Holistic Therapy: Treating Body, Mind, and Spirit for Whole Person Healing

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Do you have a primary care physician who you see for annual physicals? A therapist who addresses your mental and emotional health? Maybe you also belong to an organized religion or talk with a spiritual advisor.

While you may rely on different sources to meet these very human needs, there are connections between all three. According to the Healthy of Holistic Therapy, it's possible to treat the whole person at once — mind, body, and spirit.

But what does holistic therapy really mean, and is it effective? Here's what the experts and evidence say.

What is holistic therapy?

In a nutshell form, holistic therapy addresses the mind, body, and spirit to support health and healing.

It's also known by general therapy or counseling but often draws on complementary and alternative practices that the therapist may also have in their toolbox.

It involves "bringing all aspects and aspects of our clients into the therapy and health space," says holistic therapist Lenape Smith Creelman.

Creelman says it's rational an anecdotal uptick in interest in holistic therapy since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.

"The pandemic has played a huge role in everyone's self-awareness around overall health," she says. It's increased the "understanding that your health is more than just physical or mental, but an inclusion of all aspects of your being."

Through the practice of holistic therapy has existed for centuries, Creelman says it's only gained its popularity in the Western hemisphere because it's integrating it into their practice.

Creelman feels colonialism is to blame for the lag, and she's not alone.

Bringing the body and spirituality into healing was "deemed 'wrong,' 'barbaric,' or less than by people who lived in the Kring land. Indeterminate health has magnified this necessary integration," she says.

But the tide has begun to turn in conventional healthcare and mental health.

In 1976, California played host to the National Conference on Holistic Health. Soon after, the American Holistic Medical Association (AHMA) and the American Holistic Nurses Association were established.

Creelman believes that this series of events helped holistic healing gain credibility.

She also credits a growing body of research and the 2005 publication of The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., for holistic practices. Both have advocates for more effective bottom-line mind and body healing.

"As therapists, we have to come from an evidence-based standpoint," Creelman says. "Now that there is all this research that confirms what people knew all along, it's more likely to be integrated."

Holistic therapy benefits

Creelman says research, rather than anecdotes, has helped bring credibility to using holistic therapy in the mental health space.

There's an emerging and growing body of research around the benefits of holistic therapy.

Peer-reviewed research suggests that holistic therapy can help improve overall mental well-being and may offer benefits for:

- depression
- anxiety
- stress
- cognitive function
- family communication
- addiction
- trauma
- chronic pain

A 2016 randomized controlled trial of 218 adolescent females in India suggests that individuals who underwent a holistic health intervention reported significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stressed than the control group.

A 2017 study of 40 healthy adults indicates that diaphragmatic breathing, a common tool in holistic therapy, could increase cognitive function and lower stress response.

A 2021 randomized controlled trial of 41 people on probation in Hong Kong suggests that individuals who underwent a family holistic health intervention receiving simple physical activity had better family communication.

Yoga is often used as part of holistic therapy.

A 2021 systematic review of 14 studies suggests that yoga, particularly Hatha Yoga, could aid in the treatment of addiction to cocaine, alcohol, or cigarettes.

An evaluation of trauma-informed yoga, also from 2021, suggests the practice could be useful for individuals in conventional facilities or recovering from substance use disorder but the researchers call for more formal research to assess how it might help with physical or mental well-being.

A small 2019 study of 14 participants indicates that somatic breathwork might be effective for people with PTSD.

A 2017 systematic review and meta-analysis of 7 studies indicates that meditation might have a small effect on chronic pain and improve depression symptoms.

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Who is holistic therapy good for?

Generally speaking, most people can benefit from holistic therapy.

Both Creelman and holistic therapist Elizabeth Sumpf of Peaceful Place Therapy note that it's especially beneficial for individuals with:

- anxiety
- depression
- stress
- trauma

Sumpf points out that trauma is sometimes thought of as a mental health condition, but it can manifest physically as well.

