

A Journey into the Mind/Body Connect For Treating Trauma Part II

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The word “biofeedback” was coined in the late 1960s. Simply put, Biofeedback is a treatment technique in which people are trained to improve their health by using signals from their own bodies. Chances are pretty high that you have used biofeedback yourself. Have you ever taken your temperature or stepped on a scale? What does the thermometer tell you? Whether you’re running a fever or whether you’ve gained weight, they both “feedback” information about your body’s condition. Once you have this information, you can take steps you’ve learned to improve the condition. When you’re running a fever, more than likely you go to bed and drink plenty of fluids. When you’ve gained weight, you may resolve to eat less or exercise.

Biofeedback uses physiological monitoring and feedback to let the patient develop awareness of, and learn to influence, bodily processes, such as muscle tension, heart rhythms, GSR and temperature. Various kinds of biofeedback units are used to read the physiological signals. Those signals are then translated into visual or auditory information. For example, the patient may see a graph on a computer screen that displays changes over time in their heart rate variability. Patients can be taught to change the pattern of their heart beats. They also become consciously aware of what internal cues are associated with changes in the feedback signal, and over time, they become their own biofeedback device, so to speak. Using the biofeedback monitoring units is very helpful at the beginning of treatment, but later on, the patient typically does not need it to achieve benefits.

As therapists we know that stressful events produce strong emotions, which produce certain physical responses. For every emotion we have a physiological response. Many of these

responses are controlled by the sympathetic nervous system, the network of nerve tissues that helps prepare the body to meet emergencies by “flight or fight.”

My introduction to biofeedback did not begin during the course of my micro-neuro reconstructive surgeries, but rather following a car accident in 1988. I was hit by a drunk driver. Though there were no visible signs of injury other than a “huge knot” in the occipital region of my head, it was determined by a team of doctors, including a psychiatrist, many, many months after my admission to Duke Hospital, I had indeed suffered a mild traumatic brain injury with persistent post concussion symptoms along with nerve damage to my right arm. Why is this significant? For many reasons. First and foremost I was introduced to Biofeedback. Remember the “feedback” concept I discussed earlier? There were many things that I was doing non-volitionally that were aggravating my pain, both physically and emotionally. Tense your body.....what happens?.....usually you stop breathing.....your breath controls your heart rate variability.....need I say more. The second reason is that quite by accident (no pun intended), it led me to who would ultimately become my reconstructive surgeon.

Over a decade later as my ‘surgical journey’ began, I would revisit biofeedback and learn beyond a doubt that the first step to responding to the challenges of a physical injury was to realize that your outlook on your situation plays an important role. An empowered attitude may help your recovery and improve your quality of life.

I so believe in “mind- body therapies.” They cover a really broad range of activities and treatments. Mind-body therapies range from movement-based activities, such as yoga and T'ai Chi, to techniques that are much more mentally focused, like **biofeedback**. I believe that Mind-Body therapies as those therapeutic interventions that include both body awareness and mental focus. They play an important role in improving health and well-being. I feel that the most

essential element of mind-body therapies is that the patient is an active participant rather than the passive recipient of treatment.

In my next article, I will discuss how I used Biofeedback to help me heal from both physical and mental trauma during my long and arduous journey, both pre and post operatively.

“Patients want to be seen and treated as a whole person, not as a disease.” Harold Koenig