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# Treating the Whole Person: A Holistic Approach to Psychotherapy

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**ABSTRACT:** This article encourages psychologists to consider a holistic approach to health and wellness as part of the treatment equation for clients. The fundamental therapy goals of feeling better and acting differently will be addressed within the context of an interactive, holistic model illustrating how our interactions create change in our clients' physical (including biochemical and behavioral), mental, emotional, and/or spiritual states. While psychologists can provide a broad perspective by integrating multiple psychotherapies, a holistic approach encourages an integration of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the human condition. Then we can also serve as treatment coordinators, to assist clients to locate complimentary health practitioners who can provide interventions outside our areas of expertise. Alternative modalities and resources for alternative approaches are presented as valuable sources that can assist psychologists to integrate a holistic approach into their practices.

## Introduction

As a psychologist trained in humanistic psychotherapy, as well as cognitive/behavioral and psychodynamic approaches, I often wonder how I can be most healing for my clients. I have been frustrated with the symptom relief philosophy of managed care and see my role not as the cure but as the catalyst for the client's journey to create and maintain a lifestyle that will help to sustain wellness.

My *humanistic side* creates a healing environment through empathy, non-judgementalness, genuineness, and compassion. That side facilitates a client to develop an emotional state of high self-esteem, personal value, and self-worth.

My *cognitive side* facilitates a client on his/her journey to shed beliefs that may create internal conflict such as those between “shoulds” and “wants.” The result is a change in cognitive style, including the client’s accuracy in distinguishing between beliefs that are treated as facts and the facts themselves. As with the humanistic side, self-respect, personal value, and self-worth emerge and become integrated as a way of viewing, and interacting with, the world.

My *psychodynamic side* facilitates understanding for clients. I learned long ago, however, that while a client’s self understanding may be useful and often desired by the client, it alone, too often, fails to help the client reach the intended goals of symptom relief or health maintenance.

In practice I have learned to integrate these three primary theoretical approaches as well as others, and have also learned that there are many other modalities beyond my scope of practice that may be useful to my clients. I have been introduced to many *alternative* approaches to health over the years and as an academically trained researcher, maintained a skeptical distance. I have, however, discovered that many “alternative” approaches have either been supported by a research base or have an enormous amount of anecdotal evidence that makes them worth exploring.

The practitioners to whom I have referred clients include holistic medical doctors, acupuncturists, nutritionists, hypnotherapists, chiropractors, vitamin experts, etc. Within my practice I try to maintain a whole person perspective and question clients not only on their symptoms and goals, but also on their life habits including their eating style, physical activity, “passions,” relationships, work environment, and *attitudes* toward all of these components of life.

In addition to symptom relief, a fundamental goal of therapy with my clients is to generate lifestyle changes that maintain emotional and physical health. To accomplish this goal, it is essential to help clients explore the component parts of their human system.

### **The Holistic Approach**

*Holistic* refers to a “whole” consisting of interdependent, interactive parts. While all therapies have the goal of improving the quality of life, conventional medicine has generally addressed specific symptoms without

attending to other aspects of the client that might be generating these symptoms. Therefore, conventional treatment has tended to be one-dimensional.

A healthcare practice incorporating the holistic approach is multi-dimensional. The practitioner and client are partners. They work together and take into account the whole person and the whole situation, deal with both symptoms and the root cause, and consider both conventional and alternative therapies.

Since multiple aspects of the human system are explored, other experts in the various aspects may need to be consulted as part of a holistic treatment team. Practitioners with a holistic perspective integrate conventional and complementary approaches in order to explore human ecology to generate change that can become integrated, lifestyle changes for health and wellness.

Because clients often mistakenly perceive that they must make a choice between alternative and conventional treatment options, they tend to separate their health practitioners rather than attempt to integrate and develop a healing team. While the divisive perspective was encouraged by the medical community in the past, today practitioners with the holistic philosophy are modeling how to address the entire human system and bring both conventional and complementary therapies into the health equation.

Eisenberg et al. (1993), discovered that about 34% of patients seeking conventional medical treatment also seek alternative treatment. What was most striking was that about 72% of those seeking health alternatives did not inform their conventional medical practitioners that they were also being treated by one or more "alternative" practitioners. A coordination of treatment or holistic approach, therefore, was not part of the client's health equation. It is the responsibility of both the practitioner and the client to coordinate treatment approaches.

