

# CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  May / June 2006

## Psychotherapy: Moving from “Top Down” to “Bottom Up”

I recently had the pleasure of attending a professional conference in Los Angeles where many of the top names in attachment theory, trauma theory, and brain research presented papers and workshops.\* Some exciting research was shared that will increasingly impact the way in which we think about and treat many of the problems that currently confound us as a society and that we see on a day-to-day basis in our work with people at the Center.

This research lifted up the powerful role the deeper, non-rational, and sensory-oriented limbic portion of the brain plays in regulating emotions and controlling the behavior these emotions are designed to evoke. Operating for the most part outside awareness, this instinctual portion of the brain is not easily modified by appeals from the rational mind located in the upper cortical regions of the brain. This suggests that we will begin to see a shift occurring from the predominantly “top down,” rationally-focused approaches to psychotherapy to more “bottom up,” limbically-oriented approaches to bringing about change.

Over the years, counselors at the Center have seen two major developments in the types of problems for which people seek counseling. The first development is that more and more people suffer from problems caused by an inability to control their behavior. Their behavior is “out-of-control” in the sense it is inappropriate to a given situation. In many cases, it is also hurtful to themselves and others. We see this trend in both adults and children. Such out-of-control behavior is a troublesome dimension of post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic violence, sexual violence, various forms of self-harm, a wide range of addictive behaviors, and argumentative and non-compliant behavior in children. It even plays a role in what is commonly called “road rage.”

The second development that has occurred is that more and more people suffer from increasingly complex arrays of symptoms. These quite often take the form of various manifestations of anxiety and depression, which often occur together, and which share a number of overlapping symptoms.

A common characteristic of this wide variety of presenting complaints is the impaired ability persons have in effectively regulating their emotional states. Instead of their emotions motivating them to act in a functionally appropriate manner and feel alive in the world, their emotions become so overwhelming that they interfere with the capacity to direct energy in appropriate and effective ways. Common scenarios include: normal levels of anxiety become amplified to panic and fear; feelings of loss and despair become entrenched as depression; needing another to provide soothing and comfort turns to abuse when these needs are not provided on demand; and normal agitation over a lack of common courtesy becomes exaggerated to the point of aggressive and impulsive road rage.

Traditional approaches to treating these difficulties take a “top down” approach. They focus on ways to engage the cognitive

regions of the brain to “think about consequences,” “recognize when emotions are building,” and “think of alternative modes of expression.” In essence, we try in various ways to mobilize and strengthen the *rational* mind so it might exert greater control over *irrational* emotions and behavior.

Much of our traditional “talk” therapy focuses attention on the stories and experiences clients share. This is most often done in narrative form, and therapy proceeds as the therapist and client together explore the experiences, interactions, and personalities comprising the client’s life story and the relationship this history has to the person’s current concerns.

Different forms of psychotherapy focus attention on different components of this life story and its telling. Some focus more directly on the cognitive dimension, identifying “cognitive distortions” the client has developed over time and which now direct his/her thinking and behavior in patterned and problematic ways. Other approaches work on editing and re-writing the person’s narrative story into a script that is more accurate and life-giving. Still other approaches direct attention to behavior rather than words, using sets of rewards and punishments to reinforce positive behaviors and extinguish troublesome behaviors. All these approaches can be helpful, and each has a rich theory and base of research supporting its use. In reality, each of these approaches will be used by most therapists in the course of their work with any one person.

While these traditional “top down” approaches can be helpful in some situations, new methods of brain research are helping us understand why such approaches often produce limited results. We are learning that the limbic portion of the brain plays a major role in these “irrational behaviors.” The limbic region is a deep, centrally-located, sub-cortical area of the brain that is responsible for basic functions like survival and procreation (including basic mothering and parenting functions). This survival center of the brain mobilizes our bodies to act *before* thinking in situations where “taking time to think” would put us in greater danger. It is now thought that many of the emotional volatility and behavioral control issues noted earlier are the result of neural pathways through the limbic region being increasingly primed to fire with less and less provocation. This leaves individuals in a constant state of primed readiness to act, and less able to modify their emotional and behavioral responses by means of rational thought processes.

