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Finding common ground: How teaching movement and grounding techniques to sexual assault survivors affects their learning in higher education

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Abstract

Survivors of sexual trauma are at risk of developing PTSD which can impair learning. This paper examines how female adult learners who are sexual assault survivors benefit from grounding techniques.

Keywords: trauma, PTSD, grounding, adult learning

Trauma is neither rare nor uncommon. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (n.d.), nearly one in five women have experienced rape at some time in their lives. Additionally, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (n.d.) reports out of all women, females aged 18-24 who attend college are three times more at risk to experience sexual violence. Among this age group, only 20% of females report to law enforcement, leaving many sexual assault survivors without support, aid, or resources.

According to the National Center for PTSD (n.d.), every six of 100 people develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after experiencing trauma. One of the most impactful trauma-related symptoms to affect memory is dissociation (Perzow et al., 2013). Dissociation is a coping mechanism greatly impacting one's attention to current surroundings which can cause issues in a learning setting, bonding with others, or completing a task (Özdemir et al., 2015; Perzow et al., 2013). Additionally, anxiety can play a role in a learner's intrinsic motivation as well as negative emotions can hinder learning motivation and achievements (Sun et al., 2017).

Based on these findings, female adult learners who have a history of sexual trauma could have problems with learning due to PTSD and its related symptoms such as anxiety and dissociation. As a solution to these issues, grounding is a vital component when dealing with a person's loss of physical and psychological reality due to issues related to trauma (Clauer, 2011; de Tord and Bräuninger, 2015) as well as movement approaches the whole person to release stress and induce positive emotions (Serlin, 2020). By using movement and grounding techniques through embodied and somatic learning, survivors may be able to neutralize their PTSD symptoms and improve their educational experience.

This model is guided by the following questions: How would teaching movement and grounding techniques to sexual assault survivors influence their learning experience in higher education? In what ways would connecting women to their bodies connect them to learning academically? Further discussion will show how offering instruction in movement and grounding techniques on a college campus could correlate to a survivor reassociating with their body and aid them in their ability to learn.

Literature Review

To facilitate the connection between trauma, its affects on the body, and its influence on learning, this section will explore the core components of the issue. This section elaborates on the definition of trauma, identifying PTSD and its symptoms, and how dissociation and anxiety impair memory and learning. By incorporating movement and grounding techniques, a learner has the potential to reconnect with their body. This allows the learner to find safety in themselves and their environment.

Trauma and PTSD

Caruth (1995) states, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (pp. 4-5). Van Der Kolk (1998) defines trauma as “an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people's existing coping mechanisms” (para. 3). Trauma is an emotional response to a disaster, attack, accident, or other life-altering event. Though trauma can result in a physical injury, the emotional injury is also difficult to heal. Trauma reactions can be long-term and unpredictable (Rowell & Thomley, 2013). The most common reaction to trauma is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a term encompassing a variety of symptoms and aftereffects (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

PTSD symptoms fall into four categories which are intrusion (e.g. intrusive thoughts, distressing memories, or flashback of the traumatic event), avoidance (e.g. avoiding reminders of previous trauma such as people, places, activities, or avoidance with recalling or retelling of the event), alterations in cognition or mood (negative or distorted thinking about self or others, ongoing feelings of shame, fear, and feelings of detachment or estranged from others), and alterations in arousal and reactivity (e.g. reckless behavior, angry outbursts, and issues with concentrating or sleeping) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Whether one goes on to develop PTSD is dependent upon individual resiliency, level of emotional and social support, personality, and other environmental factors (Sippel et al., 2015). PTSD related symptoms include issues related to memory and attention, dissociation, anxiety, depression (Brandes, 2002), shame, fear, guilt, anger (La Bash & Papa, 2014; Oktedalen, 2015), intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbance, emotional numbness (Ehlers & Wild, 2021), and panic attacks (Berenz et al., 2018). Many people believe trauma and PTSD are a mental problem; however, Levine (2010) emphasizes that trauma is something that happens to the body. He argues trauma's primary impact is to the body, with the effects on mental states being secondary. According to Scofield (1998), the brain and body are connected, and within this connection the brain is responsible for when and where events are processed and stored.

When a traumatic event occurs to the body, there may be a psychological overload and our cause-and-effect survival mechanisms can take charge causing certain brain states (Scofield, 1998). Levine (2010) explains when the body experiences the extreme stress of survival emotions during trauma, it inhibits the completion of defensive and orientating responses to be fully processed. Rather than the brain properly processing the event, the trauma can get stuck and frozen in time. Without being fully processed, the trauma is stored as “reoccurring as it was originally experienced” (Scofield, 1998, p. 340). The event is stored along with the associating physical sensations and effects as well as locked in the disturbing form in which the body experienced it (Scofield, 1998).

