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The Numbskull

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This article deals with the psychic trauma—numbskull and brain dismemberment—that results from verbal, sexual and physical abuse in childhood. Our goals are to discuss the “numbskull” phenomenon from a physical and energetic standpoint, to share our own experiences regarding it and to offer guidelines for working therapeutically with this issue.

Personal Stories

How does it happen that the mind becomes stunned, the body frozen, and the personality dumb? We decided to use our own personal histories as clinical material to help answer this question.

Melanie

Recently I had several experiences that made me aware of how I split the right/left hemispheres of the brain. Insights about the split came to me as I was reflecting about having grown up in the Catholic Church. I was thinking about the Ten Commandments. Somehow the notion came to me that the commandments applied to a child but not to an adult. For example, number five: “You must not murder.” (Yet early influences threatened my physical, emotional and spiritual life.) Number six: “You must not commit adultery.” (Yet I was having sexual contact with a married man.) Number seven: “You must not steal.” (Yet I felt as if my body, mind and soul had been stolen.) Number eight: “You must not lie.” (Yet I was asked to keep secrets about the abuse.)

How had I ever managed to keep the abuse I had experienced out of my conscious mind and still be able to live in the Catholic Church as a child, I wondered. I began feeling the right hemisphere of my brain. (Now I know we aren’t supposed to have any sensation there, but I was feeling something.) I remembered the quote “the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.” I think the same thing was true of my brain. The left hemisphere didn’t know what the right hemisphere knew about the abuse.

This type of hypocrisy, where child and parent live by separate rules even though the child is told they are all living by the same standard, leads to a madness for the child. The child does see and hear the lies even if the child cannot articulate what the deception is about. This madness left me twisting, freezing and/or splitting my mind, body and spirit.

Another time, I was talking about the impulse control that had prevented me from inappropriate sexual activities as an adult. That same control keeps me from asserting myself when necessary. I again began to feel both right and left hemispheres.

The splitting of the frontal lobe from the remainder of the brain served two purposes: It blocked aggressive impulses; it kept memories at bay by keeping my mind cluttered with daily happenings.

Lastly, in another instance, I began to feel a coldness of my skull cap which came and went for about two months. Again this numbness came with the resurfacing of many memories. As I was about to do another professional presentation on “The Numbskull,” I worried I was committing a sin. I was raised in a generation where no one was supposed to question authority. My parents, the Catholic Church and society at large did not encourage such questioning. I was left with the feeling that to use my brain was wrong. I always lived with the possibility of saying or doing the wrong thing. We can only do this for so long before the brain tissues actually goes numb. We lose the ability to have a mind of our own. We constantly defer to someone else to make decisions for us.

In conclusion, I think there is a right/left hemisphere split which kept my memories of abuse separate from messages

received from parents, teachers and society about how to be in the world. Additionally there was an expectation that I not tell anyone about the physical and sexual abuse in order to protect the image of my family. I had to live two lives, one of righteousness and one of shame.

Jane

I have lived most of my life in denial, in a fantasy land, a kind of Alice in Wonderland, to keep myself out of the nightmare that happened in my childhood. The fact that I was not "present" in the family madness is probably what saved me from somatizing as my siblings did. However, vacating—"I'm not here . . . You're not here . . . This isn't happening to me"—had its own cost.

In bioenergetic terms I split my head from my body. I broke the alignment by thrusting my head forward. My pattern was only one of many possible ones I could have used. The detachment between head and body can occur by twisting off, or by elongating the neck, or by jamming the muscles in the base of the skull—all of this to keep from seeing and knowing. My parents used to describe me with such phrases as: "You'd forget your head, if it wasn't attached. How can you be so smart in school and not have common sense? Your head never saves your feet."

Recently I became aware of another split, one between my eyes. My left eye tears easily and when highly charged, I feel overwhelming sadness. When I cover my left eye my right eye senses horror. Also, my left eye says "Come closer;" my right eye says "Don't dare!"

Six years ago at the time of my husband's death I had a tiny sore above my left eye that was diagnosed as skin cancer. Surgery was indicated. A larger tumor that had almost penetrated my skull was extracted. I believe this was a manifestation of a significant eye block. Having recently studied some of my infant and childhood pictures, I now see that my left eye was never fully opened physically or energetically.

As my eyesight was divided, so was my reality divided into absolutes of good and evil. I always felt unreal. Everyone else was real. How could it be true they [my parents] loved me and

hurt me at the same time? Yet these contradictory truths coexist in the experience of a child who is abused.

Life itself takes on an "unreal" quality. In adulthood, the incest survivor never trusts her perceptions or feelings. Always she doubts herself and feels crazy.

Today I am aware that when I am in such a state of denial, another kind of reality emerges, a physiological one. I have a sense of heavy hypnotic sleepiness or sometimes a sense of being enshrouded in a thick fog.

