

Clients who present for treatment at Saint Luke Institute may be surprised by the frequency with which they hear a question like, “What are you experiencing in your body right now?” Somehow, inquiries about the body do not seem pertinent to traditional notions of “talk therapy.” Yet, as many experienced therapists will attest, an awareness of one’s sensations and physical responses is an integral part of psychological well-being and is crucial to authentically experiencing one’s feelings. Eugene Gendlin, pioneer of the focusing technique in therapy, observed that clients who possess a level of internal body awareness and can pay attention to the “felt sense” of their experiences do far better in therapy than those who do not have such access. In multiple ways our bodies reveal who we are, as they are the container of our personal history, our emotional experiences, and other types of experiences that are felt to be “beyond words.” Furthermore, a number of psychological problems include physical symptoms, pointing to the need for interventions that promote deeper awareness and appreciation of the body.

Bringing our bodies into our awareness, however, often does not come easily. Through cultural and societal influences, many of us learn to view our bodies as things to be suppressed, controlled, or objectified. The body is all too easily disregarded, mistreated, and seen as a constant source of dissatisfaction. In Western culture, many of us prize intelligence, language, and rational thought over the more intuitive and sensory aspects of our experiences. This, in combination with painful life experiences, may lead us to detach from our bodily experiences and, in turn, from our feelings. Unfortunately, moving away from our bodies and splitting ourselves off from our feelings and desires can adversely affect our physical and emotional health. Our awareness of our physical and emotional needs and our limitations is compromised. When our body awareness is limited, we are at greater risk for behaving in ways that promote physical injury or illness, using maladaptive behaviors to fulfill unmet emotional needs, working to the point of exhaustion and depletion, and living a life that is not aligned with our hearts’ desires.

In her book *Centered and Connected: A Therapeutic Approach to Mind-Body Awareness*, Thea Rytz explores our human tendency to limit our perceptions and disconnect from our bodily experiences. Rytz notes this tendency often surfaces in moments when we fear becoming overwhelmed by strong or distressing emotions. At the first hint of distress we may react by engaging in activities that temporarily distract us from unpleasant feelings or temporarily produce positive feelings or stronger sensations. Physically tensing our bodies, chronic busyness and overwork, and addictive behaviors are among some of our short-term solutions to avoid encounters

with emotional pain. Similarly, experiences of physical or sexual trauma and physical illness or injury may further cause us to flee the body, particularly if we believe it has betrayed us. Physical tension brought on by everyday stressors can also inhibit our access to feelings and sensations. It is not uncommon, for instance, for emotions to emerge as one learns to let go of physical tension, breathe deeply, and relax. This phenomenon is illustrated in stories of yoga students who, after releasing deeply into a posture, begin to cry.

In therapy, clients are often encouraged to “sit with” unpleasant feelings, rather than rely on their habitual, maladaptive escape methods. Rytz identifies the concept of oscillating awareness in which we flexibly shift our attention between the three levels of perception: our thoughts, feelings, and sensations. With practice we can track the changing nature of our perceptions and can experience first-hand that no feeling or sensation lasts forever. What was once believed to be intolerable now becomes more bearable.

At Saint Luke Institute, the process of cultivating mind-body awareness takes many forms and is reinforced in multiple program modalities. These include psychodrama and experiential groups, exercise, biofeedback, massage, yoga, awareness exercises presented in psycho-educational groups, and the simple act of tracking sensory experiences in the presence of an interested witness, such as a therapist or other group members. For many, reconnecting with bodily sensations and feelings can be quite threatening. For people who have lived in their minds, actually perceiving physical reactions and sensations can be difficult. Still others are so conditioned to overvalue thought that they think *about* their body and feelings rather than experiencing them.

Rather than seeing the body as irrelevant or even as the enemy, clients are encouraged to see the body as a tremendous resource for self-understanding and emotional regulation. By engaging the body, important truths emerge and the potential for revitalizing all aspects of our lives is maximized. Metaphorically, this is the task of being at home in one’s own skin. As with most worthy causes, this process requires time and patience. We may encounter resistance to change our long-term patterns of disconnection. For many of us, there is a strong need to re-inhabit the body in order to feel alive, experience joy, and reconnect with our true self. By becoming more attuned to the body and more open to its instinctive wisdom, we move into greater authenticity in relationship to ourselves and others.

Emily Ray, Ph.D., BC-DMT, is a clinical psychologist and a therapist in the residential program at Saint Luke Institute.



