A photograph of a woman's back and shoulder, wrapped in a white towel. The woman has dark, wet hair and is smiling slightly. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. A thin horizontal line is visible above the text.

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Freedom for Feelings

Bodywork and Emotional Release

By Cathy Ulrich

It started as a typical visit. Jennifer was seeking help for chronic low back and hip pain and over the course of several bodywork sessions, we worked to clear areas of tightness throughout her legs, hips, and lower back. But on this day, as I gently freed the side of her hip, her facial expression changed from one of pleasure to one of puzzlement.

"That's interesting," she said. "I just remembered when all this started."

I listened as she recalled the accident that began a pain cycle she had endured for years.

"I fell from the top of a human pyramid at a summer cheerleading camp in high school. What's odd is that the memories are flooding into my brain — things I had forgotten long ago. I remember the day, the weather, the smell of bacon when I woke up, what I had for breakfast. It's all so vivid." As tears welled she described the fall, how she felt helpless and embarrassed when she couldn't get up. How she had to quit the camp and leave the squad her senior year.

I waited, watched, and listened, giving my full presence and support as she relived the event. From that session forward, Jennifer got better. Physically, her hip and low back pain began to resolve, and she felt she had gotten in touch with an important event in her life.

"I had no idea that fall had been so devastating," she said. "It was a key point in my life when many things changed."

What was happening in this pivotal session? Jennifer experienced an emotional release as a result of the bodywork. Because she felt safe and supported, she was able to work through some of the feelings that came up which helped her understand the origin of the chronic pain.

We've heard much about the connection between the body and mind, but what's really happening when you suddenly feel a strong emotion or retrieve a memory while getting a massage? It helps to first understand how the mind-body connection works.

The Body-Mind Connection

From an early age, we learn habits about how — or how not to — show our emotions. Some emotions such as anger, rage, or even frustration are discouraged. Suppressing emotions may be the difference between being accepted by our parents, friends, and teachers or being punished, criticized, or shamed.

But what happens to suppressed emotions? Where do they go when we're not allowed by parents or even ourselves to show them?

Our conscious mind has many functions. It directs voluntary movement in our bodies. It determines how we feel about our environment, and it makes choices about most aspects of our lives. Because the conscious mind gets information from our senses and directs our muscles to move, it is fully linked to our nervous system. Our nervous system controls our bodies. Further, our unconscious mind — those things that we think but aren't aware of — is also part of our nervous system.

When we learn not to show our feelings, they usually go into our bodies. We tense the muscles in our neck instead of frowning, we hold our breath instead of crying, or we clench our jaw instead of yelling. When these patterns are repeated, emotional suppression becomes a habit, the unconscious mind takes over, and the body becomes a storehouse for unexpressed, unconscious feelings.

At some point in almost all our lives, we've experienced a clear example of the mind-body connection. Recall a time when you had to give a speech or played your first music recital. Were your palms sweating, did you feel dizzy, was your heart pounding? In a stage fright situation, you were probably perfectly safe; no one from the audience was going to jump out and grab you, but your own feelings about the situation caused your body to react in a way that was completely out of your control. Were you able to stop the sweating in your palms? Probably not. Your mind took control and expressed your fears in a purely physical way.

Body language is another example of the mind-body connection. Someone who is feeling uncomfortable in a situation may sit with arms folded and legs crossed. They may show little feeling on their face, but their body tells something about what's going on in their mind. Many persistent pain patterns are associated with postural habits that have an emotional component. Think about how you sit or stand when you're feeling depressed or anxious. Postural holding can be entirely unconscious and may become fixed over time. Finally, breathing patterns often reveal unconscious mind-body connections. Stress, chronic fear, or anxiety will show up as shallow and/or rapid breathing as the body stays in a chronic state of fight or flight.

Bodywork and Emotional Release

With an understanding of how emotions are stored in the physical body, we can understand why bodywork helps release them.

Muscle tension is one of the most frequent ways we hold emotion. Many people seek massage to help relieve tension from chronic stress. By relaxing muscles and reducing tension, massage frees the pattern where the unconscious feeling is being held. Once the tension is gone, the unconscious mind loses its grasp and an emotion may emerge.