Dissociation and Anxiety

One of the most impactful trauma-related symptoms to affect both the mind and body is dissociation (Perzow et al., 2013). Dissociation is “a disruption in the integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, and perception” (Özdemir et al., 2015, p. 36). Dissociation literally means disconnected or a lack of connection and is the ability to exit one's body when it wants to escape something harmful (Kock & Harvey, 2012).

Exposure to trauma can lead to anxiety, panic disorders, and other similar conditions. Trauma exposure can also lead to an increase in panic attacks, and studies have shown a correlation between panic reactivity and PTSD (Berenz et al., 2018). Though moderate anxiety isn't typically an issue, excessive anxiety can have adverse effects and have a negative impact on learning. Anxiety can also lead to a variety of physical challenges such as tension, rapid heartbeat, and headaches (Sun et al., 2016).

Painful emotions cause trauma survivors to avoid turning inward on their bodies and leave these sensations unattended (Van der Kolk, 2006). Trauma experienced in early development can be deeply embedded in the primitive parts of the brain which cannot be accessed in talk therapy. Until these areas are regulated or treated, they will continue to disrupt normal brain activity and the effects on the mind and body will continue to transpire throughout adulthood (Dieterich-Hartwell, 2017; Perry, 2005).

Memory and Learning

Traumatic experiences cause hyperarousal, or what is often referred to as the fight, flight, or freeze response. Continual hyperarousal overtime can lead to chronic stress producing neurobiological changes in the brain. This has been linked to poor physical health and cognitive performance, as well as the impediment of social, emotional, and academic development (Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017).

When the survival mechanisms within the brain are activated, the learning memory centers shut down. When an individual is in a state of fear, whether it be from a crowded room, feeling vulnerable to further trauma, or from other related anxieties, normal brain development is affected. Learners can become disengaged, distant, forgetful, or unable to concentrate. Without the ability to stay engaged and properly withhold information, learners will suffer with lower grades, become discouraged by less praise from those in authority, and perceive themselves to be academically incompetent (Perzow et al., 2013).

Movement and Grounding Techniques

The arts enable us to transcend from the places which have us stuck and move us into imagining a future and new situation. When it comes to movement, it embodies the whole person and can bring clarity and relief from stress. Movement captures expressions that go beyond verbalization and brings connection to the places fragmented by trauma (Serlin, 2020).

Movement therapies have helped survivors of sexual trauma express feelings that cannot otherwise be put into words. Regarding an experience with movement therapy, Koch & Harvey (2012) shared, “when beginning her improvisation, she tried to follow her inner movement impulses as authentically as possible, being true to her perceptions, sensations, feelings, and thoughts” (p. 375). By using non-verbal reflection and providing a creative atmosphere for improvisation movement, the participant can experience kinesthesia within their body (Pierce, 2014).

The primary purpose of grounding is to focus on the present by paying attention to one’s body through the different senses (de Tord & Bräuninger, 2015). Grounding can prevent a dissolution of boundaries and improve being in touch with reality. There are six realms within the concept of grounding which involve gravity, contact with the physical realm, containment and discharge into the ground, connecting and maintaining relationships, tolerance of dissolution of boundaries, and connectedness with one’s history (Clauer, 2011).

Grounding is especially helpful for battling intrusive or destructive thoughts as it is a variant of mindfulness. Grounding has a way of distracting you from the memories or feelings that pulled you into the traumatic past and bring you back to the present moment (Kelly & Garland, 2016). “Grounding is a vital component when dealing with a person’s loss of physical and psychological reality due to issues related to trauma” (de Tord & Bräuninger, 2015, p. 18).

The Basis of Proposing this Model

Adult learning can be challenging in and of itself, and an adult learner who suffers with trauma-related stress only adds to the challenges (Kerka, 2002). Trauma-related learning difficulties may be manifested through missing class, avoiding assignments, disengagement in class, or out of the ordinary responses to class discussions. For trauma occurring to the body, it is important that the body is included as part of the therapy. Conducting movement and grounding techniques with survivors of sexual trauma has helped them express feelings that cannot be otherwise put into words. In addition to improving connection with the body, movement and grounding techniques support a survivor in building trust with others which is an important step in the healing process.

