

The Trager® Approach to Somatic Education, Therapy, and Personal Development

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1. What is Trager®?

Unconsciously habituated muscular responses and adaptations to life's adverse circumstances, such as accidents, illness, surgery, emotional traumas, or high levels of daily stress, often develop into poor postures and patterns of movement that can become the silent accumulative context for further pain, injury or disease. And wasteful, ineffective muscular patterns can also frequently slow down, compromise, and even ultimately limit the process of recovery from physical or emotional breakdowns of many kinds. The Trager® Approach is a rapid, effective, and painless, indeed pleasurable method of deprogramming these accumulated negative muscular pattern, and of restoring the positive body image and feeling, tone, and organized responses that are essential to healing and healthy development." The purpose of my work," Dr. Trager has said, "is to break up these sensory, motor, and mental patterns which inhibit free movement and cause pain and disruption of normal function."

The Trager® Approach consists of the use of hands-on contact and movement re-education to influence deep-seated psycho-physiological patterns in the mind, and to interrupt their dysfunctional projection into the body's tissues. The method is to impart to the patient what it is like to feel right in the sense of a functionally integrated body-mind. Since the inhibiting patterns are affected at the source, the mind, the patient can experience long-lasting benefits.

2. Sensorimotor Patterns and Health

The brain recalls just what the muscles grope for: no more, no less.

-William Faulkner

Our most sacred convictions, the unchanging elements of our supreme values, are judgments of our muscles.

-Friederich Nietzsche

Muscle patterns dominate the organization of our life processes in a number of ways. First of all, muscles make up a large percentage of our body mass. Taken altogether, they form our largest single organ system; initiating and controlling every movement we make, from our gross motions to microscopic twitches, openings and closures. This makes our musculature a major player in the energetic economics of our organisms: It draws down 20% of our fuel consumption at rest, and up to 90% during strenuous activity. This range of action and energy consumption should alert us to the fact that the things our muscles are up to, consciously or unconsciously, have a tremendous impact upon our overall energy stores and the availability of fuel for all the other internal tissues, organs, and processes we continually have to feed in order to survive and to heal.

Secondly, we utilize this large muscle mass--skeletal, smooth and cardiac to accomplish an enormous range of activities upon which our lives continually depend. Many of these activities coordinate the same muscles to cooperate in different ways to do different things, and they operate at varying levels of conscious awareness and control. This means that there are many ways in which the habituated disorganization of one or another activity can interrupt the smooth orchestration of many others:

- With their resting levels of tonus, muscles hold the joints of the skeleton in place: and they suspend, truss, and contain all other body parts, providing our basic structural integrity-stability
- Muscles pattern the overall arrangement of our framework in space -posture
- Muscles provide specific movements around the joints--gesture
- They move us around the planet--locomotion
- They fill and empty our lungs--primary respiration
- They provide the pumping action for the blood, the lymph, and all the body's inter-cellular fluids--circulation and secondary respiration.
- They open and close all the circulatory and glandular sphincters, directing the specific flow patterns for the bodily fluids in continually changing circumstances
- They seek out nourishment, pick up, bite, chew, swallow , move the food through the gut tube, collect the waste products, urinate, and defecate.
- They copulate, support gestation, and deliver the infant into the world
- They aim and focus our special senses (sight, hearing, smell, equilibrium, taste)
- They mobilize the sense of touch--our means of actively exploring our surroundings.
- They are themselves sense organs of primary significance. With their embedded muscle spindles and golgi tendon organs, they contribute enormously to both the development of our own body image and to our sense of mass and extension--the concrete sense of the whole world of objects, both within and around us.

Finally, the sheer extensiveness of the musculature is as significant as its mass and its multiple uses. Muscles are everywhere in our bodies. There is not an organ or tissue or microscopic structure within us that is not surrounded and immediately affected by skeletal, smooth or cardiac muscle. Their patterns of movement, tension, and pressure provide both the impetus and the immediate physical environment for literally every other physiological process in the body. And many of these body-wide macro /micro internal environmental effects are, by the way, occurring in addition to and indeed often in competition with --all the commonly recognized functional activities of the muscles themselves listed above.

It seems clear that many tissues and processes in the body are involved, either directly or indirectly, with the specific activities of the entire sensorimotor system. Muscles can be carefully organized supports or poorly coordinated holding patterns for our posture, initiators or inhibitors of movement, active pumps or tourniquets for circulation, facilitators or blocks for many physiological processes, a vital part of our internal economy or profligate wasters of energy. And as a critical part of our proprioceptive system, their activities generate a large portion of both the locally specific and the overall sensory body images upon which the brain relies in order to orchestrate effective responses and strategies of all kinds.

