

Pain: An Experiential Exercise*

The following exercise can be used to get in contact with the role of pain in one's personal life by bringing back general theoretical constructs and research findings to personal living. Everybody is encouraged to continue this way with his/her own favorite ideas on pain – trying out how they work and carry forward to a shift of a deeper understanding of pain.

Focusing and the experiential use of concepts may be helpful in finding the very specific personal meaning of pain in life. I only can guess a relationship between the „meaning“ which is created by the presence of pain in one's life and the hidden medical „chain of causation“ which maintains chronic pain. Thinking from this distinction and relationship between „personal meaning“ and „cause/causation“ we can learn both more about pain and the role of the experiential method in medical context.

Originally, this instruction was written as a group instruction. Pieces of this instruction can also be used in the one-to-one process of working with someone suffering from chronic pain.

Right now, it can also be taken as an exercise in experiential reading/writing by yourself:

Step by step:

Read one piece of instruction

take the questions inside

stay with them,

wait what comes,

write down your response like talking to a partner... or paint it, move...

stay some moments with what you wrote, painted.....

Then move to the next

Outline:

- (A) Preparing for the group instruction (creating a safe place)
- (D) Focusing on the „pain situation“
- (C) Getting back to a situation of physical pain in personal life
- (D) Focusing on the „pain situation“
- (E) Trying out theoretical viewpoints on pain:
Do they make sense for that personal experience
- (F) Viewpoint: Thoughts
- (G) Viewpoint: Habits, behavior
- (H) Viewpoint: Family situation / relationships
- (I) Closing

(A) Preparing for the instruction (creating a safe place)

- Goals for the exercise:
Trying out, if assertions about the relationship between physical pain and its (inaccessible/ unconscious) „meaning“ make personal sense, can carry self-understanding of the „meaning of the pain experience“ forward.
- Preparation for the exercise:
Providing / creating a safe personal space:
Check, if it feels okay right now to get in contact with a personal pain experience (if not: don't do it !)
Interrupt, if you feel something „too much“
Imagine whom you could talk with after the exercise, if you wanted to.

(B) Relaxation / making space

- Do it the way you are used to do relaxation, making space - or follow my instructions
- Take a position *as if* you are going to relax

Take a deep breath

Let the awareness come in the middle of your body: How is your body feeling now ?

* This paper was first presented at the International Focusing Conference 1995 in Boston

Welcome the different parts of your body - if possible, in an attitude of empathy and positive regard, accepting whatever you are realizing now, more and more ... (feet, knees, legs, belly, chest, neck, head, ...)

Imagine you're looking from a bridge to the river below: Can you see the leaves on the surface of the water: coming and going ...? Imaging your thoughts now to be like these leaves: Coming and going ...

Now, please go back to the middle of your body: How does this part of your body feel right now?... Any difference from the beginning ... ?

(C) Getting back to a situation of physical pain in personal life

- Now I'll invite you to the next step: Please go back to a period or situation in your life when you suffered from PHYSICAL PAIN ... Is it possible... (?) to get back ... (?) in contact ... (?) with this issue in your life ... (?: PHYSICAL PAIN ... (?:

If something is coming up to you ... please care for the right distance ... just get a little bit of the „smell“ of that situation or period of physical pain ... *Do not* go „into“ the pain ... maybe it's good to remember the strong and safe place in you, from where you can do all the steps of this exercise ... ?

(D) Focusing on the „pain situation“

- (Inviting people to focus the way they are used to do - or follow instructions):
- Now: let your attention come to the middle of your body: How does it feel in your body - this issue of PHYSICAL PAIN ... (?:

Is something reacting ... does it make any difference ... now (?) ... in the middle of your body ... (?: to be with PHYSICAL PAIN in your life ... (?:

Where can you feel something ... (?:

How does it feel right there ... (?: ... this PHYSICAL PAIN ?

