

The Refined Method¹

I'd like to discuss the main concepts and components of the refined method. The refinements I'm talking about are changes I have made to the original Hakomi Method of Body-Centered Psychotherapy over the last fifteen years. They have been incorporated one at a time over those years until, at this time, a whole new conception of the work has evolved. The method as I now conceive of it can be described as *the method of mindfulness-based, assisted self-study*.

Let me speak of the differences between this method and other psychotherapies. First of all, assisted self-study requires a strong commitment on the part of the person being assisted² to make the effort to understand herself.³ To do this, she must be capable of entering into a present-experience focused, vulnerable state of mind. Mindfulness. The client must also understand that the process requires participation in evocative experiments that are done in mindful state. She must be willing to enter into that process knowing that painful emotions may arise as a result. (This commitment is also required of people training in the method.) These commitments are necessary because we are seeking to bring the pain-causing unconscious material into consciousness in a way that reveals their influence and the falsities they contain.

The practitioner assisting must have some specific habits and skills in order to this work. Most important, practitioners must be able to sustain a compassionate and aware state of mind called, loving presence. This is essential, without it the process does not work. I'll discuss loving presence in a moment.

The central unique feature of the original Hakomi Method was doing experiments with the client in a mindful state. I have described it elsewhere this way:

The unique contribution of the Hakomi method is this: the method contains as a necessary element precise experiments done with a person in a mindful state, the purpose being to evoke emotions, memories and reactions that will reveal or help access those implicit beliefs influencing the client's nonconscious habitual behaviors.

So, the experiments while in mindfulness are specifically designed to evoke reactions that would help bring unconscious material—such as foundational memories, underlying emotions and implicit beliefs—into consciousness. This is still the central feature of the refined version. However, some new elements have been added which make the work simpler, faster, easier to do and even more effective.

When we use the refined method, the work becomes much easier. Years of teaching and doing therapy sessions led inevitably to adaptations which increased efficiency, reduced effort, conserved energy while supporting the natural processes of emotional healing.

¹ From a talk given in Mexico, November, 2006

² Still called the client, although the effort made is in the service of understanding, rather than “curing a disease”. The work has been described as “applied Buddhism” both for its use of mindfulness and its approach to suffering as the result of ignorance. The “client” is more like a meditator, than a patient in a medical procedure. It's just that a better word has yet to come to mind.

³ I'm going to use either him or her, more or less evenly, instead of trying to use both all the time.

When we work out of an this new model, the work becomes very easy. Part of what makes it so is the explicit understanding of the client of how the process works. Maybe in these four days you will discover why this is so. I'm very sure that everyone in this room would be an excellent client for this method. But not everyone who comes to therapy will be. If the person is very anxious or easily distracted, or is someone whose image of psychotherapy is the one portrayed in popular movies, and so does not understand what the process actually requires, then the work can be difficult or impossible without some prior preparation.

I remember going to visit Swami Rama to get a mantra. I was so nervous, he had me come back the next day. Because something like that can't be done when you're that nervous. It's the same with this method. But, if the client is capable of mindfulness and understands the process, then it works and it works well.

Having mentioned the commitment of the client, let me now talk about the commitment, qualities and skills required of the therapist. The most important of these is the practice of loving presence. Loving presence is a combination of several habits of mind. It is an integrated combination of attitude, emotional state and focus of attention. Compassion is the key element. In this work, reaching and maintaining a loving state of being is the first task of the therapist. How this is done is an essential part of the training. Of course some people are already good at this. These people, I find, are the people most drawn to learning and doing the work.

Still, it's not just the loving part that's essential. It's also the being present part. Being present can be difficult for some people. It means keeping your mind focused on what is going on for you and the client *right now*, moment to moment. To train your mind to be present like that, you have to train it away from one of our strongest, most common habits, the habit of gathering information through talking, through questions and conversation. We're operating out of that habit right now. It's not bad for what we're doing, but when the task is to assist in another's self discovery, it too often gets in the way. It's a bad habit if you're trying to be present. So, you have to train your mind not to get drawn away from present experience by getting overly focused on ideas, words and conversation. It's what clients are experiencing right now that's the truest expression of who they are, not what how they describe themselves or their histories.

I was once at the Saturday Market, up in Portland, Oregon. I was sitting across table from a friend of mine. I was eating something with pieces of chicken in it and he was telling me about some work he'd been doing. Suddenly, I got a piece of chicken stuck in my windpipe. I started to choke on it. I was desperately trying to get a breath. I must have been turning bright red and thrashing about. My friend never noticed. He kept blithely going on talking. He was caught up in what was, at this point and by necessity, a completely one-sided conversation. Besides all the effort that was going into my choking, I was becoming angry. So angry in fact that was hoping I could launch that stuck piece of chicken right across the table and through his skull.

So, with the help of that image and the tremendous pressure being built up in me, I managed to cough so hard, it dislodged the piece of chicken and projected it in his direction at close to supersonic speed. It didn't hit him; it went right past him and possibly into orbit around the Portland, Oregon area. It was gone but, happily I was not.