An important question then, one that can bear directly upon many of the mechanisms of healthy development, healing, and rehabilitation is: *How can we most effectively and least intrusively change for the better the muscular elements of stress and physiological restriction, and restore to the organism the vital coordinated actions and energies that optimal motor patterns can provide?* And secondarily, but no less important: *How can this process of optimizing patient's motor patterns contribute to their appreciation of their bodies as a source of pleasure and strength, to accurate and positive body images of themselves, and to their personal sense of empowerment, improved self-control, and more successful coping and healthy, effective compensating--all factors that can be crucial to their recovery, their effective adaptation, and to the quality of the rest of their lives?*

3. The Trager® Approach

During a Trager® tablework session, the practitioner use gentle, pleasuring rocking motions, compressions and elongations, gravity-assisted swings and hangs of the limbs, and shimmers of the tissues to facilitate a more and more painless and passive perception of movement throughout the patient's body. These manipulation are not perceived as intrusive because they do not work against the organism's basic reflexes and defenses, but rather simulate the normal ranges of elongation, compression, and jiggling of coordinated movement in the body. And the pleasuring aspect of each exploratory movement is not incidental the treatment. On the contrary it is of the essence, and any pain or discomfort is always an indication to modify the depth, range, or speed of the practitioner's imposed movements.

This pleasuring is important for three reasons: 1) Pain inevitably engages reflex muscular defensiveness, producing amplified, not reduced contractions and holding patterns; 2) Pleasuring is a potent biofeedback element which leads to deeper relaxation, softening, and increased ranges of motion within the limitations of the actual conditions in the body; 3) Trauma and pathology themselves have created pain and fear, frequently to the extent that the patient can no longer imagine any part of their body as a source of pleasure, comfort, or strength. The goal is to create in the session a sense of safety and ease in which new and better patterns can be learned, a delicate process that can be easily disturbed by any increase in pain or discomfort. "Every shimmer of the tissue," Dr. Trager has said, "is sending a message to the unconscious mind in the form of a positive feeling experience. It is the accumulation of these positive patterns that can offset the negative patterns so that the positive can take over."

As an integral part of their treatment, patients are taught Mentastatics®, their "homework" which will develop their ability to continue the kinds of gentle, pleasuring, exploratory movements on their own that they experienced passively on the table. This self -development with their mentastatics allows them to return to the relaxation and freedom of painless movement experienced during their session, and to continue to pursue the pleasuring , the positive body experiences, and the healing influence of the relaxation response further and further. The ultimate intention is to develop this practice of Mentastatics to the point where each individual can continue to expand the benefits of the treatment. It is a tool that can help them to discover and adopt more positive adjustments for the rest of their lives.

The relaxation response, induced in clinical studies by the cultivation of the practice of Transcendental Meditation, has been shown by Dr. Herbert Benson to have significant restorative physiological effects of many kinds. In general, the profile of physical and mental changes brought about by a deep, peaceful, meditative state of mind is the healthy mirror image of the sustained and ultimately damaging "fight or flight" changes in physiology and behavior brought on by high degrees of chronic stress, as documented by the extensive work of Dr. Hans Selye. Prominent in the "fight or flight" response studied by Selye are the over stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, the heightening of anxiety and the elevation of muscle tonus and reflex reactivity. Prominent in the relaxation response are the dominance of restorative parasympathetic activities, peace of mind, and the lowering of tonus and defensive reflex contraction.

Both Dr. Selye's and Dr. Benson's research and observations bear directly upon the effects of The Trager® Approach. Dr. Trager, himself a long-time meditator, insists that the main success of his work stems from the practitioner's cultivating and sustaining during a session a mental state that he has called "Hook-Up," a deep state of connectedness to the self, to the feeling state of the patient, and to the abiding forces that successfully regulate the life of the organism. Every movement of the patient's body on the table is expressive of this calm, alert state of Hook -Up; these expressive messages are repeated over and over until the patient begins to feel directly what that state is like as a flow of sensations, and begins to adopt it into his or her own mental state and to project it into the activities of the musculature.

During the treatment, patients are learning, much more quickly and directly than they could on their own, how to evoke in themselves this deep mental and physical relaxation response and the positive physiological changes it brings in its train. Dr. Trager has said that as a feeling state he does not discern any differences between what he has called “Hook-Up” and what he has experienced during Transcendental Meditation. The chief difference is that he has cultivated Hook-Up while directly engaged and interacting with the movements, sensations, and responses of another individual, not silently and alone. And this perhaps is the key to the effectiveness of the approach –this self-aware and healing state of mind and body is projected and anchored quickly into the perceptions and reactions of the patient, and the pleasuring, restoring power of the relaxation response is then further deepened and broadened by the continuation of Mentastics.

4. Potential Applications

Essentially The Trager® Approach evokes in the patient a potent combination of pleasurable and information-laden sensory stimulation, optimized muscle tonus, improved motor coordination (both autonomic and skeletal), and a calm, alert, self-possessed state of mind. These conditions then set the internal stage for more rapid and successful healing, more complete rehabilitation, better adaptations as progress or problems continue to unfold, and an enhanced quality of life even in the case of chronic and incurable conditions.

