



Reclaiming the Embodied Feeling of Being Fully Alive

‘Remember that the path is truly ours, regardless of what happened in the past.’ This is what a very dear relative of mine wrote to me just recently.

To know that the path is truly ours is quite a liberating feeling. It frees us from having to blame the past, or people in the past who have caused us significant difficulties, hurt or even trauma. However, this does not mean that we should stay passive, especially when we feel that certain events and experiences of the past still act on us in ways that prevent us from living a peaceful and balanced life.

Here I refer to the life we live within ourselves, our psychological life, as opposed to our life in time and space. The latter simply just happens, revealing what it has in store for us in every moment that unfolds. Our life in the external does not distinguish between positive and negative experiences and events or between good and bad, because it is governed by universal laws and the laws of physics.

This obviously means that we can’t change what happened in the past; but we also can’t deny that significant things, both conducive and non-conducive experiences, took place that might still affect us in everyday life. If the non-conducive things outweigh the conducive things, as a consequence they will prevent us from living life in a true state of coherence and balance. That is, coherence between our body, emotions, mind and spirit.

The Lost Value of Coherence

The remnants of the knowledge and understanding of coherence between body, mind and spirit got lost in our society in the times of Rene Descartes (1595–1650), who made a deal with the Pope to separate matters concerning the body from mind, spirit and emotion – with devastating consequences that affect all of us today. The body was given to science, the emotions were allocated to the psychologists and the mind/intellect was given to academia. Everything concerned with the spirit and soul became the possession of the church.

In recent decades, scientists and psychologists have become aware of the seriousness of the implications of this divide and have finally joined forces to develop new ways to re-join what was separated centuries ago.

With increasing scientific evidence produced during the past twenty years, a revolution is taking place in the field of psychology and bodywork, which has led to a complete transformation of psychology, psychotherapy and their respective impacts on our physiology, along with how this new understanding is applied today. However, lots of health professionals and academics still meet this new understanding with the utmost resistance, specifically when it comes to the newly discovered benefits of alternative therapies and holistic integrative approaches to work with body, mind and spirit.

The Power of Repetition

Most people today live under the influence of a deeply engrained conditioning that can be summarised by the phrase ‘just get on with it’. This ancient mindset became prevalent at the beginning of the 19th century, and in today’s language enables us to ‘put a lid on things’ that profoundly impact on us and store them away, to then be able to just get on with it.

We all acquire this behaviour by imitation and repeated conditioning throughout the early stages of our life. In the 20th century this specific way of dealing with difficult and painful experiences became known as suppression and repression (terms used by Jung, Assagioli, Freud and Rogers). Causes of suppression are things that unfortunately most of us have experienced at one point in the past. Examples are being manipulated by another person or group, minor threats and minor

bullying, being continuously wronged, punishments for things we haven't done, being made to feel guilty and ashamed about something we should not feel guilty or ashamed about, being smacked, and so on.

Causes of repression are things that no one should ever be exposed to or experience, yet sadly they still take place on a daily basis in many people's lives. These are mental, physical, sexual and psychological abuse, major bullying, violence, torture, and the like.

We all carry suppressed and repressed material within us, whether we want to acknowledge it or not.

The Separation of Mind and Body

'Just getting on with it', which leads to suppression, is a collective conditioning in which we have all learned to separate our mind in conflicting and challenging situations from our body and emotions, forcing us to simply get on with it and overriding all physical responses, feelings and emotions. This is a natural defence and survival mechanism, which animals in the wild are able to simply shake off when they can escape their predators.

The simple act of shaking it off gets them straight back into physiological coherence, which is a state of physio-psychological equilibrium in which all body rhythms are entrained. Unfortunately, in our modern world, we have forgotten how to do this. In most situations, we can't escape our 'predators', which might be people we depend on and are in a relationship with: our father, mother, partner, peers or other family members and people we know. And we can do so even less during our childhood and teens.

We all carry plenty of experiences of how our mind is capable of separating itself off from what is happening with our body, feelings and emotions. However, it does not work the same way for our body, feelings and emotions in isolation, and thanks to neuroscience we finally know why. But before getting into the ins and outs of why that is, we need to look at how the past acts on us now.

The Inseparability of Past, Present and Future

That certain things non-conducive to our well-being have taken place in our lives is a fact, and this fact deserves acknowledgement without any connotations of shame and blame attached to it.

