

WORKING WITH FEAR

*“No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”
Edmund Burke*

It is rare that specific events can instill fear as effectively as nine-eleven. The atomic bomb produced apocalyptic nightmares and chronic anxiety for forty years. The assassination of President Kennedy still haunts a whole generation. Nothing is ever the same after these kinds of events. The images of suffering and the collapsing of the World Trade Towers symbolize shockingly the frailty of human life and interdependence. Where does the professional bodyworker fit into these traumatic events and ensuing national anxiety?

Under chronic stress, when the sympathetic nervous system is continually activated, the body produces cortisol, a natural cortisone substance that results over time in effects similar to long term cortisone treatment: fluid retention, muscle weakness, hypertension, impaired wound healing, and breakdown of connective tissue. Fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, attention deficit disorder and chronic depression are worsened by societal terror and the hyper-vigilance.

Bodyworkers can play very positive roles in reducing their clients' fear. Bodywork effects are ultimately parasympathetic in nature and can provide changed perspective and balance to our overly stimulated society. We are being called to work in a wholly different way, to work directly with our clients' fears as they show up in their bodies. Those fears exacerbate all of their physical and emotional conditions. In order to be effective in lowering our clients' fears we need to be more knowledgeable about our own. Recognizing the futility and destructiveness of our own chronic fear, we can seek a remedy by receiving compassionate care.

Persons who suffer from chronic pain often suffer from chronic fear. Chronic fear suppresses our vitality and makes even small amounts of discomfort intolerable. In a recent study done in Holland patients were educated about the true nature of pain, its necessity as a bodily signal, and that pain itself doesn't worsen conditions. They were taught how to self-manage their pain and be more active. Their misunderstanding of pain had led to catastrophizing about their pain, which had indeed worsen their condition. Perhaps one of our roles as bodyworkers is to provide information to our clients about how fear shows up in the body and also assure them that pain released from fear is much more tolerable. In parasympathetic response from our sessions they often become pain free or at least much more accepting of the role pain plays in their recovery.

The role of bodyworker is very different when we are working with dying patients. We can no longer focus solely upon symptomatic relief. We can no longer operate under the belief that our client's healing involves reversal of their symptoms. My friend who works with hospice patients shared that the hardest part of her job was dealing with the fear that accompanies the dying process. The demons of fear: isolation, confusion, depression, anxiety, loss of control, and utter exhaustion; all are changed when we commit ourselves to accompanying a dying patient with unconditional compassion, quality time and attention. Whether fully conscious or not, these clients have reached a point where easy answers and superficial solutions are meaningless. Loving attention and compassionate touch are the greatest gifts that we can give. And doing this work help us address our own fears.

During the Great Depression FDR said “the only thing we need to fear is fear itself.” He was aware of how fear diminishes the quality of life, increases the collective meanness of spirit and produces a palpable sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Since nine-eleven the qualitative changes we have experienced as a society are mainly due to the collective fear we feel. We have

learned again how easy it is to be taken over by fear and desperation. Our societal response to terror has been increased security measures and psychological and medical intervention. After every major trauma to the human community it is the ability of humans to love and nurture one another and to rebuild the delicate fabric of trust and connection that eventually restores peace and security. Bodyworkers know that the work we do can make a difference especially when the chronic condition of fear touches those we touch.

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