### **The Holistic Approach and Psychotherapy**

To understand how a holistic perspective could be beneficial for psychotherapists in clinical practice, therapists must begin by understanding: 1) Clients' fundamental goals for seeking therapy; and 2) How they (the therapists) work to help clients achieve those goals.

The fundamental goals of clients seeking conventional psychotherapy are to *feel better* and/or to *behave differently*. As they enter treatment clients attempt to find ways to relieve the emotional distress of depression, anger,

anxiety, guilt, resentment, etc., or they seek assistance to make behavioral changes that will help to improve their lifestyles.

For most clients seeking treatment for behavioral change, the behaviors which they are “unable” to achieve are within their power, but they prevent themselves from achieving those changes because they are emotionally blocked from their own goals. It is rare that a therapist actually *teaches* a client new behaviors. Instead, treatment focuses on *relieving* the emotional blocks which deter the client from pursuing his/her chosen behavior, or treatment focuses on increasing the motivation for the behaviors often through reinforcement techniques.

For example, a client who reports that he can't go to work because he's too depressed is physically capable of going to work, but the emotional distress creates such discomfort that he “chooses” not to. The same is true for the social phobic who reports that she can't attend a social gathering. Once again, she is capable of the physical act but chooses not to engage in that behavior because of her desire to avoid the discomfort associated with participating in social interactions.

The holistic approach promotes the concept that distress (emotional or physical) is a symptom resulting from the system being out of balance. Holistic medicine involves relieving not only the symptom, but healing all aspects of the system that are contributing to the client's distress so that the client learns to maintain health and wellness.

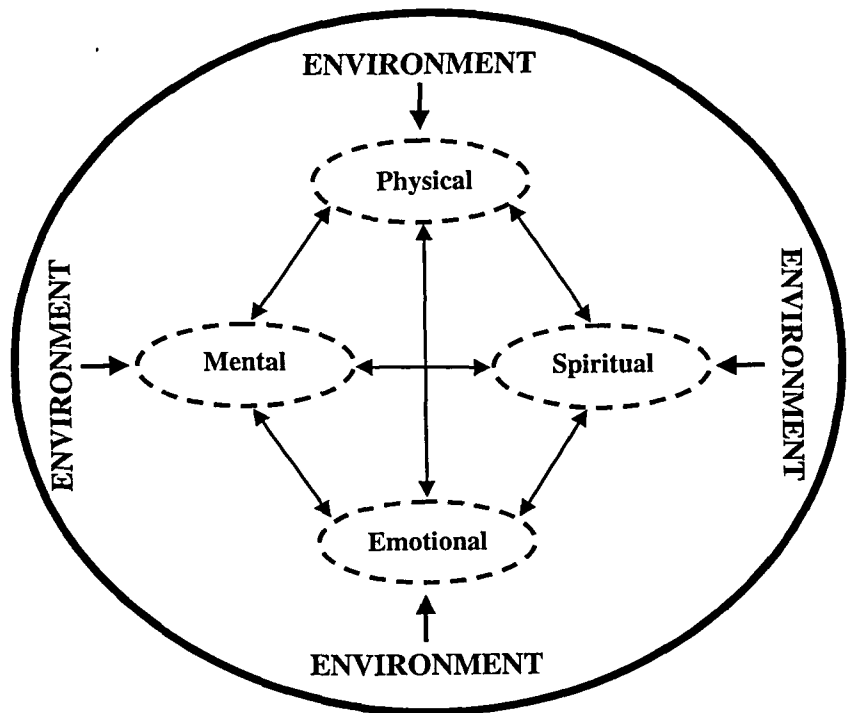
According to the American Holistic Health Association (AHHA) (1995), the human system can be viewed as consisting of four interdependent and interactive components or aspects which influence each other and interact with the environment. These components are: 1) The physical (including biochemistry and behavior); 2) The mental (essentially the cognitive process); 3) The emotional (encompassing the feelings); and 4) The spiritual (examining one's “place” in the universe).

Since clients seek treatment because they want to either feel better or be able to act differently, the evolution of clinical psychotherapeutic theories has historically focused on changing emotions or behaviors. Curiously, not all theories focus directly on emotions or behaviors. While gestalt and humanistic therapies address emotions, and behavioral therapies address behavioral change, cognitive and psychodynamic therapies concentrate on thoughts, and psychopharmacological therapies center on biochemical change. Even though these theoretical approaches focus on different aspects of intervention, each has the global goals of helping clients to feel better and/or behave differently.

