How do you know what kind of support you need?

At some point in your experience of yourself either in relationships, family life, career, recreational or spiritual life it might become apparent that you need some kind of assistance to meet your needs and to fulfill your dreams. Perhaps you find yourself to be disorganized, uninspired, in the midst of persistent communication glitches, feeling stressed, conflicted, angry or suffering from outright health problems that are affecting these other areas of your life. It's time to get help, but where do you turn? Two approaches that are often used are coaching or some form of therapy. In this newsletter I want to explore both body-based coaching and a particular form of body-based therapy called Somatic Experiencing® which deals with healing the effects of unresolved trauma. All the complaints above can usually be significantly helped by either coaching or resolving trauma.

Body-based coaching and trauma resolution are both part of a continuum of education and care that addresses some of the missing pieces in our ability to successfully understand and resolve life challenges. There are key differences between the two, however, as well as common ground. Understanding the scope of the two practices will avail us of the best help possible for our particular situation.

Both practices use the body as an indispensable part of the problem-solving and healing processes. It is certainly possible to make progress without using the body as a resource but the extent of the progress will be limited. It is truly what we have embodied - literally - that determines our fundamental experience of life.

How does coaching work?

Coaching is designed to help people by providing information; clarifying purpose, vision, short- and long-term goals; helping to develop appropriate personal skills. Coaching is not therapy as it is not dealing with correcting pathological states. A coach works with someone who is "coachable"
meaning that the person is able to work with the coach as part of a team and is able to respond to and to employ the material that is being worked with with attention and practice. The coach does not shoulder the burden of any problems an individual might have but rather supports the person to become more skilled and focused in dealing with situations through information, establishing authentic goals based on individual purpose, and increasing resourcefulness.

How body-based coaching works

Body-based coaching uses processes that access "body-wisdom" to help gain clarity that might not be available through systematic rational thought. An example would be using body response to help validate appropriate goals. As a person determines specific goals or outcomes that they wish to pursue, the "felt sense" or resonance of them can be felt in the body. If something doesn't "feel right" via the energetic patterns in the body, then this is a clear indicator that the goal is off the mark in some way. Fine tuning goals via sensing the body response to them will help to establish goals that are consistent with the person's individual purpose and that can be accomplished in a practical way.

Additional body-awareness skills can include an inner dialogue with sensations as they arise in the body in response to asking questions. The wisdom here is that sensations in the body are the perceptible play of the nervous system that interpenetrates every aspect of our functioning. Research now indicates that the phrase "gut instinct", for example, isn't just an expression but reflects the fact that our gut is indeed filled with cells that function much like our brain. Our gut is capable of processing answers to inquiries in a way comparable to our brains. Likewise "heart intelligence" refers to a complex interaction between brain-like cells in our physical hearts along nerve pathways to the frontal cortex of the brain. Using the resource of body wisdom becomes obvious when these vast resources are considered. Our usual thought patterns are typically quite conditioned by habit and survival needs, both of which are centered in less capable parts of the brain and nervous system developed earlier in our evolution. Accessing the entire system through guided inquiry or movement provides a much greater scope of intelligence and creative response.
Tuning into the body for inspiration

Coaching is geared to help people live a life that feels inspiring. If your love life, family life, recreational life, career and spiritual life are inspiring, there is a deep level of nourishment, balance and sense of growth and fulfillment. And how do we know when we’ve achieved this? It will "feel" this way, our bodies are filled with a sense of rightness and satisfaction at the core.

Have you ever tuned an instrument? If you have then you know how it is when you get the pitch exactly right. It sounds different and it feels different. A precise note sounds clear and clean. It feels centering and simple. If it’s flat it sounds and feels more murky and, well, flat and dull. A sharp note sounds shrill, it’s agitating. A guitar string that's tuned just right will produce a sound that feeds the soul. It's in the resonance. Everything has resonance and we can feel it physically. This is where the satisfaction and inspiration lie. Good coaching encourages a person to adopt practices, attitudes and rhythms that produce this resonance inside. That’s when you know you're on the mark - you've found what it is for you in particular that supports a joyous life. If you can feel it in your body then it's there to help you in your life.

