

Healing Trauma Part Five: The Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

Introduction

The majority of the information in this article is inspired from [Peter Levine](#)'s book, [In An Unspoken Voice](#). [Bessel Van Der Kolk](#)'s book [The Body Keeps The Score](#) and [David Berce](#)'s book [The Revolutionary Trauma Release Process](#) also have added to the information in this article.

I'm grateful for the published work that these three men have done. Their decades of working both individually with people and in groups has been distilled into a teachable form within their books. I'm not an expert on psychology, though I'm an avid student of understanding human nature.

I've taken two liberties in this article. The first liberty is that I'm addressing two different approaches to psychotherapy (the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach) in only a few pages. In doing so, some exactitude is missing. The second liberty is that this article is being written with unfairness to the subject. I favor the bottom-up approach. This paper will reflect this prejudice.

If people regain their prior vitality or rise higher through the top-down approach, then the top-down approach worked very well for them. For those people who don't fully recover, they may choose to approach their healing from the bottom-up approach.

The first two articles in this series on healing trauma have basic information about the bottom-up approach. I'll only refer to, and not thoroughly go over, some of the information in the first two articles. If you want to read about some of the methods used in the bottom-up approach, you can click on the name of each article. The first two articles are [Healing Trauma Part One: An Alternative Approach To Talk Therapy and Drug Therapy](#) and [Healing Trauma Part Two: Getting Out Of Our Own Way](#).

The Triune Brain

We have a triune brain (the reptilian brain regulating our body, the mammalian brain regulating our emotions and the neo-cortex regulating our thinking) where all three parts of the brain are communicating with each other and are working together. In a triune

brain, when one of the three parts of the brain changes (toward positive or toward negative), the other two parts of the brain are similarly affected (toward positive or toward negative).

The triune brain allows each part of our brain to positively affect the other two parts. As any of the three parts of the triune brain changes, the other two parts also automatically change. This interconnection of the three parts of the brain allows a non-rigid form of change to occur. This interconnection means that the top-down and the bottom-up approaches don't have to always start at the top (the neo-cortex) or at the bottom (the reptilian brain).

We Can Use Both The Top-Down and the Bottom-Up Approaches

There is also no need to be rigid in that we need to approach healing from trauma exclusively from the top-down approach or from the bottom-up approach. If a person is primarily using the top-down approach, they can also have their body tremble so that the held energy in the body releases. If a person wants to focus on the bottom-up approach to help the held energy in the body to release, they can also go to talk therapy.

The Top-Down Approach

The top-down approach is the most prevalent approach today in psychotherapy in America. This approach starts with the therapist working directly and primarily with the thinking part of the brain (with the neo-cortex). The top-down approach is that a change in your thinking will produce a cascade of change that then positively effects your emotions (the mammalian brain or the limbic system) and then positively affects your body (governed by the reptilian brain).

The top-down approach's theory is that by first working with our thinking brain, then our emotions will have less symptoms like anxiety, worry, fear, dread, anger, and the feelings of isolation and loneliness. As our thinking and emotions come into more ease, then our body can have less symptoms like sleep problems, headaches, backaches, irritable bowel syndrome and other digestive tract problems.

I've known many people that know their problem with their thinking mind very well and they continue to be in terrible shape. They're emotionally a wreck. Their sleep is very poor, their body aches and their digestion suffers. Their thinking mind is well aware of what's going on, and there is no, or very little, positive cascading effect for their emotions or for their body.

Bessel Van Der Kolk's Opinion Of Using Prescription Drugs

Using prescription drugs is one of the main tools available when a person is pursuing their healing through the top-down approach. The opinion of Bessel Van Der Kolk (who is probably the foremost expert on healing psychological trauma) is that prescription drug use inhibits the trauma to heal.

Bessel Van Der Kolk states that prescription drug use will often take away the lowest feelings, though the drug use also takes away the highest (better) feelings. He further states that he has not seen prescription drug use lessen the amount of held trauma, and that prescription drug use will invariably inhibit or block the body from releasing its held trauma. His opinion is that prescription drug use delays or stops full resolution of the trauma.

Short term use of prescription drugs can be helpful in helping a person who is severely troubled, though these same drugs that can help people when they're desperate have also been known to increase the risk of suicide.

The Bottom-Up Approach

The bottom-up approach states that if we reduce the stress in the body, this will have a positive cascading effect into the emotions. As the emotions improve, this will have a positive cascading effect into a person's thinking.

As previously written, the top-down approach to healing from psychological trauma is the prevalent therapy today. Even though the bottom-up approach is in the minority, there are strong advocates for this approach. Not surprising to the reader is that Bessel Van Der Kolk, Peter Levine and David Berceli are all strong proponents of the bottom-up approach. They're also very vocal in their criticism of the top-down approach.