That is, whilst we all walk both our personal path and the path of the collective simultaneously, by walking the path that is ours truthfully, we are aware that the past, the present and the future are active in us at the same time.

I am aware that right in this present moment, in the here and now, I carry my past in the form of memories and experiences, both the ones I clearly remember, which live in the field of my current awareness, and the ones I can't remember, which live in the subconscious and unconscious parts of my psychological makeup.

Hence, on the path that is mine I have to acknowledge that the past makes me what I am in the present moment, and that both the conducive and non-conducive parts of the past are active and present in everything I think and do in the 'now'.

However, I am also aware that the future is active in me in the form of my potential. This includes my emotional, intellectual, instinctual and creative potential, and taken altogether is my potential to evolve, change and become someone different to the one still ruled by parts of me that are actively governed by the past. That's how the past manifests itself in the present, becomes the present.

Ever Repeating Cycles in Life

For a long time I struggled to come to terms with the possibility that there is not enough time left in this life to get to the core of what keeps us in the loop of repeating themes and cycles, bringing up the same issues and questions again and again.

Ask yourself how often you encounter the same feedback loop that starts with a very familiar feeling we can summarise in the expression 'Oh no, I can't believe that I didn't see this coming again!', whilst fully realising that 'Here we go again!' And each time one of our cycles comes to completion we tell ourselves that we will not allow the same thing to happen to us again – until we wake up to the fact that it has just happened again.

I have faced this many times in my own inner work, as well as in supervised discussions during CPD training. Having facilitated countless people in the past decade and a half as a cranio-sacral practitioner, the subject that was the underlying theme in almost all of the sessions was how to get out of the loop of ever-repeating cycles of the same detrimental experiences we seem to attract in our everyday life.

Loops that cause physical and/or emotional hurt and pain prevent us from moving forward. I also remember how often my colleagues and I have shared the same observations during discussions and training.

This leads us to one of the most genius sayings of Albert Einstein, which might hold the answer to this problem.

He states that 'no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it' and that 'we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking'.

Captivated by Beliefs

If we now go back to how our past affects our present life, we can go one step further by including the possibility that it is doing this through deeply imprinted beliefs we acquired in the past, which we hold onto and keep about ourselves. This means the past keeps itself alive in our deeply held beliefs, inducing same thinking and keeping us in the same loop and cycle of repeating situations and events.

We learn and absorb both conducive and non-conducive beliefs through rules and regulations in our society, through cultural and religious beliefs that are reinforced by the collective around us, as well as beliefs inherited from a stronger person we looked up to, even though they did not have our best interest in mind.

This can also happen through a more dominant person who had a specific influence or hold over us, or even someone we subconsciously feared, as well as people we wanted to please or desperately tried to prove something to.

Figuratively speaking, a belief can be seen as the strong authoritarian voice of a person, collective group, peer group or ideology that acts on us through frequent repetition. The influence these different voices have on us starts infesting parts of our psychological makeup, gradually turning into an internal voice that sounds just like our own

inner voice, which we then listen to when it is triggered by a particular situation. We fully trust what it is telling us.

In psychology this kind of influence that acts on us over a longer period of time is known as cohesive control. Here are some examples of voices we all might have absorbed: 'I (you) am not good enough', 'I will never be able to live up to these high standards', 'I am of no use', 'I am not likeable', 'I am ugly and fat', 'I am not pure enough', 'I am a failure', 'I better keep my mouth shut', 'I feel guilty'.

If this habit of same thinking (belief) continues within us we will never be able to solve the problem and get out of the loop of repeating cycles. We will forever stay on the same level of consciousness that created the problem.

At the End it's down to the Brain

If we now take this idea a step further by going back to the question of why it doesn't work for the emotions and the body to 'just get on with it', we can start seeing light at the end of the tunnel by considering the latest neuroscience. It is all down to our different brains and the way they are wired. But there is also the exciting possibility that we can change the workings of those neural circuits and possibly even replace them.

Our nervous system comprises three different systems known as the central, autonomic and enteric nervous systems. Each one of them is working just like an individual brain, storing its own memories. Our brain (cerebrum) has the capacity to switch off deeply upsetting experiences. However, the body undoubtedly will 'keep score', according to Bessel van der Kolk, founder of the Trauma Centre at JRA and a clinician, researcher and teacher in the area of post-traumatic stress. His work integrates developmental, neurobiological, psychodynamic and interpersonal aspects of the impact of trauma and its treatment.

