

Just when you thought it was safe to get back on the table...

I think it's fair to say that when COVID-19 first started to impact Australia, many of us as practice owners thought that we would just take a short break. After the bushfires that affected Australia earlier this year, I'm convinced that many of us did not anticipate the impact that coronavirus would have on our businesses and our lives, writes mental health and trauma expert Kerry Howard.



| Kerry Howard

Connection

As massage therapists, there is a strong connection between what you feel with your hands when you're working on a body, and the energy that you draw from being in connection with that human being.

For the majority, client work had to stop. This resulted in many people having a significant downturn in finances at a time when much of our family life was also disrupted.

Human beings are social creatures. COVID-19 has impaired our normal routine in social connection. Previously we would commute to work, we might grab a coffee and have a meeting. We might eat lunch at our desk or in the tea room with colleagues. We go to the gym or catch up with a friend for lunch, or go out to dinner with our partner or have family over.

These are all social cues that were safe, that we are a part of a social network, a community and we feel secure in that. So, when we are disconnected and isolated we are suddenly a 'lone wolf' who has to do everything for ourselves. It's not natural.

I have said it many times in the last couple

of months, but we really do live in the 'lucky country'. I am also extremely grateful that our land is 'girt by sea', especially when the nightly news is constantly blasting us with images of other countries around the world, where politics differ and social support is non-existent.

Just when we thought it was okay to relax regulations regarding work and how we can manage our lifestyle into the future, we see one of our major cities in Australia have a secondary flare up. This was always a fear of many high level health advisors in this country.

If you are lucky enough to live outside of greater metropolitan areas, then you are likely to have already returned to work, or certainly be considering doing so.

So how do we return to work, providing essential, connected and powerful therapeutic outcomes when we ourselves may not feel that we have the energy to give? We need to be introspective, self-aware and fully embodied.

Attachment

When we work with our clients, there is an energy exchange. In normal circumstances, we would pace ourselves to enable us to appropriately work through the clients' physical challenges in awareness of how much we can give. Most therapists have worked out their 'sweet spot' over time, that ideal number that provides you with enough income to live your life, and enough energy to enjoy living it.

What is unique about our current circumstances is that our clients are not only coming to us with their normal physiological challenges, but they bring with them a variety of psychological issues as well. At this point in time we also need to be mindful that we are also carrying our own psychological challenges. It is essential that we recognise them. In the current circumstances, every single person on the planet has been affected by long-term fear.

In my new book *The Trouble With Trauma* I outline specifically how emotions vibrate, and in that vibration, change the cellular functioning of our body. This is a process that happens for both the therapist and the client.

For the past several months, there has been a significant level of fear in our community. Fear is a very low vibrating emotion. You may recall when COVID-19 first escalated in Australia, the fear and uncertainty was palpable every time you stepped out into our community. It was really noticeable, especially in places like the supermarket when people got into your personal space.

Over time, these feelings become second nature to us. Now in social circles it's just not appropriate to hug or kiss your friends hello or goodbye, it's barely tolerable to touch hands! Yet, the human race survives on its ability to be connected. It is the fear of the uncertainty that provides an additional barrier to our ability to recover.

So, as therapists, how do we help our community to recover from the impact of this trauma? Especially when we are also part of that community and have to manage our own energy?

Most therapists, regardless of their profession, are exceptionally generous human beings. The natural tendency will be to provide as many services as needed, as quickly as possible, for as many people as you can. After all, we pride ourselves on our ability to be able to help others...

However, sometimes we need to fit our own oxygen mask first!

Validity

There are a variety of practical strategies that are important to put in place when you are returning to delivering face to face services. There are many places that might outline what



If you feel burnout setting in, feeling demoralised or exhausted – it is best for the sake of everyone to withdraw and restore yourself.

The Dalai Lama

these restrictions or obligations are, especially government health websites.

What is important, is the ability to recognise where we are at, in terms of our own mental and physical health. We need to ensure that we reflect on this, when we are making the determination about how many clients we are able to see.

We need to be aware of the fact that we are likely to self-sacrifice, to help others in need when we ourselves have not acknowledged that we are in need. We need to be clear on boundaries, availability of hours and even the personality characteristics of our clients, as these do impact our management of our time.

It is essential to be able to undertake some reflection with our clients about the impact of COVID-19 for them, as this helps you as the therapist to get a sense of physically what may be going on in their body, in full awareness of the impact of fear on their system.

