

Reconnection, addressing trauma-induced separation from the self and a meaningful life

Empowerment with the return of vitality and self-confidence

Animal wisdom and body-based experience as centrepieces of healing and resourcing

Links to the land, social environment, and the natural processes of life

Learning

Initiatives for

Fun and fulfilling

Experiences

Therapy is a process to relieve, release, or promote the healing of a dysfunction or expression of distress based on, either negative experiences or absence of positive experiences and awareness of self. It nurtures mutual engagement and the mirroring of experience within a relationship that is based on trust, confidentiality, unconditional positive regard, and concern. The emphasis is not on the use of external treatments such as drugs or medication to manage symptoms, or direct physical procedures to surgically remove the problem—though such treatments may be part of the therapeutic discussion—but to allow the system as a whole, through the innate intelligence of the mind-body-spirit, to re-balance and thrive.

About 'R.E.A.L. L.I.F.E.' (*Real Life Therapy*)

Real Life therapy revolves around the understanding of a holistic view of health versus disease or *dis*-ease. This requires consideration of the external social context, or life situation, of each person as well as individual biological or physical, psychological, and spiritual or meaning-based factors. **Real Life therapy** seeks to explore, gradually, the underlying root cause of distressing symptoms and disharmony. This may be translated within the realms of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual experience, and their impact on wellbeing. Symptoms are often a well-established pattern of *initial* adaptation developed in the past as an implicit or subconscious memory, belief system and behavioural response that has formed as a means of minimising suffering or distress, at that time, but have now become less adaptive, or even a source of potential harm to self or others.

New theories on the relationship between our 'inner' and 'outer' experiences

According to the new physics of quantum and unified field theory, outer experience is a reflection of our inner experience. It is our inner experience, or level of awareness, or observation, which ultimately determines our ability to create, or not, a life that is meaningful, in terms of relationships, passionate endeavors, work, or contribution to the wellbeing of others and the world. This is the basis of the popular notion of the Law of Attraction. This understanding has been a part of the core teachings of many ancient and modern mystical traditions. It now appears that scientific and spiritual traditions, and their students, can now share common ground where they have previously occupied separate territories and disciplines. Quantum theory is now being embraced to help understand biological processes through the fields of biophysics which tries to explore the subtleties of energy exchange within living organisms.

The current neuroscience of early life experiences that impact us 'now'

Neuroscience and developmental psychology are evolving and developing a more detailed understanding of how our early life experiences and those traumatic incidents that are experienced as being overwhelming and characterized by feeling helpless and powerless, contribute to and have programmed our subconscious

mind to formulate beliefs and a habitual way of reacting and responding to life situations in general-in other words our personality. Where these experiences have been predominantly negative or traumatic in nature, there may be an overall perception that one's life is under constant threat for survival regardless of external circumstances and /or may create a pervasively negative self-image with its attendant sense of life being a continuous struggle or even hopeless. This understanding has been validated from a scientific perspective through the technology of real-time brain imaging and through the detailed study of the impact of early life experiences, attachment theory and elaboration of the dynamics and physiology of the stress response in humans and animals.

Post-traumatic stress, adverse childhood experiences, and addiction

The consequence of individual or repeatedly challenging and negative experiences may create the clinical picture of what has been formulated as either simple or complex post-traumatic stress disorder in psychiatric terminology. The complex version, initially described by Judith Hermann, has recently been acknowledged by the ICD 11 classification system of mental health disorders. The numerous studies reported by the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) data collected by Vincent Felitti and his colleagues, which are based on very large population numbers, clearly show the high level of correlation /connection between childhood adverse experiences and long-term illness and disease including both physical and mental health categories of disorder. This also includes the spectrum of addiction behaviors. Addictive behaviors, no longer seen as examples of moral deficiency nor just as a chronic medical condition, may be recognised as coping strategies to manage intense or overwhelming feelings, strategies which may then become habitual or compulsive, maladaptive and self-destructive in nature.

Treating dysregulation of the nervous system and body-based ('somatic') experiences

The level and intensity of the suffering that results from these experiences have proven to often be resistant to regular medical treatments including medication and psychological cognitive-based therapeutic approaches- other than temporary containment. This is reflected in the high incidence of relapse and recurrences of illnesses of one type or another. The likely reason that these treatments do no "cure" the condition or propensity for suffering, is that they do not treat the underlying dysregulation or imbalance of the body-based physiological system, including the autonomic nervous system, the multi-faceted chemistry of the stress response and the energy system of the mind body continuum. This results in patterns of chronic inner tension including skeletal muscular bracing, blocked energy systems and weakening of the body's immune or defense system. These patterns of dysfunction and maladaptation need to find a pathway of energetic release and re-balancing or recalibration.

'Somatic Experiencing' therapy treats the body's 'felt sense'

Real Life therapy encourages, through the lens of Somatic Experiencing, bringing attention to the body felt sense or inner sensory awareness. This allows the repetitive and dysregulated complex of amplification and/or or blockage of the stress response, to have the space to complete the physiological cycle according to our instinctual animal nature, and the return to a relaxed state. Somatic Experiencing is a form of therapy developed by Dr Peter Levine where animal model acts as a biological template of observation and understanding of the natural and health promoting resolution of living with repeated episodes of threat as either a predator or prey animal in their natural habitat. The process of completion of the stress-response, or homeostasis, is naturally uninhibited in the animal model unless the animal has been exposed to direct forms of human intervention and captivity.

Homeostasis, however, may be interrupted by inhibitory neurological networks found in the human nervous system and more intricate self-reflective cortical functions associated with formulating systems of meaning. Such networks develop in the context of social - cultural values and belief systems promoted by socialization, moral philosophies, and institutional religious traditions. The capacities of self-reflection and complex

thoughts and imagination peculiar to the human mind may create psychological barriers to instinctual responses. Certain medications used by modern medicine protocols may also interfere with the physiological resolution of the stress response which can affect the body, the emotions and thoughts/memories related to the trauma experiences.