Since the four components (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) interact and influence one another, the theories of psychotherapy when viewed as a system are, indeed, holistic. In application, however, theorists spend more time attempting to create separate and independent approaches rather than an integrated approach which addresses all four aspects of the human system.

### **A Multi-Component Approach to Client Wellness**

The primary theories of psychotherapy (psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioral, humanistic, gestalt, and psychopharmacology) each address an independent aspect of the whole system but rarely treat the aspects as interdependent. Because each of the theories of psychotherapy addresses at least one of the four aspects of the human system, an integrated, holistic approach would seem to be a natural practice for therapists. However, psychotherapists are often trained in one of the primary theories, and therefore, design interventions which create change in only one of these components. A holistic, multi-component intervention is often not part of a conventional treatment program.



The above model illustrates the inter-connections among and between these four components of the human system. As illustrated, they influence each other and are influenced by the client's environment.

### **The Interactive Nature of the Four Components**

To treat depression, a practitioner may intervene in any of these four components: 1) A *psychiatrist* is likely to prescribe anti-depressants while a *behaviorist* will focus on assisting the client to generate action (physical); 2) A *cognitive therapist* will focus on changing negative thoughts and distorted beliefs (mental); 3) A *person-centered therapist* will create a therapeutic atmosphere in which the client feels valued and respected (emotional); and 4) An *existential therapist* will work on issues such as the meaning of life and personal responsibility (spiritual). While each therapist is treating depression, the intervention is focusing on one aspect of the system.

As mentioned above, the four components influence one another and are affected by the environment. The medication prescribed by the psychiatrist will change biochemistry which in turn impacts emotions and behaviors. Anger and depression (emotions) are potential risk factors for heart disease (physical) according to research cited in the *Mind/Body Health Newsletter* (1996).

The increased physical activity promoted by the behaviorist may lead to a relief of emotional distress. The change in thinking patterns and beliefs stimulated by the cognitive therapist will change emotions and behaviors. Beck et al. (1979) have shown that people who are depressed experience a depressive or negative thought triad. They see themselves negatively, their world negatively, and their future negatively. A cognitive (mental) approach helps clients learn to view their world from a realistic perspective and not one that is distorted and clouded by their depression.

Weiner (1975) and Yalom (1970) have shown that thoughts of hope and positive beliefs impact emotional and physical healing. Individuals who hope to get better, want to get better, and expect to get better do indeed get better more often than clients who do not have these hopes, beliefs, and expectations.

There can also be change in the entire system by altering the client's *emotional* state. Some practitioners (Lazarus, 1995) believe that emotions can only be changed through changes in other components of the human system. However, music, aroma, and humor can each directly alter the emotional state through their effect on the limbic system.

One of the foundations of person-centered treatment is that healing is related to the client *experiencing* a therapist who is a warm, genuine, empathic, non-judgmental human being (Rogers, 1957). It is the experience of feeling fully understood and non-judged by another human being that directly changes one's emotional experience. The client feels valued and, therefore, learns to value him/herself. As these emotional changes occur, clients behave differently and life gains new meaning.

As one explores one's *spiritual side* including the more philosophical questions such as "Who am I?"; "Why am I here?"; and "What's life all about?" life's meaning, personal responsibility, and individualism become clarified and emotions and behaviors change. While most psychotherapies do not directly address these spiritual issues, humanistic therapies, and especially existential therapies, address these questions as they relate to health and wellness. The power of prayer and belief in a "higher power" has been linked with wellness, yet these areas are mostly disregarded by conventional therapies. "Use the Force, Luke." and "May the Force be with you." as well as the higher power principle of 12-step programs illustrate the spiritual side becoming an integral part of society.

As human beings seek "meaning" to life through spiritual exploration, the emotional and physical components change. An inability to resolve or accept the "meaning" can lead to distress. To help an individual embrace the spiritual side, the therapist must either be prepared to assist the client in searching for deeper meaning, or be prepared to refer that client to another practitioner to assist the client with this aspect of lifestyle.