His recent research reveals that traumatic experiences and deeply upsetting encounters lead to actual changes in the brain. In his book *The Body Keeps its Score*, he says that these changes include 'a recalibration of the brain's alarm system, an increase in hormone activity, and alterations in the system that filters relevant information from irrelevant' (Van der Kolk, 2015). He then states that 'trauma comprises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied

feeling of being alive', which explains why 'traumatised individuals so often keep repeating the same problems and have such trouble learning from experience'.

He concludes by saying that 'we now know that their behaviours are not the result of moral failings or signs of lack of willpower – they are caused by actual changes in the brain'.

Utilising the Brains Neuroplasticity

This research has given rise to new possibilities that 'can palliate or even reverse the damage' through new approaches, as well as experiences utilising 'the brain's own natural neuroplasticity to help survivors feel fully alive in the present and move on with their lives'.

Due to the recalibration in brain function, people who carry trauma either relive the traumatic event of the past in the here and now, including all the physical and emotional responses that took place throughout the traumatic experience in the past, or they respond through depersonalisation, which is a complete dissociation created by the trauma.

Van der Kolk states that 'for our physiology to calm down, heal and grow we need a visceral feeling of safety'. Hence reciprocity is paramount. That is, 'being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart'.

We can now easily understand how traumatic experiences and deeply upsetting events like bullying and coercive control, as well as any form of physical and emotional abuse, act on our self-perception and self-belief.

In time the recalibrated beliefs we hold about ourselves and the way they cause us to respond and deal with the world around us turn into deeply engrained habits.

'These habits develop when people give a response repeatedly in a particular context and thereby form associations in memory between the response and recurring context cues.' (Neal et al., 2011)

Jane Taylor, a professor of psychiatry and psychology at Yale University, says of the study: 'We've always thought of habits as being inflexible, but this suggests you can have flexible habits, in some sense' (Trafton, 2012). In addition, the IL cortex (infra-limbic cortex) seems to favour new habits over old ones. This is consistent with other studies

which show that, once we have broken a habit, it is not forgotten but is replaced by something new instead (Filmer-Lorch, Barrow and Gill, 2016).

Reclaiming the Physical, Embodied Feeling of Being Alive

And the same is true when it comes to recalibrated habitual beliefs caused by upsetting and traumatic experiences in the past.

By moving out of the old context into a new environment that repeatedly gives us a visceral feeling of safety, we can gradually develop a firm grounding in the now and become free from all previous cues to habit performance.

That is, this shift is not only an environmental shift that frees us from our habit cues; it also leads to neural shifts that take us away from circuits that engage in habitual performance to circuits that allow us to experience the world from a greater perspective, where we feel fully alive in the present, leaving the past behind and happily moving on with our lives.

This, of course, can't be done entirely on your own, so if you are ready to step out of your ever-repeating cycles caused by difficult events in the past, know that help is always there in the form of new possibilities: bodywork, personal development, therapy, support groups and highly qualified practitioners.

And whilst you are embarking on this new venture that takes you closer to your 'self', never forget that the path is truly yours.

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References

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Neal, D.T., Wood, W., Wu, M. and Kurlander, D. (2011). The pull of the past: when do habits persist despite conflict with motives? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(11): 1428–1437. doi: 10.1177/0146167211419863.

Trafton, A. (2012). How the brain controls our habits: MIT neuroscientists identify a brain region that can switch between new and old habits. *MIT News*, <http://news.mit.edu/2012/understanding-how-brains-control-our-habits-1029> [accessed Mar. 2016].

Van der Kolk, B. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score*. New York, New York: Penguin Books.

Resources I Found Incredibly Helpful

Link to book – The Body Keeps the Score – by leading scientist Bessel van der Kolk

https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0141978619/ref=s9_acsd_simh_hd_bw_b17GB_c_x_1_w?pf_rd_m=A3P5ROKL5A1OLE&pf_rd_s=merchandised-search-4&pf_rd_r=A6FW2RQTE9FWZRM0B2HG&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_p=fd347e45-37c2-5ef7-938e-e2348b8d0a86&pf_rd_i=266239

Link to Book – The Brain that Changes Itself – Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Brain-That-Changes-Itself-Frontiers/dp/014103887X/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

Link to Bessel van der Kolk's amazing youtube video – Van der Kolk speaks about cutting-edge insights and understanding of our psychology

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=334&v=53RX2ESlgsM

Link to research paper: A unifying model of the role of the infra-limbic cortex in extinction and habits

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4138355/>