

Healing Dysregulated Defences: *A Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Perspective on Embodying Trauma Recovery*

Pat Ogden & Tony Buckley

Day 1 of An Online Conference

Zoom Webinar

13 November 2023, Monday

Times:

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm, London UK

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CPD hours: 3 /CE credits: N/A

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Threat-related attention bias involves three functionally and **neuroanatomically distinct neural networks: alerting, orienting, and executive control**. These attentional networks play a pivotal role in shaping the development of trauma/stress/danger responses within the body.

As therapists, we are aware how these neural pathways react to trauma/stress/danger:

- The interplay between voluntary and involuntary attention dynamically responding to the salience of internal and external stimuli;
- Processing of novel stimuli through dorsal and ventral pathways;
- Amygdala activation for novelty and threat detection;
- Activation of the hypo adrenal pituitary axis (HPA) in response to trauma/stress/danger

... is all part of this sophisticated embodied neural defence network. This highly adaptive threat-related attention bias is paramount for survival.



However, when emotional dysregulation results from traumatic experience(s); trauma-related implicit processes - visibly reflected in non-verbal behaviours of gesture, posture, prosody, facial expressions, eye gaze, and affect – persist in spite of attempts to regulate them with top-down executive control. **Clients often feel at the mercy of an overwhelming cascade of dysregulated emotions, upsetting physical sensations, intrusive images, pains, smells, constriction and numbing. These, in turn, influence cognitive distortions.**

This *faulty neuroception* thus perpetuates defensive subsystems in traumatised clients, leading to hyper and hypo-arousal. Clients may experience these as distressing embodied patterns of sensations in the heart, breath, muscles, state-specific tensions, impulse or movement patterns, and dissociative phenomena replaying in the body.

Sensorimotor psychotherapy emphasizes body awareness as an essential part of psychotherapy. This is **especially beneficial in trauma therapy when symptoms involve physiological distress, affect dysregulation, or dissociation.** Traditional approaches to therapy attend to the cognitive and emotional aspects of clients' lives, while the somatic experience is often left out of the room.

Sensorimotor Psychotherapy employs *directed mindfulness* and *Embedded Relational Mindfulness (ERM)*© interventions which entail carefully and mindfully directing the client's attention towards the five building blocks of the therapeutic goals: Interoception, Movement, Five-sense Perception, Emotion and Cognition. The therapist, by example and encouragement, helps the client cultivate an attitude of curiosity, neutrality and receptivity towards internal experiences. For example, if an internal image of past trauma or an external traumatic reminder, such as the sound of a siren, causes hyperarousal, the therapist might direct the client to become mindful of the sensations in their legs to promote grounding, rather than to the internally generated image, because grounding supports the goal of stabilization.

In practical steps, this process of Sensorimotor Therapy involves:

- First establishing a stable therapeutic relationship with the client
- Recovering and remodelling traumatic memories into meaningful experiences
- Taking effective steps to transform learned helplessness and release outdated activations

As Sensorimotor Psychotherapy enables clients to discover and change habitual physical and psychological patterns that impede optimal functioning and well-being; this modality renders itself especially helpful in working with dysregulated activation and other effects of trauma, as well as the limiting belief systems of developmental issues.

By mindfully attending to where their attention is, clients gain insights into their own state-specific activations, creating space for further choices that allow for healing and transforming the original state of helplessness or hopelessness. This is backed by recent research, which shows that mindfulness may be the answer to learned helplessness. It increases active cognitive and behavioural coping, problem-focused coping and approach-coping while decreasing avoidant-coping. (ncbi.nih.nlm.gov June 2017)

The sensorimotor psychotherapist looks out for specific building blocks that point to implicit processes that reflect unresolved trauma, as well as those that reflect self-regulatory resources, positive affect, competence and mastery. Together, therapist and client interrupt the automaticity of these building blocks by becoming mindful of them. In this way, the client can identify and observe, *rather than identify with*, the effects of past trauma and discover more adaptive actions.

At this practically-oriented workshop, which will be beneficial to therapists across modalities, Tony Buckley (*taking the lead on the presentation*) and Pat Ogden (*discussing video clips*) explore the voluntary/involuntary interface of attention as a useful parallel for tailoring corresponding therapeutic experiments and attention to body interventions that promote trauma recovery. Utilizing video clips, clinical examples, and brief experiential



exercises, participants in this workshop will delve into these areas of therapeutic interest and explore Sensorimotor Psychotherapy methods.

Attendees will gain awareness and skills related to:

- The significance of attending to attention within their own and clients' bodies
- Insights into the attention networks that link various brain-body systems in trauma
- Psychoeducation for clients on reclaiming the survival wisdom of their bodies
- A variety of attention interventions to be used as somatic resourcing with clients
- Intervention skills that encourage safe exploration within limits, supporting clients in trusting their body's trauma phenomenology towards releasing outdated activations

Overall, in this transformative workshop, therapists will discover the power of attending to attention and the profound impact it can have on trauma recovery, providing clients with the tools to reclaim their inner wisdom and find healing within their bodies.

Learning Objectives:

- Provide insights into the attention networks that link various brain-body systems in trauma
- Discuss a variety of attention interventions to be used as somatic resourcing with clients
- Apply intervention skills that encourage safe exploration within limits, supporting clients in trusting their body's trauma phenomenology towards releasing outdated activations

About the speakers

Tony Buckley, BA, is a BACP registered therapist who holds a BA Hons degree in Counselling, a Diploma in Supervision and Certificate of Education and Further Education. Tony has studied Cranio-Sacral Focused Anatomy and is currently studying towards a Masters in Neuroscience at Kings College London. Tony has accrued over 30 years' experience in the therapeutic field including activities such as teaching, supervision, private practice, and managing teams of counsellors in both a university setting and an adolescent counselling service within the voluntary sector. Former professional roles included seven years spent as manager of the Counselling and Trauma Service for Transport for London (London Underground), which offers a time-limited trauma treatment service, psychoeducation, stress reduction groups and response support following critical incidents. Tony has been teaching Sensorimotor Psychotherapy internationally for over 12 years, delivering all 3 levels of the method in Ireland, Norway, UK, Netherlands, Finland and Australia. In addition to teaching therapists Tony likes to find some time to write and has contributed several articles in the somatic psychology field and co-written a chapter titled *Healing the Traumatized Organization* in the 2012 Wiley-Blackwell book called *International Handbook of Workplace Trauma Support*.

Pat Ogden, PhD, (she/her), is a pioneer in somatic psychology, the creator of the Sensorimotor Psychotherapy method, and founder of the Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute (sensorimotor.org). Dr Ogden is a clinician, consultant and international lecturer. She is the first author of two groundbreaking books in somatic psychology: *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy* and *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy: Interventions for Trauma and Attachment* (2015). Her third book, *The Pocket Guide to Sensorimotor Psychotherapy in Context*, advocates for an anti-racist perspective in psychotherapy practice, and will be released in summer 2021. Her current interests include couple therapy, child and family therapy, social justice, diversity, inclusion, consciousness, and the philosophical/spiritual principles that underlie her work.

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