There are two major reasons why this growing body of research is so crucial. First, many of our socially sanctioned and supported treatment approaches to problematic and/or violent behaviors take a “top down, appeal-to-reason” and/or confrontational approach. We first attempt to engage a person’s rational mind to commit to a change in attitudes and behavior. If that doesn’t work, we impose various forms of power and control to “force” change or merely contain the behavior for some temporary

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period of time so self or others do not get hurt. To the extent that problematic behaviors are limbic-driven, affect-regulating issues, such as a “top down” approach will meet with limited success, and may even exacerbate the problem.

In addition, this new research is confirming what many of us have suspected for a long time – we need to develop more body-focused, energy-releasing, and movement-oriented forms of therapy that do not rely on the rational and cognitive areas of the brain to produce change. These “bottom up” approaches are proving to be very effective in helping people establish new neural pathways in and through the limbic region of the brain, learn effective methods of self-soothing and affect-regulation, and release memories and tensions held at a somatic level within the body that lead to physical illness or get triggered and lead to impulsive behavior that cannot be easily controlled.

In this area, the Center has been taking the lead in the community with its commitment to integrating complementary approaches such as Healing Touch™, bioenergetics, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and sensorimotor-oriented therapies with the more traditional models of therapy we have always used. This is an exciting and fruitful journey for all of us as we continue to learn and change.

J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D.  
Director of Professional Education

*Jeffrey Means is a licensed clinical psychologist. He holds a master of divinity degree from Christian Theological Seminary and a doctoral degree in pastoral counseling and psychotherapy from Northwestern University. Jeff is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Jeff is a diplomate in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors and a clinical member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Jeff provides counseling and psychotherapy to individuals and couples, with a special interest in dissociative disorders.*

*His interests also include teaching and clinical consultation.*

*Jeff is the author of Trauma & Evil: Healing the Wounded Soul, Fortress Press, 2000.*

\*This was the Fifth Annual Attachment Conference sponsored by the Lifespan Learning Institute, and it was entitled, “The Embodied Mind: Integration of the Body, Brain and Mind in Clinical Practice.”

For additional information on this topic see:

Pat Ogden, Kekuni Minton and Claire Pain. *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*. W.W. Norton, forthcoming August 2006.



Tom McFarlane (AAPC) presenting an award to Ellery Duke.

## C.O.O.L. Corner

Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life

### “Bottom Up”

My feet and legs in connection with earth tell me, “I am.”

- I am running barefoot through the grass.
- I am stomping through mud puddles.
- I am jumping up and down.

My body being held and people noticing how I feel tells me, “I have a right to be.”

- I have a right to be hugged.
- I have a right to be fed.
- I have a right to be listened to even when I am angry.

My arms and hands acting and doing tell me, “I have power.”

- I am playing tug-of-war.
- I am throwing and catching.
- I am unlocking the door.
- I am saying, “no.”

My heart can express a whole range of feelings and it tells me, “It’s okay to speak my truth.”

- I can tell you to go away, and trust that you will always be close by.
- I can tell you I need you, and trust that you will not reject me.

## DMPCC Awarded 2006 Distinguished Program Leadership Award

The Institutional Accreditation Committee of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) awarded its 2006 Distinguished Program Leadership Award to the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. This is the 18<sup>th</sup> year that the award has been presented. The award recognizes individuals and organizations that have made a significant contribution to the mission of the AAPC, *professionally integrating psychotherapy and spirituality.*

Ellery Duke, Executive Director, received the award on behalf of the Center at the AAPC annual convention in Louisville, KY, on April 29, 2006. Dr. Duke expressed, “appreciation for this remarkable recognition as the Center approaches our 35<sup>th</sup> year of bringing the healing and hope of pastoral counseling to central Iowa.” He thanked the AAPC and “most importantly, the thousands of clients who have trusted us and instructed us over all these years.”

## Women Helping Women 2006 Worth Anything At All?

A sold-out crowd enjoyed the inspiring presentation of this year's guest speaker at the Women Helping Women luncheon. Barbara Robinette Moss is certainly a woman who had experienced, in a life-changing way, the healing and hope available through counseling. When her life was spinning out of control, someone helped get her to a compassionate counselor. That made all the difference in her life.



