

What Can Insight-Oriented Therapeutic Dance Education Do for Fibromyalgia?*

Riitta Parvia
Independent Scholar, Finland

Insight-Oriented Therapeutic Dance Education is suggested as an aid for managing fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is a rheumatic disease, a chronic muscular pain syndrome. This syndrome consists of symptoms such as muscular pains and neural aches, tiredness, sleep problems, depression, anxiety, hopelessness and problems for daily functioning. Women's hormonal problems may have their part to play in the syndrome. The diagnostic criteria are simple: one has to have pains at least in eleven of eighteen trigger points in all four quarters of the body, left and right side, upper and lower body. There are many reasons for muscular and neural pains. What characterises many fibromyalgic patients is the often-found hyper mobility of joints while muscles are tensed, and painful. The patient suffers of energy crisis, has difficulty of finding treatment or medication that helps, she feels her situation hopeless. The paper discusses ways of using insight-oriented therapeutic education to manage the syndrome.

Keywords: chronic pain, treatment and training, insight-oriented method

Chronic Pain Syndrome

The causes of a chronic pain syndrome may be found in long lasting stressful life situations, problems in dysfunctional personal relationships, or simply a wrong way of using one's body, caused by a physical imbalance such as structural imbalance.

Physical training is often suggested as a cure for fibromyalgic patients. However, patients are often not motivated for physical training, the training is too hard or painful and does not suit one's body; gym routines are designed for groups of healthy people, gym hall floors are often cold and hard and may cause additional strain for painful bodies.

As fibromyalgia is a complex syndrome with varying symptoms, the patient categories too vary greatly. My experience of fibromyalgic people, mostly women, is that they may smoke, they have poor breathing and poor body posture. Some of them have "given up" and they say that nothing helps. They have accepted themselves as chronically sick. Others would like to get rid of their symptoms, but they feel themselves too sick or too tired to do anything about it. Those who are motivated to work with themselves need some support to get started, and they need training programmes adapted to their particular needs. Finally they need methods for continuous working with themselves.

* An early version of this paper was published in E-motion, ADMP, UK, Spring 2003.
Riitta Parvia, Retired Psychomotorthapist, Dance Psychotherapist, Supervisor, Lecturer, Finland.

Treatment and Training, Insight-Oriented Method

The starting point, when suggesting treatment and training for fibromyalgic people is that active physical training makes their tensed and painful muscles even worse, unless the muscles, fascia and first of all the trigger points are first treated. What I may suggest first is gentle, relaxing massage, but not every body likes massage or is helped by it. However, they need relaxation. Relaxation can be passive or active. Passive relaxation, which makes one heavy, is the first thing to learn. After the person can make herself heavy she can learn active relaxation, and to release her over all tensions and to get light. Once she is able to experience lightness small amounts of exercising can start.

Instead moving around and contracting and releasing long skeletal muscles, which work under will, as in usual physical training programs, one turns here into one's inner space. Lying on the floor one learns proper breathing. And one learns about one's deep body muscles, which one does not usually actively use, or does not even know about, these muscles are of hypotone quality. People with energy crises, painful muscles and fascia, and hyper mobile joints may benefit of isometric resistance exercises. Such stationary resistance exercising can be the first aid to help to balance one's hyper mobile joints with some muscular strength.

To insert pressure on the paining trigger points helps to release the muscles and the fascia connected with the trigger point. Pressing a trigger point is painful, but one needs to meet the pain by putting oneself mentally into the procedure, to endure it, and breathing out let the pain go. When the muscles allow it, one can combine strengthening with gentle stretching.

There are active and passive stretching techniques. This educator/therapist would not give hyper mobile people with tensed musculature passive stretching, but would teach them active stretching, and perhaps to stretch a muscle while contracting its antagonistic muscle, and to combine exercising with breathing, that is not forced breathing but by letting it breath. One has to learn how to stretch muscles, not the joints. One has to feel the correct stretch inside the muscle, and thus avoid harming one's ligaments and tendons. Ligaments are responsible for the stability of the joints and must not be over-stretched. Stretching is best done after a warm up slowly through breathing. One needs to think of what one is doing, and one needs to know what one is doing. The difficulty is to unlearn non-appropriate movement habits before they can be replaced by appropriate ones. In the process of unlearning the feeling of uncertainty needs to be endured, supported by the educator/therapist.

It is important not only to release one's body, as important it is to learn how to strengthen the core of the body and to stabilize one's movements. The freedom of moving must be seen in relation to the stability of movements. Working through breathing, concentration and mental activity one learns about one's unused resources, and how to mobilize them. Learning grounding, centering and alignment, one gets ready for dancing.

To Sum Up

The method described here developed over time when this educator/therapist was working with her own rheuma problems in cooperation with physical therapists, and when she was working with her students and clients. The physical therapist Anne Marit Mengshoel (1998) deserves debt of gratitude for the courage and inspiration she provided together with her book. Someone has called this method insight-oriented dance training. The method has nothing to do with psychoanalytic insights. We work to develop our somatic/kinesthetic awareness and insights, and to learn, unlearn, and re-learn proper ways of moving and living. The exercises are simple, but demanding. They do not suit everyone, but those who are willing and able to work with themselves in this way

benefit of this insight-oriented training, provided that one is training continuously. It is easy to laps back to old, dysfunctional habits. While working with oneself one discovers one's unused resources, and new discoveries make exercising a rewarding process.

It is possible to learn to live a more healthy life, work with oneself, and cope by oneself. One may get rid of the syndrome of fibromyalgia. When mastering the physical pains, the feelings of depression and hopelessness get transformed into a more realistic attitude towards life, or even into a zest of life. One may gain one's autonomy.

Insight-oriented therapeutic dance education is a way of transformation, and the educator/therapist, interacting with her clients, is the catalyst in the process of interaction, integration and transformation.

Reference

Mengshoel, A. M. (1998). Pain, fatigues, and the effects of aerobic exercise and patient education programs in patients with fibromyalgia. Center for Rheumatic Diseases, The National Hospital. Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, Norway.