

Practice Notes

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Editor's Note: Donna has been a skillful and inspirational Hakomi trainer for many years. In this article she shares some of her insights from both her practice of Hakomi Therapy as well as her training and supervision practice. "Part I: The Hakomi Way" was done in conjunction with Hakomi Founder Ron Kurtz and concentrates on the overall Hakomi method. "Part II: Expressing Feelings in Hakomi" applies the method to this particular issue.

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ABSTRACT: Reflects on the overall process of Hakomi Therapy in terms of studying the organization of experience for indicators of unconscious core organizing beliefs and the corresponding missing experiences needed to organize in nourishing possibilities currently organized out. Emphasizes the need for the therapist to develop relationship of loving presence while encouraging mindful exploration of present experience, and applies this approach to the specific issue of expression of emotion in therapy.

Part One: The Hakomi Way (edited by Ron Kurtz)

The Hakomi Method of psychotherapy has been recently described by its creator, Ron Kurtz, as a method of *assisted self-study*.

What Hakomi is interested in studying is the *organization of experience*. To do this, Hakomi uses *mindfulness* – a kind of quiet, non-interfering attention to present moment experience – and little experiments to evoke experiences to study. The attention in Hakomi is on *present* experience.

The Hakomi practitioner is trained to pay attention to two things about present experience: first, what it is (i.e. what is happening now); and second, how it is being organized. We call this way of paying attention "tracking". First, we are tracking *signs* of the client's present experience. Secondly, we are tracking for *indicators* (that may be signs) of how the client is organizing present experience.

Yes! We're tracking for nonconscious habits which may be indicators of foundational experiences, which resulted in implicit beliefs that organize experience into actions and emotions that create unnecessary suffering.

Experience is organized by habits. Some habits create experiences of suffering, suffering which is, in effect, unnecessary. This is the kind of experience that we can actually help the client with. We can also help with the kind of suffering that is normal, like grief for the loss of a loved

one. If the client's present experience is painful because of difficult life events happening in present time, we can offer compassion and comfort. We also offer comfort when the client is experiencing emotional pain related to some past experience that has been brought to consciousness by the therapeutic work. Many of these painful past experiences were overwhelming and were not completely integrated. This leaves an 'irritation' to the system which requires energy and habits to keep the painful experience away from consciousness. We are also very interested in helping the client become awake in the present moment and aware of the possibility that some kind of nourishing experience, formally unavailable, is available right now.

So, in Hakomi, we are not working on the person's history. We are, after all, only able to guess at someone's history. Even someone's memory is not a reliable source of information about their history. Remembering, however, is a present time experience and, as such, it can reveal how experience is organized, unconsciously and automatically. It is the habitual organization of experience that we want to address as this is what causes unnecessary suffering in present time.

The Hakomi Way is grounded in spiritual understandings gathered from Taoism and Buddhism. Buddhism teaches that the world is always changing. Taoism teaches that these changes are spontaneous, natural, appropriate and do

not need to be controlled by humans. (“Spring comes and the grass grows by itself.”)

Taoism teaches us that what happens is what happens. There is no *should* or *should not* about what happens . . . or what has happened. We learn to rest into things as they are and as they are unfolding. Buddhism teaches us about wisdom and compassion. In Buddhism, we understand that the only reality is the present. The past is a dream. The future is a dream. Only the present moment is real. This is wisdom. However, many of us continue to experience the present as if in a dream. We are dreamers. But, this power to dream also makes us great planners with a great capacity to anticipate and to remember. So our minds are filled with imaginings, many full of fear and hurt that do not match the present state of things. This ignorance and delusion causes unnecessary suffering. We are not fully awake to life as it is.

Experience is organized by habits and ideas. When the ideas that organize our experience are operating outside of consciousness, they are called implicit beliefs. When our actions are organized by behaviors that are on automatic, outside of conscious awareness, they are called reactions.

In Hakomi we want to assist clients to study present experience for clues about their implicit beliefs and the reactions that influence how they organize life experience. We want to help clients discover nourishing experiences that they are not having in present time because of how they are organizing their experience.

There is some misunderstanding about what is meant by the “missing experience” in Hakomi. Let me try to clarify.

Since Hakomi is a method that focuses on present experience, even what we mean by the *missing experience* is something happening (or not happening) in present time. This might be related to childhood experiences, but those are outside our sphere of influence (unless we are working with an actual child). The only place where we can realistically intervene is in present time. We can ask, how does the person seem to be organizing his or her experience based on behaviors or ideas that are outside of conscious awareness?