The First Step In The Bottom-Up Approach

The first step in the bottom-up approach is to have the body release the held energy from the trauma. The most obvious held energy is the tension held in the many muscles of the body. Each person can be very individual in where the tension is held in their body. A general pattern of where tension is most held to least held in the body is the following: belly, shoulders, neck, jaw, chest, back, legs and arms. This general pattern is only included as a guide; not as to what will be your pattern of holding tension.

Our muscles have a great amount of pain fibers. When our body bumps into something, we hurt. When we strain or stress our muscles (have low back pain or strain ourselves while working or during exercise), our body has obvious pain. The obvious tension from trauma will be in our muscles, though there is also a great amount of stress that is stored in the organs of our body. This is why a person's overall health can decline so much after a trauma.

Our organs do not have many pain fibers; allowing our liver or lungs to become very cancerous and we'll not even know it. Our organs, not just our muscles, have stress from the trauma. This is why our digestion can suffer, why we can have headaches and why we can have sleeplessness because of the trauma. Our organs need to release their held trauma in order for the body to heal.

Our belly (abdomen) usually holds a great amount of stress from trauma. Our belly (the open area underneath our rib cage down to our pubic bones) is almost all filled by our intestines. Under our ribs are our stomach, gall bladder, spleen, pancreas, adrenal glands, kidneys, heart, lungs and (almost all of our) liver. Low in the belly is our bladder. Women have their ovaries and uterus low in the belly.

Since this area of our belly is filled with our intestines, we won't have as obvious an amount of pain from the held trauma because the intestines don't have as many pain fibers as muscles do. Some people will feel 'knots in their gut' or may develop ulcers, diarrhea, constipation or irritable bowel syndrome from the held trauma, though mostly, people will only be aware of some tightness in their gut; which doesn't alert a person to how much held trauma is actually in their belly and in the other organs of their body.

Sometimes the development of cancer can be traced back to the time when a trauma occurred. Peter Levine's opinion is that many of the auto-immune diseases are caused by trauma held within the body. He has worked with many people with auto-immune diseases that have fully healed by the body trembling over many months to a short number of years.

How To Help Our Body Release The Held Energy From The Trauma

The previous section brought out the point that the held energy of the trauma is in the entire body; in the muscles and in the organs of the body. [Healing Trauma Part One](#) and [Healing Trauma Part Two](#) address many ways to help the body release the stored trauma. The primary way that's suggested to help the body release the held trauma is by trembling/tremoring/shaking.

Peter Levine's type of psychotherapy (called [Somatic Experiencing](#)) helps a person become more in touch with the held energy through psychotherapy sessions and to have their body tremble during the session. As a person is guided to be more in contact with the held energy of the trauma during a psychotherapy session, they can acquire more sensitivity and skill in being able to facilitate the trembling on their own.

David Berceli has developed a way for people to easily bring their body to a point where trembling occurs continuously for many minutes (for up to thirty minutes or longer) with very little effort. Everybody that I know who has been guided in their body trembling through David Berceli's instructions can easily have their body tremble. I've done trembling, as taught by David Berceli, for years with great results. People in the group are using trembling to release the held trauma.

Years ago I went to a woman certified in David's work. She guided me. I found there was very little she could add to what I was already doing. I was taught through a video by David Berceli. He did a masterful job in bringing his technique into an easily usable form of therapy. (The video that I use is not available.)

A video for \$20 is available on his website as he guides you in using his technique to help your body release stress through trembling. [Click here](#) to order the video. This updated video has a small number of additional key points, though it's shorter in the time that he's guiding you. (I appreciate the longer guidance in the previous video.)

Bottom-Up Validation

Bessel Van Der Kolk and others have used different approaches in group studies to help veterans with PTSD. Some of these studies had a group of veterans primarily go to talk therapy over a period of months. Other veterans were guided to do yoga poses daily as their primary therapy. In study after study, the veterans given yoga poses overall had better results than veterans that went to talk therapy.

An easy example of understanding the positive cascading effect of the body releasing tension that then helps both the emotions calm and the mind be more at peace is when we take a Jacuzzi. The hot and flowing water of the Jacuzzi reduces the tension in the muscles. The same can be said after a person receives a massage or goes to a yoga class. The body is more relaxed and this increased body relaxation relaxes the emotions and the mind.

A Very Recommended Approach To Working With The Emotions In The Bottom-Up Approach

What usually happens when a person's emotions are running strong is that their mind is also running strong with a story. The strong emotions and the strong story can reinforce each other. When both the strong emotions and the strong story are going on, the result can be that the person will feel more of a victim or more damaged.

The key to working with the emotions in the bottom-up approach is to keep in contact with your body and to be neutral about any story that's in your mind. The mind's job is to create thoughts, so thoughts can be there. You don't have to pay a lot of attention to the thoughts and you don't have to try to get rid of the thoughts.