As I was preparing this presentation two words kept coming to me: "mad" and "oblivion." Webster defines mad as "extreme excitement, confusion, or agitation." He defines oblivion as "forgetting, being forgotten, without remembrance, unmindful, loosely unconscious." Sexual abuse causes both states. The child receives too much excitement. Since the child's body does not have the maturity to discharge sexual energy down through the pelvis and into the legs, the energy shoots up and overwhelms the ego. It leads to madness. The child is not seen, not remembered for who she is. There is no parent for her now. She is out on a limb. The circuits are blown and she is not fully conscious.

In my healing process my mind has become more active and alive, even though temporarily under undue stress, I can't think or speak for a time. This thawing of my mind and the recovery of my memories has allowed me to perceive the full range of my bodily reality—from terror to ecstasy. Having become more conscious, I live my life more effectively and pleurably.

Research

We sought to understand what happens to the brain when it is subjected to traumatic stress. In our search for validation we found research done by Dennis Charney, M.D., a psychiatrist and the director of clinical neuro-science at the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress disorder, on the effect (Golman 1990). In his work, he found that a single instance of overwhelming terror can alter the chemistry of the brain, making a person more sensitive to

adrenaline surges, even decades later. For such changes to occur, a person usually has to experience stress that is catastrophic, an overwhelming threat to life or safety, and be one over which he has no control. The more intense the trauma and the longer it lasts, the more likely it is to be pernicious. Evidence of these biological changes came from laboratory studies on animals over the last ten years and now indirectly has been confirmed in people.

Primarily, the alterations are in the ways in which the brain secretes chemicals normally produced under stress. Charney describes changes usually as follows:

1) "The locus ceruleus, a structure which regulated the brain's secretion of two catecholamines, hormones that mobilize the body for an emergency. This structure becomes hyperactive, secreting too much of these brain chemicals even in situations where there is little or no threat."

2) "There is an increase in the secretion of corticotropin releasing factor, one of the main hormones that mobilize the body to meet an emergency. This hormone is regulated by the circuit linking the hypothalamus, the brain's emotional center, and the pituitary gland. This increased secretion alerts the body for emergencies that are not there in reality."

3) "The opioid system of the brain, which can blunt the feeling of pain is hyperactive. This may account for the emotional numbing, and inability to experience tender feelings that often accompanies posttraumatic stress."

Further research findings: The brain uses 25 percent of the oxygen that we breathe in. If our respirations are depressed, the blood supply to the brain does not give sufficient oxygen to the brain tissue for maximum cerebration (Zim 1972). Zim suggested the possibility of memories being stored in the right hemisphere, which supports the idea that one part of the brain can keep us functioning to a minimum in the world and still not be aware of past trauma.

This work also took us to material written by Robert Lewis, M.D. on cephalic shock, a condition that comes about when parents are borderline, psychotic or not in harmony with their chil-

dren in the early years of their life. Our theory presented here, is a continuation of Lewis's theory, taking the issue of psychic trauma further into the growing up years.

"The infant grows up trying to learn about life and itself from a half-blind, half-numb person, who cannot sense the separate life force, and unique rhythm in its offspring," Lewis says. "With a borderline parent, the infant is thrown back on its immature nervous system." In response to the bizarre contact, the infant feels he has "to find a way to hold on, hold together and hold against the parent who cannot provide" secure ground.

Thus very early, you get an infant lifting its head, "never quite getting peace of mind," already tensing the base of the skull and back of its head, splitting from the body and never having much feeling in the body. Already it has become hypervigilant to stimuli outside itself and numb and dumb to its own senses (Lewis 1976).

Our own personal and clinical experience has shown us that when the energy does not pulsate through the brain and there is a detachment between the head and the body, people literally do not perceive their reality. Their own biological, physical and emotional truths are lost, as is their common sense. They then must take what others say to be the truth and try to live from their head.

When the flow of energy to the head is jammed at the base of the skull, resulting in little charge to the eyes, the person looks vacant or haunted. This same deep tension extends down into the neck and shoulders. This results in both the blocking of aggressive impulses in the arms as well as in aggressive thinking. We believe that as the impulse begins to come through this block from the back upward into the brain the memories begin to come back. The memories may be either body memories or image memories.

Causes

What kinds of experiences shock the brain and cause it to numb, split, or fragment?

Knowing too much too soon

Exposing the child to violence or to adult sexuality can overload the brain circuits. Remember the child does not have the same ability to discharge energy as the adult.

Sexual abuse

Confusion, shame and humiliation that result from the abuse all have their effect on how we begin to perceive ourselves. Sexual abuse is also a distortion of what a relationship is about. The child learns the bigger person has the power, becomes confused about contact and love, and learns that violence can be part of a relationship.