LUKENOTES

Case Study: Sister Alicia

Sister Alicia is a 52-year-old pastoral assistant who serves in two suburban parishes. Neither parish is able to afford a full-time pastoral assistant, so she divides her time between the two. A conscientious person, she often feels torn between the competing demands and frequently worries that she is not doing enough in either parish. She tries to maximize her time in the parishes by eating lunch in her car or picking up a fast-food dinner rather than going home to eat with her community. She has a history of various physical problems, including gastric reflux, severe headaches, and pain in her lower back. Often when she wakes up, she experiences a feeling of dread about doing tasks that she used to enjoy. The sisters with whom she lives notice that in the rare evenings when she is at home, she talks incessantly about her anxieties about the parishes, and her worries that others are judging her as inadequate. The sisters suggested that she might need to take some time away from her ministry to tend to her own health and well-being.

Listening to the Body

When Sr. Alicia came for an evaluation at Saint Luke Institute, she was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Since she was also reporting multiple physical symptoms that are sometimes related to anxiety, she and her therapist worked together to explore the connections between her emotional and physical issues. It soon became clear that Sr. Alicia often experienced headaches during group therapy sessions where others expressed anger. She had difficulty naming her feelings, but following the sessions she felt the need to take additional medication to calm herself. The massage therapist noticed when she came for her massage session following a group that her shoulders were raised and tight. Sr. Alicia was unaware of the tension she was holding in her shoulders. The massage therapist taught her to gently roll and lower her shoulders and to shake her arms lightly to release the anxiety. Sr. Alicia initially could not feel any difference between the side of her body that had been massaged and the other side. Her only body awareness was of pain. The massage therapist

helped her to develop awareness of what relaxation felt like, so that she could sense much earlier when tension was building and could take action to interrupt the pain cycle before it intensified.

Sr. Alicia also worked with the staff physical therapist to gain strength and flexibility in her joints and lower back. After a thorough physical evaluation, the physical therapist developed an individualized exercise program for her. Eager to get started, Sr. Alicia, who espoused the “No pain, no gain,” approach to exercise, doubled the number of repetitions of each exercise. She became so sore that she stopped exercising for a few days and told the physical therapist that the exercises were too challenging for her. The physical therapist helped her to pay greater attention to her body and learn to work “under the threshold of pain” so that she gradually strengthened her back and joints without injury. The therapist also introduced her to biofeedback, an approach in which the client sees her heart rate, respiration, and skin temperature on a screen and learns to relax her body more deeply. At first, when Sr. Alicia started to relax, she felt anxious. She realized that she had internalized messages from her mother that relaxation was laziness and that she should always be productive. She learned that rest and relaxation are essential for the body to restore itself and keep the immune system strong. She recognized that she was responsible to care for her body as a musician cares for her instrument. This insight helped her to take daily time to fully relax while awake. She noticed her anxiety more quickly and reminded herself to take deep breaths, focusing on the out-breath, which helped her to calm herself and think more clearly.

Bringing the Body to Therapy

Sr. Alicia’s individual psychotherapist helped her to further explore the connections between mind, body and emotions. The therapist observed that Sr. Alicia often ruminated over past situations or interactions with others and questioned whether she did the “right thing.” This repetitive thinking exacerbated her anxiety. In therapy sessions, her therapist at times invited her to take several deep breaths and to

focus on any sensations that she felt in her body. Since it was difficult for Sr. Alicia to identify bodily sensations, her therapist provided her a list of sensation words to expand her ability to notice and identify what was happening in her body. She often noticed a tightness in her chest at the beginning of a session. As she focused on the sensation, her therapist asked her to observe if any image came to mind. The image often suggested a starting point for the therapy session. Sr. Alicia learned that she could do this for herself during the day, so that her bodily sensations helped her to recognize her emotions.

In Sr. Alicia’s Life Skills Group she learned the practice of mindfulness which focuses on being in the present moment. Participants were invited to let go of thoughts about the past or future and to focus on deep, slow breathing as one way of being in the present moment. When Sr. Alicia felt anxiety arising, she learned to walk outside and to focus on what she was seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. She mindfully observed a single flower or tree for several minutes and noticed all the details that one usually misses. As she made time for daily mindfulness practice, she experienced a lessening of anxious anticipation of the future and less rumination about the past. As all these ways of integrating mind and body became part of her daily life, she found that her headaches, lower back pain, and gastric reflux lessened. When they did occur, she could more quickly identify when they were triggered by emotions. She could recognize the situations that were prompting her anxiety and could think more clearly about how to deal with them. As she prepared to return to her community, she felt that her body had become a friend to her, rather than a source of pain. She felt confident that she could continue these simple, practical ways of caring for her body and lowering her anxiety that will enable her to engage in her ministry with greater joy.

Martha Keys Barker, MSW, LCSW-C, is a psychotherapist in the Talitha Life Program for Women at Saint Luke Institute. Kathleen Keller, SNJM, LMT, Dana Dowd, PT, MS, and Emily Ray, Ph.D., BC-DMT, contributed to this article. To ensure the confidentiality of our clients, identifying data and some details of treatment have been altered.