Trauma and how it affects us

How is the subject of trauma relevant to personal growth? A lot of people who seek out coaching or many other practices and therapies in order to move forward in their lives, will become frustrated because they won't get the results they want. In this day and age of many approaches that are marketed as "one size fits all" we tend to expect that just plugging ourselves into some kind of self-improvement model will be a kind of magic bullet that will transform our quality of life. Additionally, if we are intelligent, well-motivated, diligent, etc., and if after trying these different approaches we still feel impaired or wrong in our lives, there can be a tendency to lose hope and to conclude that either there's something wrong with us or it's really not possible to be happy in life. The unacknowledged problem here is that many people who seek help are actually suffering the effects of unresolved trauma.
Unresolved trauma can be crippling, physically, emotionally and mentally. The effects of trauma can appear in many forms: chronic disorganization and disorientation, depression, disease syndromes, fear or anger management problems, learning difficulties, unwanted repetitive behavior, self-sabotage, sleep disorders, addictions, ... to name a few. Someone who is not overly traumatized (I say overly because we have all experienced some amount of trauma) who works with a coaching program will be successful because that person is capable of learning new material, interrelating with another, and changing behaviors at will. Unresolved trauma makes a lot of this impossible and if this phenomenon is not understood can deeply frustrate and retraumatize the traumatized person, which will make things that much worse.

The phenomenon of trauma is important to understand. It affects most of us and those we love and work with to some degree. Fortunately there is now considerable expertise available to address this widespread problem. In our culture we are dominated by a bias that says that if we can mentally understand something and if we will ourselves to master something, we’ll be successful. In the case of unresolved trauma this couldn’t be farther from the truth. Trauma lives in the part of our brains and nervous system that is separate from where rational thought originates. This means that we can understand our situation but still be stuck in it if it isn’t dealt with where it lives in our body, the more primitive parts of the brain and nervous system.

**My experience of coaching and trauma resolution**

Coaching and trauma work, amongst other disciplines I use, are practices I feel very passionate about because they have greatly helped me and many people I’ve worked with.

I personally received coaching from some extraordinarily gifted people who assisted me in becoming more focused, clear and organized in my work and personal life. It increased my communication abilities, clarity of personal purpose and an understanding of how to individualize my work style so it would fit how I work, amongst other skills, and gave me many resources to bring to any kind of project I might be involved with. Coaching is a joy to bring to any situation in life as it is an in-depth creative
way to work as a team with another towards accomplishing satisfying personal goals.

Trauma resolution became an important approach for me later along my path as I realized that even with my skills, persistence, intelligence, life experience and willingness there was a degree of upset and limitation always present internally which was out of proportion to the actual stress present in the moment, which would not yield to any kind of approach I tried. And I had tried many. It was very frustrating partly because it was altogether inexplicable, unreasonable and very stuck. To the world I seemed much more calm and collected than I felt internally.

By "chance" I became aware of Somatic Experiencing®, the work of Dr. Peter Levine. In learning about how trauma affects us (see Dr. Levine’s excellent book: Waking the Tiger), a light came on. The change I have experienced personally as a result of receiving this work, Somatic Experiencing® or SE®, has been nothing short of remarkable. A great gift I initially received from it was enormous compassion for myself and others who are bound up in the constraints of unresolved trauma.

I came to understand that someone in the grip of old trauma just can’t snap out of how they’re being or thinking that might be destructive to themselves or others. What a shock to realize that effects from incidents much earlier in my life, such as a major car accident 20 years ago or being thrown from horses as a kid, could affect my work and relationship life so many years later. Resolving old trauma stuck in my nervous system was like stepping out from under a dark cloud, being given back the gift of my own self. I practice this work with others to extend the gift it has brought to my life.