Trauma impacts our body in two ways, and this is dependent upon the underlying emotion that is activated, whether that be fear or shame. In her ground breaking book *The Molecules of Emotion*, Candace Pert explains how emotions cause the body to physiologically vibrate and that this changes the way cells communicate. It is important to recognise that in our post coronavirus world, as a community, we all have higher levels of fear vibrating in our body than we have experienced at any point before in our lifetime.

It is not surprising that this will alter the way we would normally work. Our clients, if they have been significantly affected by job losses or isolation, may find their bodies will be more significantly impacted by this trauma. For many clients, the impact on their physiological presentation is very similar to grief.

Many therapists will find that clients will appear wanting to have physiological

treatments for psychological issues. It is extremely important for both the therapist and the client that you are able to recognise when the physiological issue appears to have a psychological basis and encourage your client to seek appropriate support for that. You may continue to provide effective treatment for your client's physiological challenges and facilitate the release of some of their psychological ones. However, it is important to remain self-aware throughout, and recognise when you may need to reduce contact and seek support for yourself.

No matter what the specific area of your practice, all therapists need to remain mindful. Aware of our own limitations, challenges and tendency to self-sacrifice. Failure to take account of these needs will guarantee that you will reach some level of burnout.

Recovery

When we understand the impact, we can take active steps to rebalance.

If we want to help others, then we need to understand that we also have to plan time in our day to nurture ourselves, spend time connected to the earth.

We need time to allow our brain and body to relax and connect with our surroundings – increase the vibration of our own emotions by engaging activities that encourage positive emotions to kick in.

Firstly – stop watching the news.

Research shows that watching the news will increase anxiety and make people feel more depressed.¹ I often suggest that people just listen to the radio for their small 'update on the world' soundbite news – that way you can get a 'feel' for what is going on in the world without getting embroiled in it. As human beings it is essential that we are able to soak in some light.

We have light receptors all over our brain

and we need to enable our brain to absorb light to help us regulate our emotions and support sleep. Most people know that we take light in through our eyes, but our skull is surprisingly transparent and it also facilitates the absorption of light. Plan for movement and encourage our clients to move as well. The impact of being told to stay home and isolate is that we stop moving as much.

We spend more time sitting sedentary and looking at screens. People have more pain in their hips and back from sitting and their neck and shoulders from typing and they are getting more headaches and eye strain from the blue light from screens.

As you return to work you will notice many of these commonalities with your clients.

As therapists, you understand that stretching is extremely important, we need to plan for stretch breaks and ensure that clients are doing this as well.

This is where technology really can come into its own – use an app to remind you to stand up and stretch, use a sit/stand desk and observe your posture.

As a society, we don't realise the impact of industrialisation on how we have come to live our lives. We have increased the variety of technology sources, but also reduced the obligation to maintain simple things that assist our physical bodies.

We no longer have to 'force' ourselves to do anything, or get uncomfortable. I believe that it is this shift in our society that has increased the levels of depression and anxiety that we see in the world today.

Let's face it – if I don't feel good today, I don't have to do anything about it. Industrialisation has brought many positives into our lives, but I believe it has also created some incredible negatives and I don't believe that we are truly aware of the long-term impacts as yet.

Self-awareness

Over the past twenty years there have been a variety of complementary or integrative therapies that are proving to have a positive impact on our psychological functioning. There are a variety of emerging ideas that people are adopting to manage our mental health and improve our physical health.²

When we consider the focus of many of these therapies, it is clear that they are filling the gap in our physiological experiences that we no longer have to face due to the modern way of living, post industrialisation.

It doesn't really surprise me that pushing our physical body to extremes would be having an impact on our varying systems. There are a number of different examples of how our body responds to extreme pressure from one source or another – including the impacts from deprivation and even to the benefits of intermittent pressure. These approaches more recently have shown to have positive impacts on our body in everything from weight loss to improving muscles mass and fitness.

If we consider a range of movements that have begun in the past ten years that appear to offer incredible results in a short time period – they all involve shocking the body outside of what it would normally expect.

From cold water therapies for managing pain, intermittent fasting for weight loss to high intensity interval training for building muscle strength – we are aware that placing the body in a situation that is different to the 'usual' really seems to have a dramatic, seemingly positive impact.