This key to working with the emotions in the bottom-up approach is that while you're in touch with your emotions, bring your attention into your body. Are there places of tension? Do you feel hot or cold? What is your breathing like? As you bring your attention more and more into your body, your body then has more of an opportunity to let go and normalize. Tensions can relax and your breathing can become deeper. (Bringing your attention into your body is addressed in [Healing Trauma Part One](#) and [Part Two](#).) With this increased attention on your body, trembling may spontaneously begin; especially if you've already been using trembling as a method to heal.

Most people have done cathartic crying, screaming and movement. The proper use of catharsis in any of the three forms (sadness release through crying, anger release through screaming or muscle tension release through movement) can open the floodgates for your body and for your emotions to release the trauma. Proper and improper cathartic crying and screaming are addressed on page four in [Healing Trauma Part One](#). Cathartic movement is addressed on pages four and five in [Healing Trauma Part Two](#). Improperly done, these same cathartic methods can increase the tension and the trauma in your body.

Trembling, as a form of therapeutic release, is unknown to almost everyone. Trembling is much more accessible than catharsis. A person can easily facilitate their body to tremble. For catharsis to happen, there usually needs to be an extra-ordinary amount of emotion or felt tension in the body. Catharsis can be done and have positive results, though it's in trembling that the body can more consistently and frequently release the held trauma in the body.

I know of one caution to advise you related to trembling. You can be left with a feeling of vulnerability and feeling a bit shaky after trembling. If this happens, give yourself some time to feel more normal. You can take a walk, have something to eat, talk with a friend or take a nap to help your body feel more normal. Don't drive if you're feeling shaky or too vulnerable.

The Mind's Healing And The Mind's Role In The Bottom-Up Approach

My teacher, Charles, has a saying: "Learn the lesson and move on." Learning is a job for the thinking brain. Learning from the trauma helps us come back to wholeness and also to know better what to do if the same trauma happens again. This is where the mind's thinking is very useful in joining in to heal the trauma. The mind can learn from what happened and learn how to go forward in a very good way.

How can the mind be supported to learn? Give the mind some relaxation, and then the insights and aha's come. Insights happen when we're most relaxed, when we wake from sleeping, when we're in the shower, when we're not thinking about the problem. Then, voilá, the perfect answer shows up. The mind then knows what to do.

Another use of the mind in the bottom-up approach is that the mind can know that the wisdom of the body is active when the body trembles and the mind can support the body to continue trembling (by not stopping or suppressing the body trembling). The mind can know that a good cry (proper cathartic crying) or a good scream (letting the anger out through proper cathartic screaming) or letting the body cathartically move are all ways that the mind will be able to eventually become more calm and serene.

The mind's main job in the bottom-up approach is not to get in the way of the body and of the emotions to release the trauma. By letting the body (the reptilian brain) and the emotions (the mammalian brain or the limbic system) release the held trauma, then the mind (the neo-cortex or thinking brain) can ride the cascade of goodness from the other two parts of the brain and come to a place of healing.

This cascading effect from the body and from the emotions helping the mind to heal is how the woman in [Healing Trauma Part Four](#) healed after being raped. How could the mind by itself come to peace about being raped? The body and the emotions coming to peace is what helped her mind to come to peace.

In Summary

There are many advocates of the bottom-up approach. I've already cited Bessel Van Der Kolk, Peter Levine and David Berceli as strong advocates of the bottom-up approach. My first beginning with the bottom-up approach was in 1992 when I did group work. Then in 1994 I was introduced to [Pema Chödrön](#) who also is a strong advocate for the bottom-up approach. My teacher, Charles, is also an advocate of the bottom-up approach.

Most people don't pursue the bottom-up approach primarily for two reasons. The first reason is that, because of the prevalence of the top-down approach and because of the dominance of the pharmaceutical industry, the bottom-up approach is not well known. The second reason why people don't use this approach more is because staying with the tensions in the body and staying with the strong emotions of sadness and anger is very uncomfortable.

I cited a quote by Robert Frost in Healing Trauma Part Two that says: "The only way out is through." Willingly going into the held trauma in the body and the held trauma in the emotions to get through the trauma takes bravery and a lot of support. If you don't feel brave now, support can increase your feeling of bravery.

My teacher said many times that once the worst is over, once you've stayed with the uncomfortable emotions and the uncomfortable body sensations for enough time for both of these to lessen, you'll never say you're sorry for taking this approach. Everyone I've known to work with him, that got to the other side of their pain, has said that it was totally worth it.

The bottom-up approach in the short term is a hard way because it involves being with the uncomfortableness in your body and in your emotions. This short term hard way can lead to a lifetime of much more joy.

May all beings live in peace and happiness.