

Finding Your Whole Self Through “(W)Holistic” Psychotherapy

World Mental Health Day was observed for the first time in 1992. It was started as an annual activity of the World Federation for Mental Health by the then Deputy Secretary General Richard Hunter. The day is officially commemorated every year on October 10th. In honor of World Mental Health Day, we asked local psychologist Dr. Katherine Kelly to explain Holistic Psychotherapy.

The natural health movement is increasing the overall awareness of the “Holistic Health” approach. As readers, you are well aware that this approach entails the incorporation of healing methods from a mind/body/spirit perspective. However, when asked about a “holistic” approach to psychotherapy, most people can’t even begin to describe what this might entail.

Much like holistic health, holistic psychotherapy approaches mental health from a “whole person” perspective, incorporating not only emotional health, but also physical, intellectual, spiritual, environmental, social, sexual, interpersonal, and financial components (Whole Health Model, 2006) to what may have created an individual’s psychological “dis-ease”. For a holistic psychotherapist, it is a no-brainer that any or all of these components, when unbalanced, can cause psychological distress.

A holistic psychotherapist differs from traditional therapists in that they actively seek an understanding of the client’s concerns from this inter-related perspective—the key word in describing this approach. One component has a direct impact on one or more of the others. Traditional therapists may randomly touch on these areas, but focus their strategies primarily on psychological relief as their desired outcome. The downfall of

the traditional approach is that there is higher potential for relapse or incomplete healing if the inter-related or multi-faceted origin of the psychological distress is left untreated. However, the holistic psychotherapist sees each and every aspect of a person’s being as important in creating mental health or an overall sense of well-being.

The Mind/Body Connection

As a Licensed Health Psychologist, many of the patients I see are seeking relief and understanding from stress related to medical illness—thus the mind-body connection. Whether it be a chronic or acute medical illness, psychological distress goes hand in hand. On the flip side, the psychological research is clear that stress and unresolved issues can also lead to physical health problems. The *Journal Of Health Psychology* is just one of many clinical research mediums providing clinical proof that everything from headaches, to intestinal distress, to heart attacks, to cancer are a direct result of unresolved or chronic stress or distress.

Depression and anxiety are both highly correlated with a myriad of health problems, and endless studies related to health care usage indicate that medical patients with these psychological con-

cerns tend to report a higher frequency of physical complaints. Conversely, many medical patients develop either situational or clinical depression/anxiety as a result of their ongoing medical illnesses.

So it goes unsaid that the mind/body connection exists. The question is “Which comes first—the medical (aka ‘the chicken’) or psychological illness (aka ‘the egg’)?” A traditional practitioner would answer that one came before the other, whereas a true holistic practitioner, whether medically- or psychologically-based would say that the medical and psychological symptoms coexist and that it may not matter which came first since they are so inter-related. The important part would be to actively address both aspects as inseparable components to overall health.

Holistic Psychotherapy

A holistic psychotherapist takes a patient’s treatment beyond the basic mind/body connection to include all other aspects of health. For example, it is not uncommon for the major breadwinner of a family to report overwhelm/anxiety from the psychological perspective, and chronic neck/shoulder/back pain or tension from the medical perspective. Not only is the patient dealing with



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psychological (ie., overwhelm/anxiety) and physical health (neck/shoulder/back pain), but also indirectly with financial health concerns (pressure of being the major breadwinner). The traditional practitioner may never ask where the origin of the stress stems from, whereas the holistic practitioner will recognize that the patient is carrying the "burden of his/her world on his/her shoulders". The financial health concerns may be an indirect identification, but key in addressing the root of the physical complaints.

Similarly, consider the patient who has recently undergone a separation from a 30-year marriage. For confidentiality's sake, we'll call him Ted. Ted

was referred to me because he had just left his unhappy marriage. Of no surprise, he was stressed and although he did not recognize it as such, he was also depressed (ie., psychological health compromised). He left the house from his soon-to-be ex-wife, along with most of his belongings (environmental health compromised). He was financially strapped between the legal fees and cost of moving (financial health compromised). He was newly isolated from he and his ex-wife's friends and family (social and interpersonal health compromised). His performance at work was failing and his thoughts were scattered and doubting of himself and his future (intellectual health compromised).

He no longer went to his long-attended church (spiritual health compromised). He no longer had a sex life (sexual health compromised). So, in general, his life was turned upside down and up to this point nearly all of the components of health were unbalanced. Although

he didn't report any physical problems on his initial client information sheet, I made an accurate and surprising assumption to him in the second session. I asked him outright if he had 1) intestinal and/or bowel problems, 2) headaches, 3) lower back/muscle problems, 4) high blood pressure and 5) last but not least, hemorrhoids. As I listed them out, his eyes grew wide and he asked me if I had been reading his medical records. The truth is, I have seen enough of similar situations to know that the body mani-

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fest certain illnesses depending on the psychological concerns with which a person is dealing.