Because these conditions can have such a general positive significance for many kinds of physiological processes, there is a wide variety of conditions and circumstances to which they may be applied beneficially. Perhaps the most obvious therapeutic association is with local muscle spasms and disorganized postural and movement compensations patterns in reaction to trauma or surgery. These often exaggerated and dysfunctional responses typically become habituated and self-perpetuating, slowing down and even limiting recovery, lasting long after the primary healing has taken place, and imposing new problems that develop independently of the original insult.

These kinds of chronic muscular tensions and disorganized patterns can also be generated by any number of causes that have no apparent connection to the specific trauma. Poor posture and restricted movement may be the result to unconscious modeling and imitation, seemingly innocuous habits, relatively minor but long-lasting emotional disturbances, occupational or recreational demands placed upon the body, temporary difficult episodes during otherwise healthy growth and development, the habitual acting out and embodying of the various moods, attitudes, or personality traits, and so on. And through their impact upon the large variety of life-supporting muscular activities, these subtle accumulations can generate many sorts of organic dysfunctions.

Usually the signs of these sorts of muscular difficulties are restricted to movement, discomfort, or pain. However, their long-term effects can extend far beyond these. Arterial delivery and venous return can be significantly impeded, and this in turn can trigger a variety of secondary and tertiary complications. Hypertension can be exacerbated or even primarily caused by widespread muscular tension which creates constant resistance to the efforts of the heart. Similarly, lymphatic filtration and return, which is almost exclusively powered by continual and varied muscular activity, is directly affected for the worse by chronic tension and lack of movement. Long-term muscular pressure not only may create pain and inflammation of nerves; it can also markedly reduce their conduction efficiency, reducing in turn the central nervous system's capacity to assemble accurate sensory information and to generate effective motor responses of all kinds. The operation of internal glands and organs can be impaired, both by such chronic pressure on their associated sensory and motor nerves, and by direct postural and muscular impingement upon their normal and necessary motility.

The Trager® Approach has been used to enhance pain management of many kinds. The kind of painful swelling of non-infectious inflammation associated with sprains, breaks, repetitive motion syndromes, neural irritation, excessive pressure on joints, and so on can be dramatically reduced by the movement re-education and relaxation response induced by the table work and Mentastics®. Also, the systemic pleasuring of the body and the subsequent peaceful calming of emotional and cognitive states can be of enormous significance, since they are often dominant influences in our experience of pain. These latter effects can even extend into pain that is purely psychological in nature, which has no obvious physical symptomology.

Trager® has also been used very beneficially for many individuals with permanent injuries or incurable pathologies. Severe traumas and degenerative diseases of all kinds always involve two major difficulties and impediments to potential recovery. First, there is the actual tissue damage and resulting loss of function. These may be permanent, or even relentlessly progressive as in some incurable conditions. Second, there is severe shock accompanied by the event or the diagnosis, shock that is typically deepened by a depressing prognosis and by recurring or spreading consequences of the injury or disease. This shock can take many forms: fear, withdrawal, heightened anxiety, amplified pain, denial, repression, the sensory gating off or numbing of problematical areas, the collapse of activities that may still be possible, the disuse of elements that are still intact and the exaggeration of the impact of subsequent minor events. All of these associated reactions can and usually do widen dramatically the disabilities, discomforts, and mental anguish created by the actual physical situation, and significantly amplify its devastation of quality of life.

In such instances, Trager® has been effective in restoring emotional balance, a positive and actively engaged outlook, a more accurate definition of the actual location and extent of the damage and its direct results, and the rediscovery that much of the individual's organism is still intact, can be a source of pleasure, and can be used creatively to compensate in many ways that were not available, inhibited by fear and confusion. Certainly none of these effects constitute cure, but just as certainly they do greatly enhance the possibilities of more effective management of limitations, more successful compensations, the development of superior strength and resistance to degeneration, better emotional coping, and a much improved quality of life. As has been clinically demonstrated in many experiments with many kinds of painful or frightening conditions, some—even a relatively small—measure of a personal sense of control over a bad situation can help to eliminate much of the negative physical and psychological impact of helpless distress.

These effects have been experienced, and have proven to be useful, to individuals with chronic or degenerative conditions as diverse as asthma, post polio sequel, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, stroke complications, spinal damage and other severe physical injuries, various forms of cancer and fibromyalgia. Again, let's be clear on an important point: No claim is being made for Trager® as a cure for these or any other pathologies. But in the absence of a cure, improved emotional balance, superior coping mechanisms, more effective compensations, and a measure of control over and active engagement in their own present and future will always be of extreme importance to these patients, and to anyone personally associated with them.

In sum, any condition that is created or can be complicated by muscular tensions and imbalances, that is made more difficult by shock and fear, or that tends to distance patients from their own powers of inner observation and resources for healing and effective compensation can potentially be improved by The Trager® Approach. This variety of successful applications is not possible because a wide variety of sophisticated procedures and protocols are involved, but simply because in all these instances a better coordination and management of the muscles, and of all physiological and mental processes associated with them, has been imparted to the patient, who can then use this empowerment both to facilitate healing and to better cope with disability.