The method requires that we focus on what the client is doing, that is, what the client is expressing nonverbally. We don't engage in conversations. We don't turn our eyes away to think about what the client is saying. We don't habitually keep our minds busy with what the late Francisco Varela called, the *abstract attitude*. We are present to the observable facts of the moment — as my friend at the table wasn't.

No matter what the client is talking about, your primary attention is to something else. It's true that once in a while you'll hear something that the client is saying that will be significant. It's good to notice and record that. However, the information you will need to be effective is not just verbal. It's very much nonverbal. It's all the many behaviors, visual and auditory, that are observable when you're face-to-face with someone. It's the behaviors that emails and text messages cannot reveal.

There are two kinds of nonverbal information you'll need to be gathering. There's the kind that informs you about what the client is experiencing moment to moment. We call gathering that kind of information, *tracking*. We track for signs of the client's present experience. We use that information to connect with the client and to stay connected. It's an essential part of being present. In addition to tracking, you have to train your mind to be able to name what you've noticed about the client's present experience, quickly and simply. We call that kind of naming, *contact statements*. Tracking and contact are two of the basic techniques from the original Hakomi method. They require knowing and understanding the nonverbal signs of another's present experience.

Another kind of nonverbal information you will have train yourself to notice are the client's habits. These are called, *indicators*. Clients have habitual behaviors that they are not usually aware of. (This is natural, since habits are designed to operate automatically, outside of consciousness, thus preserving consciousness for situations that require awareness and thinking about.) Here are two examples of common nonverbal habits some clients have, to give you an idea of what I'm talking about:

I have a client I've been working with, who during the first session we had would shrug her shoulders, no matter what she said or what I said to her. Shrugging ones shoulders is a very common gesture. Everyone uses it once in a while. And, we all know what it means. If you say, "I liked the movie" and add a shrug, you're really adding, "but not that much." A blind person might pick up the same information from the speaker's tone of voice, which would also be indicating "not that much".

When someone shrugs his or her shoulders, we may not think about it but, we get it. Whatever the shrug "says" — it could be "*sort of*" or "*there's nothing I can do*" or "*I don't know*" — we get it. Even if we don't consciously notice it happening, it could have an effect on us; we have habits of our own.

However, for this work, we have to notice. And we have to think about what we notice. The client's nonverbal habits are indicators of the unconscious material we want to help bring into consciousness. The habitual shrug may very well be an indication of a loss of hope that things could change, a learned helplessness that could be a source of depression. When we notice an indicator, we can then do an experiment with it. That combination is a core element of the method.

So, to do this work, you have to notice both kinds of nonverbal behaviors: the momentary ones and the habitual ones. Noticing the momentary ones is how we track the client's

present experience. Noticing the habitual ones is how we find indicators to do experiments with. Both are necessary. One gives us signs of present experience, the other gives us clues to the memories, emotions and implicit beliefs that organize what the client can and cannot experience. Habitual, nonverbal behaviors often point toward important, underlying issues that control the client's behavior. These ordinary habits are often expressions of adaptations to painful formative events and situations. The habitual shrug may be an adaptation to a time when taking responsibility for one's ideas was a bad idea.

Another example is a behavior like rubbing one's hands, or touching one's face. Often they indicate the person is comforting himself. If, as an experiment in mindfulness, you take over this behavior, the client may become emotional and realize some missing emotional need. The idea of searching for indicators like these has become a significant part of the refined method. Learning to use indicators is an important part of the trainings.

Nonverbal awareness is just one of the things that makes the work efficient. For one thing, we don't pursue stories about childhood or how the client feels about anything. We only have to observe a client for a few minutes until we notice an indicator that suggests it's connected to the unconscious material that's running the client's life. Hopefully, the client understands that bringing the awareness to that kind of unconscious material is exactly what he's come to do.

Such discoveries need not take many sessions. A discovery may only take a few minutes. We can all see each other's indicators anytime we wish to look for them. With all of us so readily visible, so constantly exposed, loving presence is the only thing that will sustain a good working relationship. It is not only necessary, it's the natural outcome of any truly intimate connection.

Once you've noticed what might be a significant indicator, you then create an experiment you can do with it. The experiment may be based purely on what you're seeing or hearing or it may take some thinking about what the indicator may signify about the client's beliefs, adaptations or early experiences. With so many possible indicators and the variety of possible experiments, this part of the process can be very creative.

If you find a good indicator and you do a good experiment with it, you're likely to get a reaction that can begin a healing process for the client. A good reaction to an experiment will be either a strong emotion or a spontaneous impulse, thought, image or memory. Or the reaction could be some clarity about a significant behavior pattern. The reaction will also tell both you and the client that the indicator itself was a good one to use.

If the reaction is a spontaneous impulse, it's best to do something with it. I call this, *following*. I think of spontaneous behaviors as "messages" from the adaptive unconscious.