While each of the above theories of psychotherapy addresses a primary component of the human system, none addresses the broader, holistic view of intervening to change multiple components. Psychotherapists skilled in assisting clients to create change in several of the aspects, intervene holistically even though they may not be conscious that this is a holistic approach. An individual therapist trained only in a single orientation is limited in his/her ability to create holistic, interactive approaches. A therapist with a singular, primary focus and yet an appreciation for the holistic nature of the individual can consciously tap the potential power of a more holistic, multi-disciplinary approach by creating a "helping" team of "healers" to assist in integrating and implementing other modalities.

Since the major theories of individual psychotherapy already propose interventions in one or more of the four fundamental aspects of the human system, but do not suggest an *interaction* of the aspects, a holistic foundation seems to be a natural extension to conventional therapy interventions. Psychotherapists have a "natural" opportunity to integrate complementary

lifestyle and healing therapies into their current practices to help clients create wellness in their *whole* human system not just in a single aspect of that system.

To make changes in the physical, a psychotherapist might consider complementary interventions such as nutrition, homeopathic medicine, or detoxification to help a client enhance his/her physical-biochemical being. (For a “consumer” review of vitamins see *Consumer Reports*, September, 1994, pp. 561-569 and *HealthNews*, August, 1997, p.4.) To change the physical-behavioral, therapists might encourage exercise, play, relaxation, involvement in creative arts, or biofeedback as interventions. Play can be particularly powerful since it both creates a behavior and generates uplifting emotions such as pleasure and joy. Helping clients find physical *passions* which might be fulfilled through martial arts, sports, walking, hiking, dance, gymnastics, roller blading, biking, etc. can be integrated as a regular part of a behavioral regimen.

To intervene in the emotional, a therapist might consider herbal remedies such as Valerian which has a mild sedating quality and may reduce anxiety and promote sleep. (For a “consumer” review of herbal remedies see *Consumer Reports*, November, 1995, pp. 698-705 and *University of California Wellness Letter*, September, 1997, pp. 4-5) While many herbal remedies are being continuously investigated, there is evidence that many herbs such as St. John’s Wort, which is used to relieve depression do have clinical efficacy (*University of California, Berkeley Wellness Letter*, 1997).

To make changes in the mental aspect, one might employ Socratic methods to change belief systems. While belief systems can be changed by cognitive and reality therapies, complementary approaches might include the use of positive humor to help a client to gain perspective. Emotional distress is as much related to an individual’s perception and beliefs as it is to the “stressor.” Humor helps place situations and events in perspective making them less distressing. Clients can be taught a cognitive “aikido” as illustrated by the phrase, “When the world gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Helping an individual expand options to the humorously absurd may help break strong mind sets and overcome limitations thus creating realistic options and helping to “unstick” rigid and distorted thinking.

Psychotherapists have the opportunity and challenge of being key providers for a holistic approach. Given the multi-faceted methods psychotherapists already employ, it could be a natural transition for psychotherapists to become the facilitators of a team approach that could integrate practitioners from many aspects of the health and wellness equation.



In addition to coordinating a holistic approach for their own clients, psychologists can network with practitioners of other modalities, who share a holistic perspective. While other practitioners may have expertise in the physical area, psychologists can use their specific skills and training to help relieve emotional distresses that impact the human system. In this way psychologists can fill the "emotional" role in the health team.

### **Holistic and Collaborative**

A truly holistic approach to health and wellness encourages a collaborative effort between practitioner(s) and the client. Interventions are not what the practitioners "do" to the client, but are strategies that are developed by both the practitioners and client to maximize health and wellness.

Skilled therapists negotiate interventions that are "person-centered"—individualized for the client. Clients who do not like reading, for example, are unlikely to read, but may be open to audio or video tapes illustrating the same concepts. It is the responsibility of the therapist to "know" and "understand" the client so that a collaborative plan can evolve.

Clients who are hesitant to exercise may be more receptive to activities that include exercise such as sports or dance. Desire for socialization may be a catalyst through which physical activity occurs. Utilizing a holistic perspective a therapist will negotiate with the client to create changes that "fit" with the client's lifestyle.

Lifestyle changes will occur only when the client is invested in the changes. Collaboration between practitioners and client helps the client become an active participant in his/her health and wellness.

A holistic approach therefore, both treats the individual as an interactive human system and as an active participant in maintaining his/her health and wellness. Because of the intimacy of the psychotherapeutic relationship, psychologists have the opportunity to provide clients with a holistic approach, coordinate health providers, and create a collaborative relationship with clients.

