

PRE-CONVENTION

Embodiment! Therapeutic Essentials for Girls and Women

Melissa Johnson, Ph.D.



On my desk I keep a reproduction of a soaring eagle connected by a chain to an earthly toad. The image, created by the 13th century Persian philosopher Avicenna, is a reminder of the often uncomfortable challenge of bringing our soaring spirits and grounded physicality together. The girls and women who sit in my office often long to soar yet feel shamed and limited by their

physical bodies. More than once this week I heard, "I hate, hate, hate the way my thighs touch!" Pointing to a picture of a glamorous star, one young woman's mind spiraled down, "Why can't I look like her?! I should look like her. Omigod, I'll never look like her." Speaking from the embattled terrain of their human forms, girls and women express conflict and despair.

Girls learn early to experience themselves from the "outside," from the perspective of others whom they imagine hold them to impossible standards of beauty, achievement, nice-ness, and more. They may judge themselves as if they were an outside observer, developing what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) refer to as a "peculiar perspective of the self." In contrast, cutting edge research and theory in neuroscience and mind/body psychologies suggest that "embodiment," moving from the inside out, can have significant benefits. Imagine girls listening to their body's messages and wisdom without judgment—at least some of the time. Envision young women experiencing their bodies as a soothing, calming resource. Embodiment includes this and the appreciation of the vast contributions that physicality makes to our lives. The results? Embodiment can promote self-confidence, increased focus and attention, trauma healing, a sense of well-being, and body wisdom (Daubenmier, 2005; Greco & Hayes, 2008).

How can we provide an environment that encourages girls and women to make the transformative shift to an embodied experience? As clinicians, are there ways to assist clients to move beyond appearance to a more resourceful, positive physicality?

Do our own work.

First, it is worth reflecting on the ways we as clinicians bring our embodied selves to our work. Our analytic minds and empathic hearts may be standard fare for the consulting room, but our field and culture do not necessarily encourage us to be embodied. How well do we notice the messages in our bodies when we're sitting with suffering? Aside from writing notes, do we take time after a session to ground ourselves with walking, yoga, or drawing? Do we process our sessions by drafting images from clay or collage? How do we bring our whole selves to the journey?

Individualize our approach.

A "buffet table" approach to embodiment suggests that what works for one person may not work for another. Helping girls and women find their own "embodied voice" through exploratory dialogue and experiments is valuable. Here is a sampling of methods on the table.

Mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally." Research shows that girls can benefit from mindfulness in media consumption, paying attention to what happens in their minds and bodies while viewing advertising images. In addition, media literacy provides information that can help girls put some protective distance between Madison Avenue images and their psyches. Girls can also experiment with mindful eating, a technique that encourages "being present," i.e., attuned to hunger and fullness or absorbed in the fragrance of a freshly cut apple or the juicy sensation of biting through the skin of a grape.

Mind Body Experiments. While two weeks on the beach can be very relaxing, mind/body experts recommend daily practices to de-stress and help settle the nervous system (Benson, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 1999). Using a stress ball, walking, yoga, vigorous exercise, mindfulness meditation, breathing and grounding exercises offer promise. For some young women, swimming is calming. For others, having a parent or older sibling brush her hair feels special. If a teen or adult is already practicing yoga, the therapeutic conversation can include a discussion about yoga postures that are energizing, calming, or that can soothe a stress headache. Through dialogue, we can support clients in finding their path to body resourcefulness.

Art. Creativity can mend the "broken hoop" of the self (Holt, 2005). Clients draw, sculpt, create collages, and form masks. Clients literally use their bodies—eyes, hands, their own forms—to create representations of their inner worlds, their dreams, their body conflicts. Congruent with their adolescent and emerging adult process, they fashion images that explore polar opposites (Riley, 1999) like "the times I feel comfort and discomfort in my body," "the times I feel best--and worst--in my body," or "the times I listened--and didn't listen--to my body."

Deep Relaxation and Imagery. The girls in our lives are growing up in a fast paced, multi-tasking world (Cohen-Sandler, 2006). Embodiment offers a special opportunity to relax the body into an inner still point, to focus the mind on the breath, on an image—one to which many girls respond positively. Using guided imagery to access strengths and in-

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ner and outer resources can be empowering.

Parents, Homework, and Everydayness. When working with girls on living a more embodied life, it is therapeutic when parents also learn and practice relaxing, mindful, creative approaches to everyday living. Family sessions, parent coaching, and/or parent groups are advised. These modalities can provide an opportunity for educating parents about the kind of homework experiments their children are pursuing.

The adventure of an embodied life is most often a gradual and challenging process. For girls-- and the rest of us--there are so many gifts to be gained through engaging the wisdom, talents, pleasures, and healing capacity of the body. ▲

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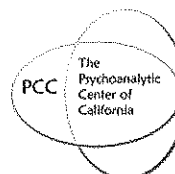
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