If the reaction is an emotional one, I now do two things that I didn't do in previous versions of the method. One, I touch the client. Or more generally, I have an assistant touch the client. The touch is gentle, on the arm or shoulder usually, sometimes a hand or over the heart. This kind of sympathetic touching is natural. Chimpanzees do it. Young children do it. However, touching clients is against the law in some places, like California. You must be very careful if you do this in a private session. It is best to have witnesses and, of course, to get permission. It is customarily prohibited in psychotherapy.

Though I would argue, as Hamlet does, “*Though I am native here and to the manor born, I think it is a custom more honored in the breach than the observance.*”

Gentle touch normally has these effects: it indicates to the client that we are aware that he or she is feeling sad and that we are sympathetic. It also signals that we are paying attention and that we are present. No danger of flying chicken parts.

The second thing I do is equally important. I remain silent. Understanding when to be silent is one of the most significant things I have learned in the last few years. Silence is one of the improvements I have made to the method. Previously, I would ask a client who is experiencing sadness, “what kind of sadness is that?” or “what is that sadness remembering?” That sort of questioning can disrupt the natural process that follows and emotional reaction. If the person can stay with the sadness without automatically shifting awareness away from it, an automatic process will follow. The emotion will draw to it associations that help make sense of the emotion.⁴

If I just get a hand on the client and wait in silence, this usually helps the client to stay with the experience. (I could tell the client directly to “stay with the sadness!” But that would signal that I am directing the process and I don’t want to do that.) I want the process to unfold naturally according to the client’s inner wisdom. I have learned what the Lao Tzu meant by, “*Mastery of the world is achieved by letting things take their natural course.*” The natural course of an emotion, given no interruptions, is to draw into consciousness the memories and beliefs that make sense of it. That’s exactly what we want to help happen.

In that silence, we very often can see the external signs that the client is having memories and insights and is integrating the emotional experience. We can track signs of deep concentration on the face and nods of the head, indicating realization or agreement with some idea. Nonverbal expressions of the integration process happens spontaneously and we are wise not to interfere with it. I do not interrupt while that is happening. The client is gathering memories and ideas and is making sense of them, making sense of what just happened and what happened long ago. The client is integrating, sorting out and finding meaning in an unfinished experience that left confusion and pain.

Silence is best at such times because clients are doing the work they have to do. Clients will find the exactly right memory. Clients will articulate their implicit beliefs more perfectly than we ever could. So, we wait patiently. We let things take their natural course. When the client is ready, he will open his eyes, look at us for a moment, and then tell us about what he’s experienced.

Often, during the silence, the client’s emotions deepen, become more intense. A key memory has come up and it’s very painful or frightening. The sequence sometimes looks like this: (1) you do an experiment that triggers an emotional reaction; (2) you wait silently while the client gathers memories and associations; (3) and the memories or the associations deepen the emotion. The process becomes a cycle: emotions, associations, deeper emotions, more associations, and so forth. It’s a snowball, pushed and rolling down a mountain. When the emotion becomes this intense, I offer, or have my assistants offer to hold the client. While held, the client may continue crying, or go in and out of

⁴ For more about this, see *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* by Antonio Damasio. Harper Perennial ISBN-10: 0380726475, ISBN-13: 978-0380726479 (1995)

crying. And, at the same time, they will be having insights and integrating. When that's happening, holding is all there is to do.

The original situation, the foundational experience, the event that didn't get integrated, or as Janet said, couldn't be made sense of, invariably had an important missing element. To be completely simple-minded about it, the missing element (or elements) had to be whatever was needed to integrate and complete the experience and return to normal functioning. Some aspects of the experience remain unintegrated, expressing themselves through the adaptations that have kept the person going in spite of the experience. One of the key missing elements may very well have been someone to hold the client during the emotional process.

If you hold a client during this time of emotional expression and integration, you're supplying that particular missing element. In the original experience, maybe the people present were causing the problems and the pain. Or people were there, but they were too disturbed to be able to offer what was needed. Maybe no one was there to offer comfort or, as Al Pesso once told me, simply to bear witness. It always needs someone to be there. The fundamental missing experience is someone calm, sympathetic, patient and understanding; someone to care for the soul in pain. The client, during the cycle of emotion and association, is reliving an old painful event. At such times, your silent presence and your kindness, if accepted by the client, will provide some of the emotional nourishment needed for healing.

Slowly, resolutions are accomplished. New, more realistic beliefs are formed. Energy is drained away from the long struggle and becomes available for living in the present. Confusion yields to clarity. Delicious joy is felt. Pleasure is taken in seeing positive possibilities arise.

In its simplest form, this healing is like the normal course of events that happen when a young child falls and scrapes a knee. Hurting and crying, she runs to her mother who takes the child in her arms, holds it awhile, soothes it. The pain subsides. The knee is cleaned and maybe gets a band aid and a kiss. A few minutes go by. The child recovers, becomes energized and happy again and rests or goes off to play some more. This is the prototypic process of integration, the natural course of things.

Every session can have a good outcome. In every session, something significant can happen. Some healing can happen. Every time. Loving presence, discovery, comfort, integration. It's as simple as that.