

Mind and Healing

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Psychology of the FutureNote: Evaluating decades of research on states of consciousness, Grof notes the significance of holotropic states. "Holotropic" means, literally, "whole-leaning" or "turning toward wholeness. " It refers to psychotherapeutic work that draws the client toward a holistic, integral experience of his or her whole being‐not just body or mind, but soul and spirit, too. In Grof’s work, holotropic practice often leads to transpersonal experiences that transcend the realms of individual, personal psychology, and tap into spiritual realms that transcend personality, expanding the experience of what it means to be human. Such transpersonal experiences transcend our normal boundaries of space and time, and reveal the deep interconnectedness between consciousness and cosmos. ‐Ed.

Traditional psychiatry uses the disease concept of the Western medical model not only for disorders of a clearly organic nature, but also for emotional and psychosomatic disorders for which no biological cause has been found. Psychiatrists use the terms "mental" or "emotional" disease quite loosely, and try to assign various disorders to specific diagnostic categories comparable to those of general medicine. Typically, the time of the onset of symptoms is seen as the beginning of the "disease," and the intensity of the symptoms is used as the measure of the seriousness of the pathological process. Alleviation of the symptoms is considered "clinical improvement," and their intensification is seen as "worsening of the clinical condition. "

The observations from the study of holotropic states suggest that thinking in terms of disease, diagnosis, and allopathic therapy is not appropriate for most psychiatric problems that are not clearly organic in nature, including some of the conditions currently labeled as psychoses. To exist in a material form, to have experienced embryological development, birth, infancy, and childhood has left traumatic imprints in all of us, although we certainly differ as to their intensity, extensity, and availability of this traumatic material for conscious experience. Every person is carrying a variety of more or less latent emotional and bioenergetic blockages that interfere with full physiological and psychological functioning.

The manifestation of emotional and psychosomatic symptoms is the beginning of a healing process through which the organism is trying to free itself from traumatic imprints and simplify its functioning. The only way this can happen is through emergence of the traumatic material into consciousness and its full experience and emotional and motor expression. If the trauma that is being processed is of major proportions, such as a difficult birth that lasted many hours and seriously threatened biological survival, the emotions and behavioral expressions can be extremely dramatic. Under these circumstances, it might seem more plausible that it is a result of some exotic pathology than to recognize that it is a potentially beneficial development. However, when properly understood and supported, this process can be conducive to healing, spiritual opening, personality transformation, and evolution of consciousness.

The emergence of symptoms thus represents not only a problem, but also a therapeutic opportunity; this insight is the basis of most experiential psychotherapies. Symptoms manifest in the area where the defense system is at its weakest, making it possible for the healing process to begin. In my experience, this is true not only in relation to neuroses and psychosomatic disorders, but also to certain conditions traditionally considered psychotic (psychospiritual crises or "spiritual emergencies").

The Process of HealingThe work with holotropic states has revealed that emotional and psychosomatic problems are much more complex than is usually assumed, and that their roots reach incomparably deeper into the psyche. However, it has also revealed the existence of deeper and more effective therapeutic dynamics. Traditional psychotherapy treatments of psychogenic disorders recognize only therapeutic procedures related to various manipulations of biographical material; for example, lifting of psychological repression and remembering or reconstructing events from infancy and childhood; emotional and intellectual insights into one's life history; or transference neurosis and analysis of transference.

The new observations show that these approaches fail to recognize and appreciate the amazing healing potential of the deeper dynamics of the psyche. Thus, for example, the reliving of birth and the experience of ego death and spiritual rebirth can have far-reaching therapeutic impact on a broad spectrum of psychological disorders. Similar beneficial results are often associated with various forms of transpersonal phenomena, such as past-life experiences and identification with various animals or archetypal figures and energies. Of particular importance in this sense are ecstatic feelings of cosmic unity, which—if properly integrated—provide healing of extraordinary power.

Work with holotropic states encourages healing, spiritual opening, personality transformation, and conscious evolution. When confronted with the challenging observations from modern consciousness research, we have only two options. The first is to reject the new observations simply because they are incompatible with the traditional scientific belief system. This involves an arrogant assumption that we already know what the universe is like, and can tell with certainty what is possible and what is not possible. With this kind of approach, there cannot be any surprises, but there is also very little real progress. In this context, everybody who brings critically challenging data is accused of being a bad scientist, a fraud, or a mentally deranged person.

This approach characterizes pseudoscience or scientific fundamentalism, and has very little to do with genuine science. History offers many examples of such an approach: People who refused to look into Galileo's telescope because they "knew" there could not be craters on the moon; those who fought against the atomic theory of chemistry and defended the concept of a non-existing substance "flogiston"; those who called Einstein a psychotic when he proposed his special theory of relativity, and many others.

The second reaction to challenging new observations is characteristic of true science. It is excitement about, and intense interest in, such anomalies combined with healthy critical skepticism. Major scientific progress has always occurred when the leading paradigm failed to account for some significant findings and was seriously questioned. In the history of science, paradigms come, dominate the field for some time, and then are replaced by new ones. If instead of rejecting and ridiculing the new observations, we would consider them an exciting opportunity and conduct our own study to test them, we might very likely find that the reports were accurate.

It is hard to imagine that Western academic science will continue indefinitely to censor all the extraordinary evidence that has in the past been accumulated in the study of various forms of holotropic states, as well as ignore the influx of new data. Sooner or later, it will have to face this challenge and accept all the far-reaching theoretical and practical consequences. When that happens, we will realize that the nature of human beings is very different from what is being taught at Western universities and what industrial civilization believes it to be. It will also become clear to us that materialistic science has an incomplete and inadequate model of reality, and that its ideas about the nature of consciousness and the relationship between consciousness and matter (particularly the brain) have to be radically revised. It is my firm belief that we are rapidly approaching a point when transpersonal psychology and the work with nonordinary states of consciousness will become integral parts of a new scientific paradigm of the future.

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