**Somatic Experiencing®**

Trauma used to be thought to be caused by extreme circumstances, suffered only by soldiers in war, victims of catastrophe, or more recently as women’s lib has revealed, victims of domestic abuse. Trauma wasn’t even a category of psychological consideration until the 1970’s. The general thought was that bad things happen, time passes and we move on and get over whatever it was. Wrong!
Trauma is defined generally as any survival experience that is overwhelming at the time it occurs and that produces fixity in our point of view, emotions, behavior and body that is chronic. With this understanding we can add many other causes of trauma to our list because it is always the effect on the individual that is crucial. What is traumatizing for one person may not be for someone else, and the effects may take years to appear.

The hallmark of trauma is that some part of the person is constantly stuck in the trauma as if it were still going on, although the person may have no conscious awareness of the original event(s). This nervous system preoccupation means that our survival mechanisms are "stuck on" and we are constantly responding as if there is some kind of emergency. As I listen to many of the battle stories of my clients working in corporations, many of the management styles sound very much like this kind of "emergency mentality"!

**Tuning into the body for healing**

Peter Levine's work has provided a way of accessing the nervous system directly through working with attention on sensations in the body that allows the different parts of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system to "discharge" the bound highly charged energy that has been held in storage ever since the original event. Animals do this naturally in the wild after danger has passed (which is why gazelles don't go around with PTSD - post traumatic stress disorder); humans with their highly developed and socialized brains have a much harder time doing this. Once this discharge occurs, the nervous system can finally recognize that the danger is over and can reset back to normal.

Bound energy contributes to headaches, back pain and all manner of physical symptoms, hypervigilance, spaciness, overaggressive behavior, shyness and exaggerated social fears, learning problems, depression, etc. as well as all the coping mechanisms that develop to try to create balance.

One interesting side effect of trauma is shame. We are all familiar with the sense of shame that can come from being ridiculed or criticized, but it turns out that even physical trauma which does not include social shaming can produce a residual effect of shame. Humans are essentially herd animals. When a member of a herd is wounded they automatically separate
themselves from the herd because they know they are vulnerable, therefore less able to survive and possibly a threat to the general well-being of the herd. The accompanying psychological state that arises in humans is shame. So a child might experience a physical accident such as falling off a bicycle, subsequently have a harder time concentrating in school and also feel a sense of isolation and shame around peers and teachers. This same pattern can persist into adulthood creating under performance on the job.

Unresolved trauma is a lot like trying to drive a car while holding down both the accelerator and the brake at the same time, wondering why you are bumping into things and not getting anywhere. Once the system has reset back to normal we are naturally calmer, more organized, creative, healthier and have a much stronger sense of being in touch with our self, others and the environment, because we can respond appropriately to what's in the present moment.

On a cautionary note, trauma does not explain everything and one should seek out whatever other care or practices are appropriate.

**Common Ground:**

**Coherence**

Coaching and trauma resolution have a common goal of producing something called coherence. Coherence is experienced when there is integrity internally and externally. Integrity allows resilience, satisfaction, joy, creativity, competence, alignment with ones highest values and purpose, healthy relationships and a healthy body. It is as if we are both one with the greater pulsation of life that guides and nurtures us and one with our very individual selves. Coherence is a total experience, not just a mental construct. Coherence occurs when our body, emotions, mind and spirit are all in agreement with one another.

**Resourcing**

One of the greatest skills of both coaching and trauma resolution is called "resourcing". A resource is anything that contributes to balance and a deep feeling of well-being and capability. Resources support life in general and
all of your specific endeavors.

Resourcing exercise:

Contemplate and write down for yourself what the resources in your life are right now. Examples of resources are:

people we know - friends, family, mentors
exercise
spiritual practices
community
creative work
music
enjoying nature
specific memories that are affirming of positive qualities in our self or others
pets
healthy food
colors we keep around us
poetry, etc.

Focusing on our resources produces pleasurable feelings in our body of well-being, support, vitality, capability, balance, connectedness, inspiration, and so forth. It’s important to 1) develop resources and 2) to notice the feelings that are produced in your body when you are connected to a resource. Over time it becomes more and more normal to feel good, to be productive and full of life as you spend more time feeling the feelings that go along with these states as they arise in the body. It’s an upward spiral with its own momentum and you can encourage this momentum by bringing your attention to the wellness in your life through your sensation-al experience in your body.