I just think it's really interesting to observe how we are evolving as human beings when many of the things that we normally have done over thousands of years in adapting to our environment, are then overlaid with our industrialised world. In essence, we no longer have to adapt, so do we then stop evolving?

The advancement of our understanding of psycho-neuro-immunology continues to grow and the medical profession is really starting to come to life around the linkages between our physical health and our mental health and recognising that the key to recovery is to treat holistically.

There are many supporters of the need for effective gut health in order to maintain good

mental health, and this notion makes sense when we consider that our gut is our 'little brain'. It forms from the same part of the neural tube that your brain develops from, when you are an embryo. We know that your gut is clearly involved in common mental health issues because recent research indicates that 95% of your serotonin (the neurotransmitter that is thought to be most involved in feeling good) is developed in your gut.

Diet and gut health affects symptoms expressed by anxiety; stress and depression can be seen through changes in gut microbiota.

As we learn more about the functioning of our physical bodies, we learn about the impact of our psychological expression and our somatic functioning.³

The benefits of music should not be overlooked. Music is used to regulate mood and arousal in everyday life and to promote physical and psychological health and wellbeing in clinical settings, such as for pain management, relaxation, psychotherapy and personal growth.⁴

The notion that 'music is medicine' has roots that extend deep into human history through healing rituals practiced in pre-industrial, tribal-based societies.⁵

As more options are developed for integrative approaches in the treatment of our mental health issues, we will see more evidence for the interplay between our mind and our bodies.

The key for you to understand about all of these integrative therapies is that we need to be able to build self-awareness about our own challenges and engage in many varied activities and ways of living that support us to connect to our bodies and our communities, to enable us to feel our best. It is not for anyone else to judge your decisions or tell you 'how' to fix this, nor tell you how you should feel or not feel.

The decision about how we approach recovery in this life is a combination of many things that help you to feel better – be open, try new things and don't care what anyone else thinks about it!

Empowerment

When we have good insight into our own system we are able to cope with any stressor and manage our way through it effectively. That is not to say that we will behave 'perfectly', but we can be aware of our behaviour and be

more accepting of our short-comings as human beings. We are, after all, imperfect!

In better understanding our behaviours and response, we can more readily recognise when situations or circumstances have impacted us or impaired our ability to respond rationally. We are all capable of taking better control over our lives and outcomes, but we can't do it unless we learn better self-awareness and learn how to connect with our bodies. Our gut responses are there to protect us – your mind is not only your head, it is your whole upper body, right down through your torso – we just need to learn to listen to it and recognise when we have specific reactions and understand why.

Research shows that our brains start to consolidate information within the first six hours after a traumatic event, so one of the first steps in self-awareness is the ability to undertake some activities that can help to minimise the impact of our experiences.

When we get stressed, we often talk things over with someone close to us. We are looking for engagement with others and support for our experience, seeking a connection that validates our perspective. In short, the stressor creates the potential for a disconnection and the connection with our friends and family through telling them the story is designed to facilitate our processing of the problem as we either get confirmation of how the experience was unreasonable and the problem is external, or we get confirmation that we did something wrong and the issue is internal.

Mastery

The reality of any situation is that self-aware people are constantly trying to move themselves forward, they want to grow and embody rational awareness.

There are many people in the world who prefer to externalise everything, they don't grow or change because they operate in constant numbing – avoiding responsibility and stagnating their life.

We all know people like this and they can't acknowledge that their problems might actually rest with them – it's easier to blame everyone else.

In *The Trouble With Trauma* I clearly outline how we can develop mastery over our self-management system.



The notion that 'music is medicine' has roots that extend deep into human history through healing rituals practiced in pre-industrial, tribal-based societies.

When you understand the system and how conflicts arise, you can approach each situation with curious observation about your own behaviour.

The challenge for us as human beings is that most people are looking for a way to eliminate their feelings, repress them and make them go away, as this is how we have been taught to manage our emotions all of our lives.

This book clearly shows you why this approach is fraught with difficulty - for our health and happiness. To be happy and healthy we need to understand our emotional responses, validate our experiences and rationally move things forward.

Ultimately, we need to be aware that we have to take responsibility for addressing our emotional needs, understanding what drives them and working towards a rational solution for resolving them.

Kerry Howard is based out of Canberra and is a best-selling author and trauma psychologist who in 2018 was recognised as Australia's Most Compassionate Women in Mental Health.

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