And what positive or nourishing experience is missing for the person, right now, because of how she or he is organizing experience? There is this very significant connection between implicit beliefs, habits and the inability to receive certain kinds of emotional nourishment. Implicit beliefs and the habits associated with them, inhibit those perceptions and actions that would create positive experiences. One good reason to bring such beliefs into consciousness is it provides an opportunity to realize how such beliefs actually do that. So, one kind of missing experience is missing because of the habits that keep it from happening.

A second important type of missing experience is one that would have supported the integration of a painful event at the time it first happened. When an old emotional hurt comes into present consciousness, it can be met with a kind of emotional support that was missing during the original event. With kindness and understanding there to meet it now, emotions may flow freely and come to a natural completion spontaneously.

With genuine emotional support, the old pain and its negative effects on the organization of experience have a good chance of dissolving. This kind of unintegrated painful experience is very common. Providing the emotional support that was missing can be very effective.

Talking about past events is only one source of information about how someone is organizing experience. Nonverbal behavior is perhaps a more accurate source. Memory is a very unreliable source of accurate information about the past, but it can be a source of information about beliefs, especially when we pay attention to the person’s unspoken assumptions. A better source is paying attention to nonverbal behavior, searching for indicators of those habits and beliefs connected to the narrative elicited by the memory.

Hakomi was originally referred to as “body-centered” psychotherapy because the information about someone’s present experience and how someone is organizing experience is more available from nonverbal expression than from what the person can or does say in words. So we track nonverbal signs of present experience and indicators of how experience is organized.

In Hakomi, we are accompanying the client on a journey. We are constantly following signs of his or her present experience and where it is going.

The Hakomi Way has four distinguishing characteristics as a therapy method. Two have been with the method from the beginning; two have evolved more recently. From the beginning, there was a focus on present experience and the use of little experiments in mindfulness for the purpose of self-discovery.

What has evolved since is the movement toward a nourishing missing experience. This evolution has been two-fold: First, there is now more understanding of the missing experience as a present experience. We are looking for what kind of nourishing experience the person needs now and is ready for, one that is missing only because the person’s own habits and beliefs make them so. And we will supply it, if we can.

Second, we have more understanding now of how important experience is in shaping the brain, and how important the new nourishing experience is in changing how the mind perceives and responds to life. So we want to spend more

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time on creating the nourishing experience and less time on the old painful experience. Painful emotions are evoked only long enough to give us the information about what kind of nourishing experience is needed. The focus of attention and time in the therapy session is now on providing the nourishing experience needed and of making sure it is taken in.

One way of doing this, throughout the whole therapy session, relates to the final key ingredient of Hakomi as it has evolved. There has always been an awareness of the importance of what we call the *healing relationship*. In the past ten years, we have realized that the key to the healing relationship is the state of mind of the therapist. We are calling the particular state of mind that creates the best possibility of a healing relationship *loving presence*.

Loving Presence is now seen as the key to the whole method.

Previously, in psychotherapy generally, the therapist was supposed to be in a neutral state, somewhat emotionally detached from the client. Now the latest research shows that the successful therapist needs to be loving--emotionally connected with the client, full of compassion (without sympathy), and skillfully responsive to the client in a way that is felt as caring.

In Hakomi, we call this way of being “loving presence.” It means, first and foremost, that we see the client as a source of inspiration and nourishment. We are receiving the client as a gift. This receptive and appreciative state is felt by the client as a reminder of their own personal strength and wholeness.

As Hakomi therapists, we see ourselves, not as professional experts who will heal the client, but as a kind of skilful spiritual friend who will accompany the client on a healing journey. The quality of relationship that this state of mind creates is tangible to the client and to observers. The therapist is relating to the client as a person with another person.

So the four characteristics of the Hakomi way are:

1. the practice of loving presence and all that entails . . .
2. a constant focus on present experience (both the what and the how, using nonverbal expression, emotion, memory, etc as sources of information about present experience and indicators of habits)
3. the use of little experiments in mindfulness for assisted self-study
4. and a movement as soon as possible in the direction of the nourishing missing experience.

Part Two: Expressing Feelings in Hakomi

Since Hakomi is a method for helping people discover how they are organizing their experience, we are interested in using the method to bring organizing habits and beliefs into consciousness. Habits are behaviors that operate outside of consciousness. They are on automatic. It is for this reason that they are sometimes, in some cases much of the time, inappropriate. Some habits actually cause unnecessary suffering.

What is important to realize is that emotions are a natural part of our human experience. Feeling our emotions can help us to know what we need. Expressing our feelings can help us relate to others.