In simpler terms, it is our “big brain” which can repress our basic animal instinctual nature. Repression reinforced and repeated through early life experiences may then become established neurological networks that create styles of attachment, dynamic relationships and personality traits based on family and cultural beliefs systems. Trauma, either through direct experience or witnessing, may also create established networks and patterns of response which may also be reinforced through measures of control such as the use of medication and substances.

Thus, the stage is set for the development of the range of symptoms associated with the complex posttraumatic stress syndrome and single event post-traumatic stress disorder as well as re-enactment in later life of interpersonal traumatic experiences. The Adverse Childhood Events (ACE) studies also highlight various correlations between unresolved traumatic stress and a wide spectrum of physical and mental health conditions including addictions.

The good news is that this pattern of being “locked” into a repeating cycle of stress-related autonomic system, emotional dysregulation and intense activation/dissociation can be released through a spectrum of therapeutic approaches that include a “bottom up” process of attending to the patterns of body felt inner experience with awareness. Therapy may then facilitate the body and mind to complete the natural process that allows the body and mind to complete the activation cycle, inner tension and stored emotional intensity to find inner peace and enjoy life once again.

The recent understandings that potential cure and relief from entrenched trauma-related syndromes is possible has also been evidenced through trauma-related literature, research studies and a plethora of various clinical approaches. This includes general conceptual understandings of memory reconsolidation. This then further informs the development of particular therapeutic modalities such as Somatic experiencing and Deep Brain Re-Orienting. It has been described through a series of well recognized steps and techniques that collaborate with brain and body’s natural healing process that can create profound transformational change and homeostatic restoration of whole mind/body integrity.

I also find that encouragement and exploration through a fun-loving approach which embraces and honours our inner animal nature may allow many to discover or re-discover and restore life affirming resources and inner experiences of feel-good emotions such as playfulness, vitality, and joy. For all those animal and nature lovers, a fun way of collaborating with the healing process is to embrace and re-discover our own inner animal and child-like nature. An example of a way to support this inner experience is to choose a beloved member of the animal kingdom as your personal ally and friend by identifying with the images and characteristics of your favorite animal. This can include shape-shifting to learn about and embody their way of life and envisioning their favorite habitats. It may also be by direct interaction through live animal assisted forms of therapy. This is becoming a well-recognized form of therapeutic and assisted learning strategies, most commonly involving relationships and interactions with dogs, horses, cats, and dolphins as well as connections nature-based environments and beings of all species - both wild and more domesticated. Opportunities to explore, discuss and encourage such forms of therapy will be a component of ***Real Life therapy*** to those who feel drawn towards such modalities of healing.

As mentioned, the basic elements of trauma-based syndromes derive from degrees of disconnection from inner experience as a means of survival. and through cultural entrainment and socialization. This disconnection can become habitual and transmitted from one generation to another. This may then be experienced as a separation from the land and a natural way of being and responding to life. The separation from supportive cultural traditions through colonization and the spread of western materialism, has resulted

in widespread generationally experienced loss of self-identity and meaningful connection to traditional ways of life. Healing is encouraged through remembering rituals and traditions of connection to the land and the natural world—mother earth being the origin of all our biological heritage. The Maori word for land is *whenua* which is the same word for placenta or afterbirth. Traditionally the placenta “*whenua*” is ceremonially returned to the land- “*whenua*” of the mother’s birth. This is a beautiful and simple example of the sacredness of this connection. The field of eco-psychology also emphasizes such a connection between the human psyche and the earth as formulated and described by Theodore Roszak in several of his books and teachings. Essentially re-establishing a living sense of this connection to the land and the natural world including the body is a legacy of somatic based therapy. This fosters the network of healing energy to connect inner worlds to the environment and beyond- a genuine experience of spirit and or the meaning of life.

Treating trauma – an integrative approach incorporating multiple therapeutic models

The diverse nature of trauma does suggest that an eclectic approach is likely to be most helpful. The challenge for each individual client is to discover the way that resonates with their subconscious or inner environment, the body’s innate ability to heal that feels safe and meaningful. The diversity of therapeutic approaches on offer reveals a wide spectrum of choice. Some modalities focus on various sensory experiences such as sound or music therapy, movement, and touch-based therapies. Others may be focussed on imaginary or symbolic landscapes of experience including dreams. Some also incorporate the importance of feeling based therapies alongside the more conventional cognitive, thought based and narrative approaches or methodologies. All lean towards the development of true self -awareness and therefore a sense of self ownership, responsibility, agency, capacity for self-soothing/ regulation of felt emotional experience, confidence in self-affirming decision making and most importantly , a life that is meaningful and embraces the full spectrum of human experience without being paralyzed by numbing avoidance, fear or terror.

Reference sources and suggested reading material

Women who run with the Wolves—Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estes, PhD

The Body keeps the Score—Dr Bessel Van der Kolk

The New Earth—Eckhart Tolle

The Tao of Equus, Riding Between the Worlds, The Power of the Herd and The Five Roles of a Master Herder—Linda Kohanov

In the Realms of the Hungry Ghost, When the Body says No, Scattered Minds—Dr Gabor Mate

One with the Herd, The Truth According to Horses, Unbridled, The Wisdom of the Herd, The Sabbath—Liz Mitten Ryan

Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma, In an Unspoken Voice, Trauma and Memory, Freedom from Pain Discover your Body’s Power to Overcome Physical Pain—Dr Peter Levine, PhD

The Voice of the Earth, Person/Planet—Theodore Roszak

Naked Liberty—Carolyn Resnick