Based on these findings, implementing a reoccurring practice of movement and grounding techniques could greatly benefit survivors of sexual trauma by reconnecting them with their bodies and rebuilding a sense of trust with others and themselves. Since connection and trust in academic settings improves the learning experience, practicing movement and grounding techniques could improve academic cognitive performance and more physically and mentally present adult learners. Mindfulness through grounding and movement bring the survivor back to their body and present moment to process and settle raging or overwhelming emotions.

Practical or Theoretical Void

The topic of trauma and sexual violence has become a more relevant as there exists more education and understanding around its prevalence than ever before. Though there is more research and

education around trauma and sexual violence, higher education institutions are still working to provide services and support that meet the need of their adult learners. Though many institutions provide counseling services on campus, the supply does not meet the demand. Depending on the size of the institution, the student-to-counseling staff ratio can range anywhere from 705-2,624 to one (Winerman, 2017).

Though counseling and cognitive behavioral therapy is beneficial in treating trauma (Lewis et al., 2020), it does not address trauma's influence on the body. By providing movement and grounding techniques for adult learners, it provides a "whole person approach" (p. 178) to listening to our bodies and avoiding harmful ways to deal with stress (Serlin, 2020). A model for how offering opportunities to engage in movement and grounding techniques on a college campus could fill a practical and theoretical void for students suffering with PTSD to manage their stress and potentially improve their learning experience.

Elements of the Model & Relationship between the Elements

Based on literature and research, this model is situated for adult learners in a higher education setting. The model is comprised of a semester long class which will teach and guide the learner in movement and grounding techniques. This learning opportunity is created with the sexual assault survivor in mind. Instruction will start slow and small as to not overwhelm the learner. Based on the andragogical assumption that adults are driven with intrinsic motivation and want to know why they need to know something and how it will apply to their immediate situation (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), how movement and grounding techniques work to bring connection between the mind and body, and how it serves the trauma survivor will be discussed.

This model is a 50-minute class once a week in an open setting. Students will have yoga mats and will situate themselves on the floor in the center of the open room. Each class the students will learn a new grounding technique. With each following class, the students will go over the previous classes' grounding techniques and will a new one that week. As the students learn grounding techniques, the instructor will discuss how to use grounding techniques as a coping mechanism for stress, and how the technique works to bring your mind and body back to the present moment.

About mid-way through the semester, when the students have become accustomed to connecting to their minds and bodies, the instructor will guide the students through movement techniques focusing on using movement as an expression. Movement will also focus connecting to thoughts and emotions that are typically difficult to express verbally. At the end of each class, time will be left for students to reflect and discuss their thoughts and what they experienced. Students will also be encouraged to practice what they learned throughout their week, especially when faced with difficult situations.

Relationship to Existing Adult Theory

When it comes to learning, the body has often been ignored. The dominance of rationality as a source of knowledge has played a part, but so has detachment from our bodies as a way of escaping feelings of pain or distress (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). As Snowber (2012) explains, the Western culture has been dominated by accumulating knowledge for the purpose of education. However, she further states, "the lived body is the felt body where we make connections to the multiple sensations around and within us" (p. 55). Bringing attention to the body can allow ourselves to react to our environment and ourselves as we listen to our bodies in open communication (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Embodied learning, embodiment, and somatic learning are all closely related as they are focused on constructing knowledge through an engaged awareness of bodily experiences. Embodied learning is about connecting to both the body and the world, and somatic learning is involved with body-centered and movement activities such as dance or yoga (Freiler, 2008). In embodied learning, education is directed to the whole person allowing the individual to experience themselves as a holistic "acting, feeling, thinking being-in-the-world, rather than as separate physical and mental qualities which bear no relation to each other" (Stolz, 2015, p. 474).

Embodiment and embodied learning places the body at the center site of learning and typically connects with other domains of learning such as rational, symbolic, affective, cultural, and spiritual (Freiler, 2008).

Conclusion

Due to the common nature of sexual trauma on college campuses and the impact trauma can have in learning environments, it is important for higher education institutions to incorporate opportunities for adult learners to reconnect to their bodies in a safe and welcoming atmosphere. Trauma survivors dealing with PTSD, dissociation, and anxiety can benefit from opportunities to reestablish the connection with their bodies gradually beginning with grounding techniques and building to movement of the whole body. These techniques can help sexual trauma survivors return to their bodies and be mindful of the present moment. When higher education institutions focus on teaching the whole learner, trauma survivors have the knowledge and experience to use constructive coping techniques to improve their learning experience and gain an overall sense of safety by connecting with themselves fully.

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