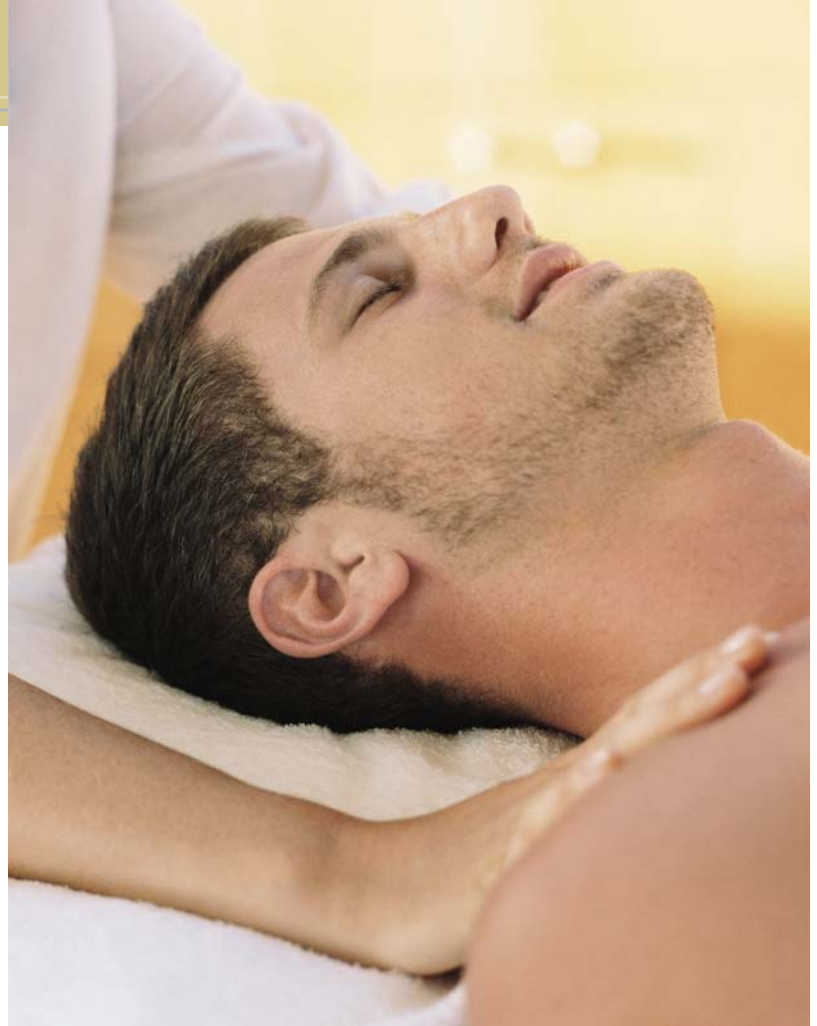
People who hold excessive tension often have hypersensitive nervous systems. Supportive touch offered by a trained massage therapist can calm the nervous system, which changes the mind-body pattern. This calming effect creates freedom for feelings to come forth and be released in a safe, supportive, nonjudgemental environment.

Some bodywork systems such as Rolfing and Hellerwork actually help to change body posture. These whole body approaches can even help change a general emotional pattern by reorganizing the structural pattern that developed as a result of the initial depression or anxiety.

What is an Emotional Release Like?

Emotional releases can take many forms. As a client, you may feel sadness, grief, anger, fear. Positive feelings may come up in releases, but this is rare since our culture is more supportive of expressing positive feelings in the moment rather than suppressing them. You may have memories of a particular event, but you may not be able to associate your feelings with anything from your past. You may feel like crying or your feeling may simply come with a desire to take a deep breath.

Some emotional releases are associated with specific traumatic events while others reveal more chronic thought patterns. You may get in touch with old unconscious



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beliefs or attitudes that no longer serve you, or you may be surprised to learn something about your relationship with your body. What's important to know is that your body is offering you an opportunity to grow and change beyond habitual patterns. If you're getting a feeling that seems to be out of context with the circumstances of the massage, it may be an emotional release surfacing. Pay attention to your feelings and tell your therapist what's happening.

Many bodyworkers are experienced in working with emotional releases. While they're not trained as psychotherapists, they

material. Counselors offer solutions to emotional issues and can give advice related to personal concerns.

While many people seek the help of a counselor to work on deep psychological wounds, counseling is also a great avenue for personal growth. By working on old thought patterns and belief systems, clients can discover new ways of making choices and new ways of being.

Because bodywork can reveal unconscious thought patterns, many counselors work closely with massage therapists and bodyworkers as a way of enhancing this personal growth.

I collaborate with several psychotherapists who refer their clients for bodywork to help them access



can be there to support you through the release process. By simply maintaining a grounding touch and listening, they are there to support you as you release a feeling that no longer serves you. If you feel supported and safe, you're able to let go of the emotion — most importantly, don't push it back down in your old way of suppressing. When the emotion surfaces, your body is telling you it's time to let it go.


Most releases surface and resolve quickly. However, if you have frequent strong emotional releases in your massages or if you're feeling more anxious or fearful as a result of the bodywork, it's important to seek the help of a professional counselor.

Counseling and Bodywork

Professional counselors are trained to work with clients in the psychological realm. They know how to treat mental health conditions and are able to create a safe environment in which to explore psychological

unconscious patterns that can then be explored in their psychotherapy sessions. The combination is a powerful personal growth tool. The body and mind can finally be connected in a healthy way, and the client learns new ways of expressing feelings.

Bodywork helps the client become aware of how and where she stores emotions. Not everyone experiences emotional releases in bodywork sessions, and I've never seen anyone have an emotional release in every session.

Many times the release takes both therapist and client by surprise, but if we're prepared for the possibility, it can be a freeing, learning experience. The body becomes the teacher for the mind and if we stay open, we gain the power to make new choices, learn new patterns, and create a healthier, more conscious, life. 

Cathy Ulrich is a freelance writer, artist, physical therapist, and Certified Advanced Rolfer. She maintains a private bodywork practice in Colorado and teaches workshops on intuition and personal energy management. She can be contacted at cathy@circleofbeing.com.