The psychologist also has a prime opportunity to become part of the treatment team for other practitioners. It is the psychologist's responsibility to network with other providers in order to educate them on the role the psychologist can serve as an expert on the emotional and behavioral components for health and wellness.

## **AHHA as a Valuable Resource of Complementary Approaches and Practitioners**

One prominent source for resources supporting a holistic approach is the American Holistic Health Association. AHHA operates as a national clearing house for resources to assist individuals seeking to make intelligent and informed choices about their health. This national, volunteer, non-profit association has remained independent of affiliations with any products or specific healthcare modalities. Their materials are provided free of charge. While the main AHHA activities are to assist the general public, there are many ways AHHA assists healthcare professionals.

AHHA is lead by Suzan Walter, a dedicated businesswoman who lost a loved one to cancer. It was during this experience that she first realized the power that mind and belief can have on the healing process. During her term as President of the American Holistic Medical Foundation (AHMF), Suzan expanded her understanding of the holistic philosophy to see it from the viewpoint of healthcare professionals. In 1989, as she and her Board reviewed the resources then available, they determined that there was no group to educate the general public about the principles of holistic health. Suzan and another AHMF Board member, Michael Morton, were challenged to start such an organization. The American Holistic Health Association was incorporated in November of 1989 as an independent, non-profit corporation supported by public donations. Contributing members include the general public, healthcare practitioners, and organizations.

AHHA encourages individuals to balance and integrate their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It promotes establishing respectful and cooperative relationships with others and the environment. AHHA advocates wellness-oriented lifestyle choices, and people actively participating in their health decisions and healing process.

To support this, AHHA's free materials include resource and networking lists, an award-winning newsletter, and an educational booklet. For those searching for a healthcare practitioner, AHHA offers a list of their Practitioner Members—healthcare professionals from all modalities, who have incorporated the holistic philosophy into their delivery of care. Also, AHHA has compiled a list of over 50 other organizations that provide referrals for a wide variety of types of practitioners. A psychotherapist can use these lists to locate appropriate healthcare practitioners of other modalities to provide as referrals to clients needing to expand their healing team.

For individuals facing a serious illness or debilitating chronic condition, the AHHA list of health information services is a valuable resource. It lists several professional research services that can be hired to compile a report on all the treatment options known for a specific diagnosis (both conventional and complementary), plus other related data. This allows the patient to gain hope and confidence for making treatment decisions. Psychotherapists can access this list of research services as a useful tool for clients.

In a more general way, AHHA provides a wide variety of resource options with a list of free catalogs of self-help, health-related books; a list of AHHA Organizational Members, who offer health-enhancing products, services, and educational opportunities; and a newsletter, *AhHa!*, filled with self-help tools and resources. The newest AHHA publication is a booklet, *Wellness from Within: The First Step* (1995), designed to motivate people who are not yet personally involved in their own wellness process. Additionally, AHHA has a comprehensive website at <http://www.ahha.org>. The site includes resource lists, the text of the educational booklet, articles from past newsletters, articles explaining holistic health, and other special AHHA projects.

Mental health professionals can contact AHHA and request a packet of free AHHA resource lists. These resources may assist mental health professionals to network with practitioners in other modalities, and in doing so a referral file can be compiled. Holistic health oriented mental health practitioners can become AHHA Practitioner Members for a small annual fee. This may be a valuable networking tool, as each member is listed on the AHHA Practitioner Member list, and each practitioner's name and information is sent to every inquiry from the practitioner's home state. The practitioner member listing is also on the Internet in a searchable database in the AHHA website and in the Health World Online Professional Referral Network at <http://www.healthy.net/referrals>. Practitioners participating in this program also have the option for an inexpensive, personal practitioner home page to be linked to their referral listing.

Some of today's leaders in the health field who endorse AHHA, include Board of Advisors members Deepak Chopra, M.D., Bernie Siegel, M.D., Janet Quinn, R.N., Ph.D., and Evarts Loomis, M.D. For resource lists and membership information, mental health professionals can contact the American Holistic Health Association, P.O. Box 17400, Anaheim, CA 92817-7400, (714) 779-6152, e-mail: [ahha@healthy.net](mailto:ahha@healthy.net).

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