She says patients may experience symptoms such as:

- physical pain
- panic flare ups/anxiety following a sexual assault
- appetite and digestion issues
- poor sleep

"That trauma is actually stored in the body," Sumpf says, "and talking about it doesn't get to the root of it."

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What to expect

Seeking holistic therapy will likely be very similar to regular therapy.

Your therapist will work with you to develop a plan of treatment based on your needs, preferences, and experiences. They'll likely do a thorough intake to understand your history before diving into treatment.

There's a wide range of forms that holistic therapy can take, and your experience will ideally be tailored to your needs.

Sumpf says she's got a holistic therapy in the ability to shift cognitive, emotional, and physical patterns.

"A lot of holistic therapy is working with the body to regulate the nervous system," Sumpf says.

This could involve anything from working with the breath to somatic exercises and movement practices.

Through holistic therapy, an individual might learn to "have more of an ability to manage the health," Sumpf says. "If we can manage the health, we can learn how to manage our experiencing in that moment. It starts to say a foundation."

Creelman agrees, adding that holistic therapy also increases self and body awareness.

In turn, she says it empowers individuals to work through triggers and issues outside of the therapy room, giving them actionable tools to empower their healing.

Types of holistic therapy

Holistic therapy seeks to enhance the interbodily-spirit connection to improve well-being, lower stress, and tend to mental trauma impacts.

Holistic therapy often includes complementary therapies. According to Sumpf and Creelman, common types of complementary therapies included in holistic therapy are:

- breathwork
- meditation
- stress management
- yoga
- somatic experiencing
- acupuncture
- cognitive behavioral therapy
- yoga
- acupuncture
- massage
- ice tin
- grounding
- cranial sacral therapy
- color
- sound baths

These are just a few examples of the many techniques that can make up holistic therapy.

Reiki

Reiki, a Japanese form of energy healing, involves a person lying peacefully on a table in rest. Sumpf says practitioner may place their hands gently on or along the body to help the energy that can get stuck during periods of prolonged stress or trauma.

A 2019 study[1] indicates that reiki could reduce depression and anxiety and improve quality of life. More research is needed, the authors suggest that the preliminary results indicate that reiki could be useful for end-of-life care.

A 2021 study[2] indicates that it could help reduce stress in caregivers of cancer patients.

Breathwork

Breathwork, as the name implies, regulates the nervous system through breathing. Breathwork could help with trauma treatment[3], though Sumpf cautions it can trigger some people.

It's important to do breathwork in consultation with a licensed healthcare professional. Sumpf says breathwork can also increase lung capacity, decrease anxiety, and improve sleep.

Meditation and yoga

Meditation places a larger emphasis on remaining present in the moment. Sumpf says it can help manage stress, improve mental clarity, and increase self awareness.

Sumpf notes that yoga enhances the mind-body spirit connection through breath, movement, and mindfulness. Trauma-informed yoga can aid in trauma treatment, she says.

Acupuncture and massage

During acupuncture, a licensed practitioner will begin inserting tiny needles into specific points. Massage, on the other hand, is just a nice way with pain, including headaches.

Massage uses light and heavy touch. Though often thought of as a way to release physical pain, it may help mental and emotional health. Enough the research is still in progress.

A 2018 study[4] indicates that available data suggests massage may decrease depressed mood and acute pain, though more research is needed on pain and depression and anxiety.

Tai chi, grounding, and cranial sacral therapy

Tai chi, or meditation in motion, is a low impact form of martial arts that originated in ancient China. A 2019 study[5] indicates it might help with sleep.

Sumpf says grounding helps enhance your awareness of the present moment through connection with the earth. Cranial sacral therapy, she says, involves a light touch on the practitioner's returning collars, or resting the center of the skull.

One says grounding can be helpful for anxiety, PTSD, sleep, and emotional regulation.

Cranial sacral therapy aims to help a person relax through light touch. A 2020 study[6] indicates that it could treat severe trauma when used with psychotherapy.