Could you feel a word ... (?: an image ... (?: or another symbol for that feel or sense in your body ... (?:

Now, if you got any symbol ... word ... (?:, image ... (?: of this period or situation of physical pain you could try out to broaden your view on your life situation ... then, when you experienced this pain ... is it possible ... (?: ...

and try out now, if that symbol (word, image or something else..., that feel ...) *somehow fits* to this whole life (or to a part of your life before and during the pain...)

(Maybe it's not possible to *describe* this intricate relationship between your pain and your life then ... (?:)

Makes that any sense to you ? ...

Stay a little bit with it ...

Viewpoints to pain ...

- Now, I'll invite you to check your personal experience of physical pain under the simplified viewpoints of some theoretical assertions coming from psychological research on pain ...

(E) Viewpoint: Thoughts

- The first viewpoint I'd like to offer you are thoughts:

Can you remember your *thoughts during physical pain* ... (?: ... the way you are thinking ... the *quality*, the tone of thinking ... (?: How was it ... (?:

Now you can compare your thoughts to the theoretical assumption, that - „thoughts during pain are tending to be negative ...- that this negative thinking is making physical pain more painful“

Does this assumption of „negative thinking during physical pain...“ somehow relate or fit to your „personal experience of pain ... (?)

Please check up

A further step:

Can you *imagine* how it would be, if you could think *positively* ... whatever that could mean for you ... *think positively during pain* ... (?)

How could that happen: Thinking positively during pain ... (?)

And *if it could happen* somehow: What difference would it make ... (?) Can you feel that now ... how it would *feel different: Thinking possessively during pain* (Stay a little while with it...)

(F) Viewpoint: Habits, behavior

- Now I'll offer you a second „checkpoint“ for your „pain experience“

Your habits res. behavior during (that) period of pain ...:

Is / was there anything in your behavior / habits in your daily life you *should change* in favour of your pain, but you *don't* ... or you *won't* ... *change* ... (?)

(For example: If you have back pains, you're still continuing to carry heavy weight things...)

Is there anything of that quality in your behavior ... ? ... you should change, but ... (?) Is there anything to realize ... (?)

- Some research findings are bringing up this point:
“Behavior is not changed, remains in the old structure during physical pain ... and this makes pain more painful...”

Can you feel that „something“ which is in the way of changing your behavior in favor of your pain... (?)

And now again:

Can you get a vision how you *would* behave, if you really would change *your behavior according* to your physical pain ... (?)...

- What would you *do differently* ?

How would this *changed* daily life look like ... (?)

And: can you *feel* the difference *now*?

How would it feel if you *changed* your *behavior* according to / *in favor* of your *pain* ... (?)

(Stay a little while with this difference)

(G) Viewpoint: Family situation / relationships

- Now a third and final offer for checking your pain for meaning
- Some psychological approaches to pain assert that pain has something to do with the family or partnership situation

If you want to explore this aspect for your physical pain experiencing

I invite you to imagine ... in front of your „inner eye“ ...: a wall painting containing the various facets of your family or relationship situation before and during that pain ...

Let your „inner painter“ create something ... uncontrolled .. just let come up this painting, titled „My family / relationship situation before and during my (physical) pain experience ...“

Can you see anything ... (?)

And now: Ask your inner painter to symbolize your pain somehow ... creatively ... within this painting... Is it possible ... (?) ... maybe the meaning of this symbol in the painting stays unclear first .. like in a dream image

Could you just stay with that painting, containing your relationship and your pain

Does that make sense to you(?)

Is there anything you *can understand better ... more clearly ...* when you *take this separate points together: your pain ... and your (experience of) relationships/family ?*

(Just stay with both and see what comes ...)

(I) Closing

- Now I ask you to find a good way to close this exercise ...
- Take the time you need to come back now ...
Care for whatever you need to feel good, when you're back ...

Be aware of what you want to take with you from this exercise; make sure, that it feels okay.

(If necessary: be aware of your inner critic ! Is she/he mixing up something ...: Send her/him away or cope with it in a good way ...)

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