

The Hakomi Method: Therapy Through the Body

By Patricia Stepan

“Children should be seen, not heard” “Haven’t got time for the pain” “Keep a stiff upper lip” “Shoulder your responsibilities”

Language references the body, revealing the role it plays in living our beliefs. From childhood we literally are shaped by messages that surround us. Throughout life we are encouraged to ignore the information our bodies offer. We stop listening to its signals, failing to heed our inner wisdom and impulses. “If only I had listened to my gut...”

As living beings, we continually and creatively adapt to our environment. Our nature is to be fluid and flexible, yet we establish set attitudes about ourselves, becoming limited to habitual, automatic behaviors. “That’s the way I am”, “You can’t trust anyone”, “What’s done is done” ... indicate limiting beliefs that shape us. Beliefs are not just constructs of mind, but are accompanied by physical postures, tensions, emotional patterns, images and feelings. The bodily sense of aliveness becomes impaired, minimizing our ability to live fully and creatively.

Hakomi Therapy endeavors another option: to become aware of our belief heritage and to transform our relationship with the body to one of respect and trust, to reclaim our wisdom. When we learn the body’s language, it becomes one of our greatest allies.

Hakomi emphasizes relating to the body as a living source of information, intelligence and change. It is a gentle, direct and educational approach to accessing limiting beliefs and patterns while developing new and empowering resources.

Hakomi Therapy, founded by Ron Kurtz in the 1970s, is rooted in Taosim, Reichian and Bioenergetic therapies, and Systems Theory. The origin of the work is Hopi: “How do you stand in relation to these many realms?” Hakomi has evolved into a graceful, gentle means for clients to explore “how they stand in relation to” their issues, beliefs, bodies, relationships, and how they would like to relate to these now.

Kurtz developed Hakomi’s original techniques as a means of “supporting” people’s defenses, finding that defenses yield more easily when they are unopposed: tension is “supported” rather than asked to “relax” before it’s ready. As an “information based” therapy, a premise of Hakomi is that living organisms will mature appropriately when provided appropriate input.

Hakomi is based on five principles:
Unity: everything is part of a greater whole
Organicity: each organism has its own nature and integrity
Mind-Body-Spirit Wholism: each of these reflects the other
Mindfulness: a cultivated state of self reflection

Non-Violence: change without force

In the early 1980s, Hakomi took root at the forefront of the body-psychology movement. A colleague, Pat Ogden, had been intrigued by tendencies in clients to disassociate from the body. Most body therapies remained separate from psychotherapy. Together Kurtz and Ogden forged a new path, blending the two approaches into an effective tool for healing mind/body disassociation. By including the body in the therapeutic process and re-educating client’s sensitivity to sensation, the healing process became more integrated and long lasting. The synthesis of Hakomi and bodywork gained it international acclaim in its twenty years. “Hakomi is the cutting edge in modern psychotherapy.” John Bradshaw.

A Typical Session

Hakomi work explores rather than analyses, guides rather than demands, and connects rather than confronts.

A session begins by the client and practitioner talking, deciding the direction to work. The client then is assisted in accessing a “mindful” state of awareness, observing and describing facets of their inner experience: body patterns, emotions, memories, thoughts. Attitudes, previously unconscious, begin to emerge: “I’m not good enough”, “I have to do it all alone”, “I am not safe”.

“Experiments” are used to deepen the experience. The client may be invited to “notice what happens when...” the practitioner incorporates touch, movement or awareness toward body sensations: such as feelings of sadness arising with a memory of being alone as a child. The client may notice an exaggeration of a familiar physical pattern (collapsed shoulders). The “collapse” being supported, can free a new insight into this habitual posture and discovery of a deeper meaning (“I’m not good enough”) that has influenced his/her experience since childhood.

The practitioner works in partnership with the client to facilitate an empowering, educational experience. Identifying and supporting client resources (strengths) is emphasized, especially in the resolution of trauma, where helplessness is predominate. Natural creativity leads to new possibilities. “I can ask for support” may be felt through the lengthening of the spine, for example. The transformational shift is physical and psychological simultaneously. Physical structure often shifts to new ease and use; the psychological state emerges more creative and hopeful.

Difficulty in recovering from accidents, ongoing stresses from childhood, fatigue, relationship issues, unresolved trauma, or a desire to be more “in tune” bring people to this work.

Effects of Hakomi Therapy

Effects include reduction of pain and post traumatic stress symptoms, increased physical alignment and awareness, capacity for intimacy and overall feelings of being more alive. The work can

enhance physical, psychological and spiritual well being. Work with the body-mind often reveals information that remains unconscious in conventional therapy. Hakomi’s focus toward the body lends it an effective adjunct to traditional psychotherapy.

“We are really seeking... the rapture of being alive in our bodies.” Joseph Campbell