Barbara Robinette Moss, Sheena Thomas

We at the Center are incredibly grateful for the generous support given to Women Helping Women by our underwriters: The Vicky Daniel Real Estate Team, Family Communication Associates, Jordan Motors, Kemin Industries, and The Lagniappe; and our sponsor: West Bank. Bouquets to the event volunteer committee: Miriam Davis, Starr Hinrichs, Mary Kramer, and Kathi Slaughter. And many thanks to the 74 women who have made a donation to help other women and girls who may be struggling with questions about whether they are worth anything at all.



Linda Sears, Claudette McDonald, Caren Sturm, Vicky Daniel

Won't you help the Center in this meaningful work by sending in your contribution to the Women Helping Women Fund. Access to quality, affordable counseling at critical moments in the lives of women and girls can mean survival. Just ask Barbara.



Joyce Chapman, Kari Schulte, Kathleen Murrin



Susan Ackelson, Miriam Davis

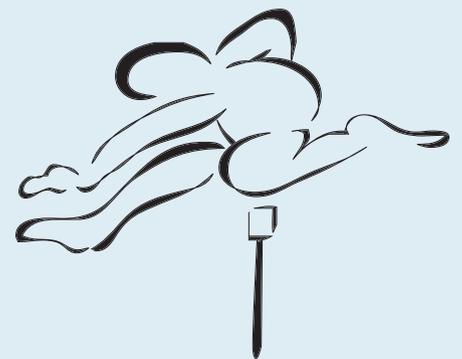


Elaine Szymoniak, Judy Conlin, Trudy Holman

## Hurdling for Healing

"So as not to waste your time, I'm going right for the 'ask': would you pledge your financial support as I race for a worthy cause?" That's how Center board member, Peter Olson, opens his letter to a small circle of friends and acquaintances, as he begins training in earnest to run the 110-meter high hurdles at the Iowa Games, July 16<sup>th</sup>, in Ames. What a creative and meaningful way to focus one's time, talent, and treasure toward a goal that will benefit the broader community.

Peter is making his own pledge, \$.05 for every practice hurdle (max 750) and \$3.75 for every race hurdle (10), which will go directly to the work of the Center for its mission of healing and hope. Hence the theme, **Hurdling for Healing**. We are thrilled at Peter's commitment and generosity of spirit to the work of the Center. We wish him the very best in this pursuit of his dream to qualify for the 2007 State Games of America. And we thank him for *setting the pace* for the Center in this special way.



# Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center FOUNDATION

What is it you want to leave as the legacy of your life? It is never too early to begin to consider your social-ethical legacy and to commit that to writing for your family. What about starting with the answer(s) to This I Believe....

At some point, you will want to take a look at your financial legacy. There are still significant tax advantages to planned giving. Check with your attorney or financial planner and make certain you have your affairs in order. And PLEASE consider including the Center's Foundation in your estate plan. Your gift could help ensure that the healing and hope of counseling will be available to those who come after you.

## A New Board Member

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center welcomes a new member to the board of directors: Starr Hinrichs. Starr has been a very active member of the Center's Women Helping Women planning committee for the past three years. She is in the process of retiring from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. We are delighted to have Starr add her talent and energy to our excellent board of directors.

# Educational Events for the Community

Are you listening to your body? Our spring 2006 events will help you do just that. The series is focusing on *The Body Talks*. All events take place on the first Tuesday of the month, 5:30 – 6:30 p.m., at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, 4126 Ingersoll Avenue in Des Moines. The events are free, but please call or e-mail the Center to let us know you will be attending or to obtain further information (274-4006 or [info@dmpcc.org](mailto:info@dmpcc.org)).

June 6, 2006  
Jacqueline Stoken, D.O.  
*The Difference a D.O. Makes*

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Stoken will discuss her unique approach to regaining health and decreasing pain. Utilizing an integrative approach that encompasses traditional Western Medicine and Natural Medicine, she strives to help her patients regain their vitality and live life to the fullest. Dr. Stoken is an osteopathic physician, board certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and also in Holistic Medicine.

## CONNECTING

is a publication of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, an independent, interfaith, not-for-profit organization. For nearly 35 years, the Center has been providing counseling and educational services to adults, families, adolescents, and children for the purpose of enhancing emotional, spiritual, and relationship health. The Center has satellite offices in Ankeny, Lamoni, Lenox, Leon, Mt. Ayr and Osceola.  
Editor: Kathleen Murrin

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