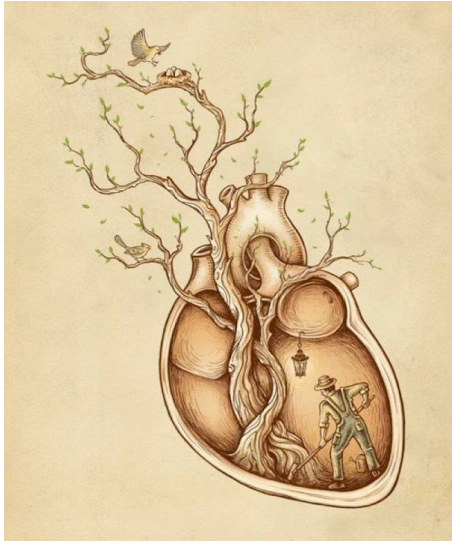


Getting To The Root Of It All . . . by Hala Khouri

Any gardener knows that in order to get rid of weeds, you don't just cut off the part that is sticking out of the soil, you must pull the root out. Otherwise, the weeds keep growing back. It's the same with stress—if we only address the parts of our stress that are obvious to us and on the surface, we will most likely find ourselves in an endless and unfruitful search for inner peace. Many of us fear getting to the root of our issues because we are afraid that we will not be able to survive the memories and big feelings that are beneath our symptoms. Many of us will do anything to avoid the source of our suffering—millions of dollars are spent every year on pills, potions and programs that promise a quick fix to our malaise. So-called gurus amass huge followings by promising enlightenment if you just get the particular initiation, secret mantra or special hug that only they can give you.



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I wish those things worked! I've seen hundreds of clients over the years—folks come in with all sorts of complaints—chronic health problems, depression, anxiety, addiction and just general lack of meaning and purpose. The people most stuck are the ones stubbornly clinging to dealing only with their symptoms rather than the root cause of their

symptoms. Most of us intuitively understand that a person is not an alcoholic only because they cannot resist alcohol, but because they are using the substance to hide from their feelings. If we only treat the alcoholism, the addiction will simply surface somewhere else (ie sugar addiction, or relationship addiction). It's like the Whac-a-Mol game at the fair, you punch one down and another one pops up right away.

Joe is a singer in a band. He came to be because he was having performance anxiety while on stage. He was doing a lot to manage the anxiety—hypnosis, meditation, herbs, and aromatherapy—but it wasn't getting better. During our session, he connected to having similar feelings as a child when he would perform in front of others. He always wanted to please his parents and make them proud, so he would perform even if what he really wanted to do was play at the park or go hide in his room. He never acted out as a child, and now, as an adult, all of that unexpressed energy starts to come out while he is performing. Once he connected to these unexpressed feelings, he could begin to work through them and let them go. Gradually his stage fright subsided and he could enjoy performing again.

Joe could have repeated a positive affirmation for years, but unless he confronted his core wound—in his case, the belief that if he didn't perform he wouldn't be loved, his symptoms would not have changed.

The Quickest Route to the Root

The body can be the quickest route to peeling through the layers of defenses that we develop in order to avoid our core wounds. Simple talk therapy can take a long time because it engages only the cerebral cortex, the rational mind. The problem is, the mind can be like a stubborn lawyer defending her case passionately. The higher mind is capable of earnest denial of deep truths, but the body often is not.

Leticia is a strong-willed woman in a corporate job that requires her to always appear composed and calm (non-emotional). She has mastered this skill, and it has carried over onto her personal life. She

came to me after her father died. She was not able to feel her sadness and grief, and she was concerned that it might impact her negatively if she didn't express herself. She had gotten so used to carrying on, even when things got tough, that she lost her connection to her true feelings.

In therapy, she seemed very calm and composed when talking about her dad. She said that they weren't that close which might be why she couldn't feel her sadness. I heard her words, but then when I asked her a simple question, "What is going on in your body right now?" she immediately broke down in tears. She had been using her rational mind to defend against her feelings for fear of appearing messy in front of others, that was a big fear of hers. She had chronic neck pain and digestive issues. Her body was literally gripping against any feelings that were messy or difficult. Had I relied on her rational brain to get to the core of the issue, we may have never gotten there. The body was the doorway in for Leticia, and she has now cultivated a practice of asking herself what she is feeling in her body in order to know how she truly feels about things.

Impulses, Emotions and the Rational Mind

We can think of our consciousness as having three parts—our impulses, which are connected to the most primitive and animalistic part of our brain, our emotions and our rational mind. In order to be balanced, we need to be in relationship with all three parts of ourselves, if one part gets stifled, it will clog us up physically and emotionally. Yet, most of us are taught to suppress our impulses and only acknowledge our feelings insofar as it's not inconvenient or uncomfortable for others. The side effect of that is tension and addiction; it takes a lot of work to suppress our impulses and our feelings.

You might be concerned that if all people decided to act on their impulses the world would be chaotic and unsafe. You're probably right. What we need to do is learn to express our impulses and the fullness of our feelings in a safe way that does not harm ourselves or someone else. Just even acknowledging our impulses can often be enough. Children don't have a highly developed neo cortex and for this reason they are very impulsive and emotional. All of us were kids at some point, and how our parents dealt with our big feelings and behavior creates a template for how we deal with them in ourselves and others. If we were shamed for our feelings or told not to express ourselves, we will likely internalize that voice and then shame ourselves. If we weren't taught what to do with our big feelings and impulses as children, how are we to know what to do with them as adults?

My five-year-old son has very big feelings. When he gets mad he wants to hit people and say mean things. I've taught him that it's normal to have those impulses, but that he has to find ways to get his anger out that doesn't hurt someone else. Now when he is mad he can say things to me like, "I really want to tell you I hate you because it will help me feel better" or "the only way I can get my anger out is if I hit my brother in the face!" I never shame him for what he says—I'm glad he's connected to his impulses without acting on them. Then we find other ways to express the impulses and emotions: yelling, growling, punching pillows or jumping on the trampoline. Slowly, I'm seeing that he is developing a relationship with his impulses—he understands that they are normal, and that he has to find ways to express them.

Balance

A balanced person does not simply feel good all the time. A balanced person has a palate of emotions and expressions. He is able to feel anger and sadness as well as hope and joy. She is able to acknowledge her impulses and the parts of her that she would never act on, without shame. When we are not hiding from ourselves, we feel more at ease and genuinely happy. In my experience, people who are happy with themselves don't have a lot of shame around their darker parts. They are in relationship with their shadow and their light.