Seasoned holistic psychotherapists, thus, tend to see the patient or client from a "whole person" approach—they read beyond face-value information and can complete the picture of a client's need for assistance. In fact, these practitioners are often able to anticipate certain impact on other aspects of health. Holistic psychotherapists also are likely to align themselves with various other professionals or practitioners who can assist them in serving the patient from this comprehensive approach. Again, the key is the understanding of the inter-relatedness of each component to help the individual reach their optimal mental health.

Another example of a holistic approach in psychotherapy is the application of the whole person approach to overweight and obesity. In my practice, I specialize in emotional eating behavior. Simply put, these concerns are never

about the food; rather, they are a direct result of the imbalance of the inter-related components of a person's overall or "whole" health. It is not uncommon at all for women who deal with emotional eating to have difficulty relating to themselves and others (social and interpersonal health). This, in turn, is reflected in an unhealthy relationship with food. In a few cases, there is also a physically-based component (i.e., metabolic, endocrine, or other disorders). Along with these are often dissatisfaction with jobs/careers (intellectual health), their place of living (environmental), or even religious concerns (spiritual health). Without awareness of the inter-relatedness of

such conditions, traditional therapists can inadvertently overlook key aspects to helping their clients. In the case of emotional eating, I tell my clients that a person doesn't lose their physical weight until their "emotional weight" is resolved. Once an individual begins to connect the dots and make change toward more balanced components of health, their weight starts to slowly drop. To them it's magic, to me, it's "whole health".

Holistic psychotherapists also tend to emphasize empowerment of clients to take charge of their own overall health in a more proactive manner than previously. By helping patients to connect the dots to other components of life balance, they are better equipped in the long run to deal with further times of imbalance. Clients, are in turn, more able to look at their own big picture to identify which "dots" aren't connecting. Some refer to this concept as the "psychosynthesis" of therapy—helping clients identify and synthesize their own approach to health. Currently, there

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are no specific training programs for holistic psychotherapy, but these practitioners tend to be self-seekers in finding our more about the approach.

Typical Questions related to Holistic Psychotherapy:

Q: What is a holistic psychotherapist?

A: Much as described above, a holistic psychotherapist treats psychological concerns from a “whole person” perspective. This may include discussion about the various components of overall health (psychological, physical, intellectual, social, interpersonal, spiritual, environmental, financial, and sexual). This may also incorporate a team approach with other practitioners/professionals who can address these concerns. For instance, it may be that a holistic psychotherapist works closely with medical providers, social workers, ministers/priests, and even financial consultants/advisors to best help their clients.

Q: I’m worried that Holistic means something related to religion—does your

treatment include “holy” or religious work?

A: The best answer here is “Maybe”. Holistic means whole, not holy. So, I approach a psychotherapy situation from a (w)holistic perspective. If a person’s psychological health is negatively impacted by an uncomfortable religious upbringing or current religious/spiritual situation, the treatment may include discussion of how to resolve these concerns. However, holistic psychotherapy is not done from any particular religious orientation or belief system.

Q: How do I know if I need a holistic psychotherapist vs. a traditional therapist?

A: This is often purely an issue of preference. Some people are already interested in a more holistic approach to health and this may follow for psychological concerns as well. The good thing about this is that a holistic approach can only help the client more, not detract from a given area of concern.

Q: How do I find a holistic psychotherapist?

A: Basically just like you would find any particular professional--- ask around! My theory is that the other health professionals who are good at what they do will also know the holistically-based psychotherapists who are good at what they do as well. These individuals tend to team-up to create a better healthcare approach for clients in general.

Q: Is holistic psychotherapy covered by insurance?

A: In most cases, yes. Insurance policies

all differ, but if mental health services are covered under your insurance, it is likely that holistically-based psychotherapists will offer services through these companies.

Q: Does holistic psychotherapy cost more?

A: No. Generally, psychotherapists charge about the same amount regardless of their training or speciality.

Q: Does a holistic psychotherapy approach take more time?

A: As in any treatment, this is purely dependent on the willingness and investment the client, themselves, puts into the treatment. In fact, in many cases, by applying a holistic psychotherapy approach, treatment time is decreased because a fuller understanding of a situation can help to avoid unnecessary detours or delays in treatment.

Q: Are holistic psychotherapists certified to do holistic therapy?

A: There are no specific certifications for holistically-based psychotherapy, although there are for areas such as health/medical psychology. However, many practitioners seek training in related areas of healing (energy work, nutrition, etc.) to supplement their understanding of holistic health.

Dr. Katherine Kelly, Ph.D., M.S.P.H., is the owner and director of Branches Holistic Health and Wellness Center, LLC. At the center, she provides holistically-based psychotherapy services, groups, and workshops in a variety of health and wellness areas. Two other therapists at Branches also practice holistic psychotherapy. For more information call Branches at 336-723-1011 or go to www.brancheshealth.com. See ad on page 8.



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