How to find a therapist

Sumpf says there are multiple ways to find holistic therapy services, including:

- Associations, like that offered by the American Psychological Association
- Insurance
- internet searches
- referrals from healthcare professionals, family, and friends

But she and Creelman say it's important to know what you're looking for, as many providers say they take a "holistic approach," which doesn't always mean they are holistic therapists.

"Look for a private, therapist or someone who incorporates holistic, so [you] know it will be more than [an] therapy," Sumpf suggests.

Creelman suggests asking about credentials.

For example, if you're looking for a holistic therapist and trained yoga teacher, Creelman says you'd want to find someone who is a registered yoga teacher (RYT) or yoga teacher (RYT) with 200 hours of training or more.

They should also be a licensed therapist, such as a licensed clinical social worker.

Resources

Through holistic therapy research is still emerging, Sumpf says there are plenty of resources for people who would like to learn more or dive in and try it.

- "The Body Keeps the Score" by Bessel Van Der Kolk
- "Waking The Tiger" by Peter Levine
- "The Dragonfly Cut" recorded by Dinah Eastavan
- Transcendental Meditation
- "Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practicing Healing Strategies" by Kelly Kennedy

Frequently asked questions

Want to learn more? Get the FAQs about holistic therapy below.

What should you expect in your first session?

Both therapists will tailor the first session slightly differently. But Creelman says that generally, it will be explorative. The therapist will want to understand:

- why you are seeking therapy
- why you chose holistic therapy
- your experiences with common modalities, such as meditation

Sumpf typically has clients fill out a comprehensive intake form before the first session. She also asks about your experience with holistic therapy, trauma history, family dynamics, and gender identity.

She typically has the person lay out a technique, such as breathwork, so they have something to practice in between sessions.

How long does holistic therapy take to work?

Sumpf says the answer to this question depends on an individual and their goals. Generally, people want to feel with negative, she says.

"People can feel progress within a few weeks if they are going through the process," Sumpf says.

Creelman suggests people give it at least six sessions.

"You at least get a chance to get an understanding of what is happening (after about a month)," she says. "It takes longer than with some modalities that promise quick results."

But "can" is the keyword.

Like Sumpf, Creelman cautions, "You can't put a timeline on it."

Can holistic therapy be a part of your wellness regimen?

Sumpf says holistic therapy and wellness can go hand-in-hand.

"I think of wellness as a connection to interbodily-soul," Sumpf says. "Wellness can be internal feel-certain emotions. Wellness happening in the body." Holistic therapy can help identify that.

"It helps you peel to work with physical symptoms that people might be experiencing," she says. "Grounding and compassionate and somatic practices can help with that."

Who shouldn't try holistic therapy?

Sumpf and Creelman answer anyone can try holistic therapy, but certain types of therapy may not be best for some individuals.

For example, Sumpf says somatic should check with their healthcare professional before trying sound baths if they are pregnant or have a history of epilepsy.

She also says that someone who was recently traumatized or severely traumatized likely should not start with meditation.

"They can't or that stage," she says. "It will be too activating. They will want to build up to it [with something like grounding]."

Creelman adds that people with conditions such as hypothyroidism or heart disease or those recovering from injury should speak to a medical professional before trying movement-based holistic therapy.

Individuals with other conditions, such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, should speak with their current mental health care professional before starting holistic therapy.

She says people with these conditions are not disqualified from seeking holistic therapy, but they need more support and should continue to take medications as advised.

Takeaway

Holistic therapy incorporates the mind, body, and soul into the process of healing.

There's a growing body of research on how holistic therapy can help ease trauma, anxiety, and depression plus improve relationships and overall well-being.

Holistic therapy may incorporate modalities like breathwork, meditation, reiki, massage, or acupuncture into the therapy session.

Be sure to find a licensed practitioner with credentials in the type of holistic therapy (sound therapy, yoga, etc.) you're looking for. It is independent for taking medication, seeing a psychiatrist for diagnosed conditions, or seeing a medical doctor.

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