some of the details have been changed). The testimonio was eventually given to the client's lawyer and most likely helped her to obtain the residence permit which she now possesses. It was also submitted to Amnesty International. In the original German version of this article, the testimonio is reproduced in full length because such oral history reports should be brought to the attention of the democratic public in order to help build a society in which human rights are truly respected (Regner, 2016 b).

own impulses and your body's spontaneous movements; (2) include familiar elements (from gymnastics, folk dances, yoga, martial arts, etc.) playfully and according to your mood; (3) use mainly top-down movements, i.e. wiping, shaking and "dancing off". Empowerment dancing has five effects: (1) rapid reduction of tension, (2) leading to improved sleep, (3) an immediate improvement in mood, (4) improved creativity through development of a personal dance style, (5) holistic strengthening. Advice: clients who are not physically fit should be cautious and begin slowly, dancing only for a few minutes.

6 See www.inter-homines.org/IH-Brandenburg.pdf. The assessment is carried out using a direct method of monitoring, that is, the client is asked again and again in the course of the therapy, “If the intensity of your problems and complaints was 10 at your first session – where are we today?”