Emotional expression is misunderstood by some therapists as being in-and-of-itself healthy and healing. The idea of “repressed” feelings that need to be released has created a way of working in some kinds of psychotherapy that is not necessarily useful. In the Hakomi Method we have a special approach to understanding how to help clients have a new relationship to their feelings.

All of us have habitual ways of organizing around our feelings and emotions. These habits might be based on temperament, on past experience, on family rules or models, or on cultural messages. However, when someone comes to psychotherapy with feelings that have not been expressed, the simple expression of them is not likely to be therapeutic. In fact, research now tells us that the expression of a feeling, such as anger, actually increases the feeling and increases the tendency to have the emotion. Expressing anger, by beating on pillows for example, not only doesn’t “release” the feeling but actually increases the person’s anger and hostility, and has been shown to have a negative effect on physical health. (See the HeartMath website.)

In Hakomi, we assist clients to study how they organize their experience. If they have habitual ways of doing something based on unconscious attitudes or beliefs, we want to help to bring these into consciousness where they can be looked at. In this way, people can have more choice about their actions and their experience.

For example, if someone comes to therapy with a habit of not showing her feelings of anger, a Hakomi therapist helps

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her to study this. Our goal is not to try to get her to express anger. In Hakomi we have a paradoxical approach. We are studying how experience is organized. If a feeling such as anger is habitually not expressed, in Hakomi we study how this happens. We want to help the client become more conscious of *how* she hides or contains her feelings. And by studying this (we might support the physical containment for example, or take over the “voice” that says *don't show anger*) we want to learn what idea or belief or memory is organizing this behavior.

One person might have the habit of not showing anger because of a fear of being hurt. Another has a fear of hurting others. Someone else fears rejection. The idea or memory that organizes *don't show anger* might mean the person imagines the result would be punishment, or humiliation, or being criticized. Perhaps she expects to be seen as weak, or judged as bad. There is an unconscious expectation of what would happen if she showed her anger. It is very personal. There are many possibilities of the underlying idea or belief.

A Hakomi therapist recognizes the presence of emotions in the client and helps to bring them into consciousness. The first thing to discover is whether the emotion is based on a valid or invalid idea. There's not much point in supporting the expression of a feeling that is generated by an incorrect idea, such as “nobody loves me,” or “I can't trust anyone.” The very idea needs to be re-examined and a new possibility provided (of a different kind of experience). The feelings will then naturally change. What we are looking for, in Hakomi therapy, is a realistic new nourishing alternative to how the person is habitually organizing her experience. The alternative to “nobody loves me” is feeling loved by “somebody,” (not, of course, “everybody loves me”).

For someone who has always hidden her feelings, it might not matter what the emotion is about. What might be nourishing is the experience of showing her feelings. But just expressing the feelings is not enough. The nourishing experience must include a different result than the one expected. And in Hakomi we not only want to provide a new experience for the client, we want client to realize she is having this new experience.

For example, if she has been afraid to show her anger because of a fear of rejection or being judged, part of the nourishing new experience for her is recognizing that the therapist is not judging her. For this, she needs to be looking at the therapist, not just expressing anger with her eyes closed. She needs to express the feeling and notice that the reaction of the therapist is different than what she implicitly expects. Even better if she is in a group and more than one person is relating to her. (With eyes closed, most people continue to imagine their old reality.) What is nourishing is being related to differently than what is expected based on history or family rules or cultural

messages. (This is why it is so important that the therapist be in Loving Presence.)

One of the powerful results of the Hakomi Method technique of “taking over” is a demonstration to the unconscious of support for what it is doing. This is a true expression of non-violence, and, along with bringing something more fully into consciousness, taking over gains the cooperation of the unconscious which is organizing the behavior.

So, in the case of someone feeling anger and wanting to hit something, in Hakomi we take over the resistance to hitting. We explain to the person that we know she is holding back so as not to hurt herself or someone, and we will help her to hold back so she doesn't need to work at it so hard. Instead of helping her to hit (a pillow for example) we experiment with offering resistance, preventing her from hitting. Amazingly, this allows the person to put more energy into trying to hit, which might feel really good. She is freed from the internal conflict and can just enjoy the energy of the impulse to hit (and the presence of someone not reacting to her.)

If taking over resistance, or whatever we're doing, doesn't feel like a good experience for the person, we stop. We then want to find something else that does feel nourishing.

There is also no point in the person expressing a feeling that doesn't feel good to express. Painful feelings do not go away by being expressed. What can happen, in a good therapy session, is that feelings come into consciousness that were previously “exiled” or cut off in awareness.