Violent rage from the parent

The child sees the craziness in the eyes of the raging parent. In response it often goes numb out of fear of being harmed or killed. This also has confusion, shame, humiliation, guilt and fear as residual aftereffects.

Secrecy and silence

Some children are allowed to remember the trauma, but are not to tell anyone outside of the family. Silence can also be demanded in order to restrict the child from protesting the abuse, either as it occurs or after. Having to keep silent or having to go on "as if," produces its own madness.

Double messages

Under the guise of teaching the child, the parent says "We don't go around hitting people." At the same time the parent hits the child. Or the child is told to be kind to people, and then hears the parents talking with hostility. Another example: A shy, reclusive mother kicks her daughter out the front door and says, "Do it" and "Don't be like me." Yet inside the house, she slaps the girl across her face for any assertive expression.

Seduction from society and family systems

Society, church, school and parents all prescribe ways of

behaving. The media too tell us how to dress, what food and beverages we should consume and what cars to drive. We make our leaders gods. Seldom do we think of them simply as another human being expressing a thought on a particular subject. We give up our ability to think critically and evaluate what we hear. Yet, ironically, in an abusive family the parent can rail: "Don't you have a mind of your own? Can't you make up your own mind?"

Distortion of reality by significant others

The child tells a parent about something that happened. She thereupon is told that it did not happen at all, or that was not the intent of the other person, as though intention and impact are one and the same.

Crazy, bizarre, perverse behavior

The parent asks the child if they would make a choice on an issue, like which restaurant to go to, and then does not abide by the child's choice. The child is left in complete bewilderment. An example of perversity is the mother who asks her teenage daughter to expose her nude body before a younger brother "so he can see what a growing woman looks like." Then that same mother screams when the daughter comes home from school with blood on her skirt, "It's disgusting what length you go to to attract boys."

The inhumanity of the parent

What makes the parent inhuman is complete disregard of the child as a fellow human being. An example would be making a child sit on the potty chair in front of the entire family or company.

In order to protect against the fore-mentioned abuses, the child employs the following defense mechanisms: (In adult life the measures further compound confusion and craziness.)

- Amnesia: blocking out some period of childhood.
- Depersonalization or splitting: separation from the self. Leaving the body and floating up to the ceiling allowing the vic-

tim to escape into fantasy. Or tunnel vision, focusing on a particular object in the room (Blume 1990).

- Constant activity: thinking or doing. Never taking time to breathe.
- Emotional shutdown and psychic numbing.

Our task is to release the client from these modes of self-protection and to encourage their having a mind of their own.

Clinical Treatment

How do we get more energy into the brain, more connection between brain and body, and ultimately integrate the person structurally, functionally and spiritually?

Remember the person has been shocked. The more serious the trauma and the earlier the age of onset, the greater the repression. Whether a client remembers their abuse or not, you still have to deal with frozen tissue, both mind and body, and the resulting immobility of aggressive thinking and action. There is always tissue memory of the abuse.

In doing mind and body work we must keep in *mind* pulsation and integration. What happens at one end of the body also happens at the other. For example, if there is tension in the feet or pelvis, the same degree of tension is also present in the thinking process of the individual. Work with grounding first. Then work with tension in the neck and skull. Any of our bioenergetic exercises will increase breathing, which in turn will oxygenate the brain. But here are other specific exercises that help to keep the client *mindful*: (Have the client focus on the exercise that she is doing at the time. Do not distract from it by talking.)

- Kick and hit alternately on bed, raising right arm and left leg up and then vice versa.
- March, skip with arm movements, again with alternate sides.
- Support head and neck of client in your hands.
- Therapist manually works with the deep muscle tension at the base of the skull. This work is important to bring energy into the brain to thaw the numbness and heal the splitting.

- Client hangs forward and the therapist cups her hands on the crown of the client's head and has her come up slowly one vertebrae at a time with the head first to come up against the resistance of the therapist's hand. This brings a charge into the eyes.
- Client rolls her head with chin tucked into chest. She rolls her head gently on carpeted floor or up against the wall.
- Client bangs her head against mattress either lying down or standing up and says, "You're driving me crazy."
- Client lies down and lifts her head an inch off the floor and turns it slowly from left to right until her neck fatigues.

In this healing work, accept and acknowledge the client. There is yesterday and there is today. See how the reality of yesterday impinges on present day behavior. We can work with breathing and grounding to fully charge the body and the brain. When feeling comes into the body, memories surface. With a fully charged, grounded, focused expression of feelings, the client gains personhood. Having a voice in her own affairs and becoming embodied, she is now fully conscious for the first time in her life.



For convenience of writing we have used the pronoun she. Please know that we believe this applies to the "he's" of the world also.

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