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Suffering and Pleasure in the Counselling Process: Opening Pandora's Box

Often we hear people talk about 'keeping a lid on old feelings', and the fear of 'taking the lid off the box'. Once out, like all the evils of the world those old thoughts and reactions will be overwhelming and remain 'out there' making life impossible. The ancient story of Pandora's Box is thousands of years old and yet the universal theme remains relevant today. But the most important part of the story is often overlooked: the thing found at the bottom of Pandora's box was Hope.

The fear of letting those evils loose is not to be taken lightly. However eventually some frustration or doubt becomes too strong to be ignored; it becomes apparent to the person that by remaining trapped in the system, those old feelings and thoughts make them unable to live without feeling constrained and haunted by old fears. And in denying the release of what is suppressed, the person is also denying themselves the energy and creativity that projects them into the future inspired by hope.

The biophysics explaining the interplay of experience between the mind and body is increasingly being clarified. Stressful experience is processed by the amygdala, an almond sized set of neurons in the centre of the brain. It serves to synchronise the memory of a stressful incident with urgent body responses for survival. It works likewise to synchronise body and mind's experience of pleasure.

If the natural physical reactions to survival or stress are overwhelming and not fully discharged they become trapped in the system. They may also dominate the system, thereby blocking access to pleasant feelings and sensations. When the original stress is intense, without the need for conscious memory or awareness at all, something will later trigger the same response. For example: increased heart-rate, hormone production including adrenalin, shortening the breath to pump up the oxygen content of the blood to the muscles making the fingers and toes feel cold, the skin pale – and a whole extraordinarily complex range of other bodily reactions. That is traumatic affect. So it's not surprising that we want to suppress that.

Less dramatically yet more normally, affect may not be apparent for a long time and the effort it takes to resist it actually increases our unconscious stress. Yet eventually it might make itself known by some chronic mysterious physical problem in the body: for example back ache, or IBS, a nervous tic, panic attacks, or insomnia.

The fear of a person who requests that the counselling process does not stir up old pain of the past is real and infectious. Yet the instinct to grow and emerge is pushing against this. The therapist supports the client as they are held in tension between opposing forces: the desire for growth and change; and the fear-driven

need to contract and keep the lid on their troubles. It means helping the client to engage with the painful contents of the mind.

The key to success in this endeavour is balance. It is vital to reawaken the positive side of what the amygdala does. The therapist helps the client to tune in to the pleasant experiences through memory and how the body experiences them, the things that 'make the heart sing' and foster expansion.

In this way the person is helped to re-discover themselves and forge a fresh relationship with themselves; they reconnect with their inner wisdom, their intuition, their deeper and profoundly healing self. The Hope that lies at the bottom of the box lies waiting to be revealed.