There are two reasons we want hidden feelings to come into consciousness: One is because they might be expressing a need; the second reason is that they might be generated by an old idea which is invalid (incorrect). In the case of the latter, a wrong idea, the belief needs to change. Expressing feelings about a wrong idea that continues to be believed is counterproductive.

Feelings that are useful to express are those that point us clearly in the direction of what is needed. For example, fear needs reassurance. Sadness needs comfort. Loneliness needs contact. What is the nourishing experience the feeling asks for? How can the therapist or therapy group provide the nourishing experience in present time? This is how Hakomi works with feelings.

We know now that how we organize experience is based on experience. Experience changes the brain. How we perceive, make meaning of, and react to life and to others is organized by the brain which is shaped by past experiences and how we perceived, and made meaning of, and reacted to them in the past. To change how we experience life means having new experiences as well as experiencing in a new way. This is the opportunity and the point of psycho-

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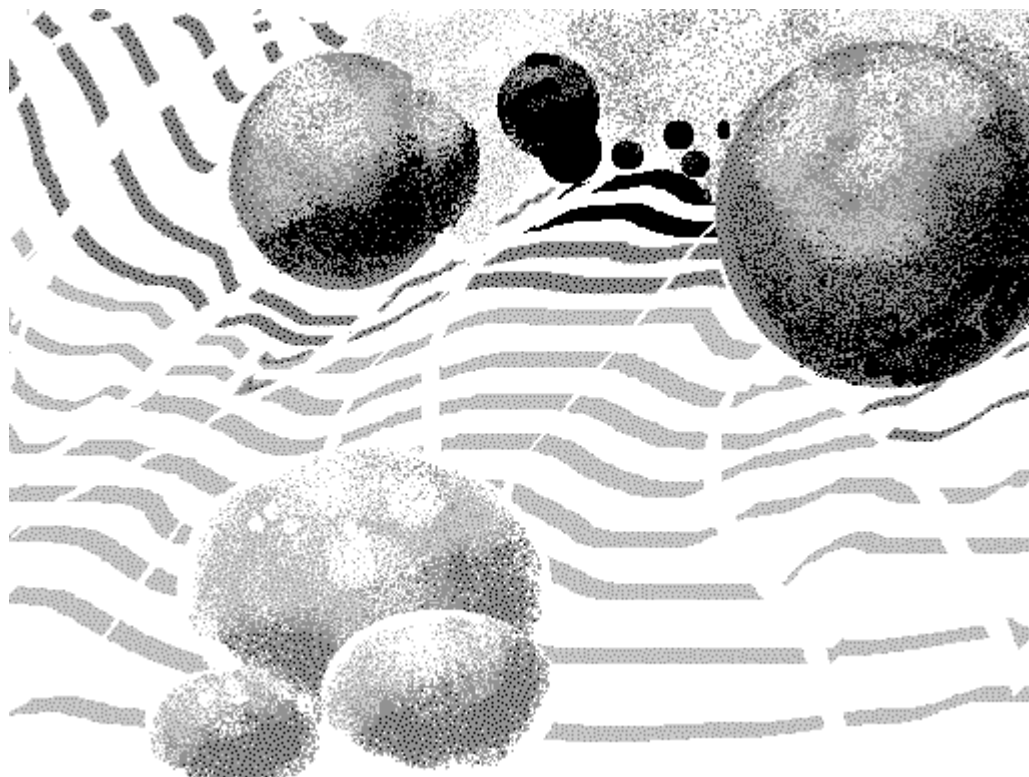
therapy. A repetition of old painful emotional experiences changes nothing. (In fact it apparently reinforces the neural pathways and receptors for the same kind of experience to happen over and over again.)

The important point about expressing feelings in Hakomi therapy is to discover what *need* the feelings are trying to express. Is there a need for a more realistic and positive idea about self, or life, or others? Is there a need for comfort, reassurance, acknowledgement, for company, support, understanding, for validation, or acceptance . . .? How can the need be met in a way that can be experienced consciously, realistically, believably, *in present time*?

In Hakomi, we not only want the client to have a nourishing experience, but we also want to help the client to *realize* she is having this experience and to notice how the experience feels, as well as to see future possibilities of having the experience again, (and even, hopefully, to have some idea about how she can make that possible for herself.)

Along the way, she might need to realize what has kept her from having that experience (an old belief, or a habitual behavior), and she might need to re-visit an old experience, perhaps a childhood memory, to integrate or *digest* an event that was too confusing, painful, or overwhelming for a child to properly digest. This will arise spontaneously if it needs to be part of the process.

In the end it is always about allowing emotional expression to be one step on the path of finding a way to make possible a nourishing experience in present time, one which offers the person a realistic new possibility for a happier life.



“Untitled”
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