

**Recovery and Resilience from a Humanistic Perspective**

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October, 2021

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In this paper, the author explores how the recovery process from stress, trauma, and adversity may improve not just resilience, but also trust in life and in oneself. The theoretical framework explored in this paper provides the foundation for the Wabing Recovery and Resilience Program used at Performance Recovery in Scottsdale, Arizona. At Performance Recovery, we provide treatment services for anxiety and depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders.

### **Recovery and Resilience**

The treatment program was developed with the two main goals of facilitating recovery from adversity and, over time, building resilience to life's inevitable challenges. The concepts that guide stress and trauma rehabilitation are the restoration of safety and the empowerment of the individual (Herman, 1998). Healing does not always mean complete relief from the post-traumatic effects, but rather the ability to live in the present without being overwhelmed by the thoughts and feelings associated with the trauma (Nordstrom, 2021). In other words, it is the process of transformation that allows people to improve their health and well-being while living a self-determined life and striving to achieve their greatest potential, something that is essential in humanistic psychology.

When a person undergoes a transformation process, they not only integrate and learn from previous difficult experiences, but also build resilience and develop essential skills to cope with the problems of the future (Nordstrom, 2021). Consequently, resilience is defined as the capacity to bounce back from adversity, adapt, and flourish (Nordstrom, 2021). Among other things, it enhances the ability to be resourceful, innovative, and persistent when faced with difficult situations or adversity (Nordstrom, 2021). Thus, being resilient is not about avoiding

stress. It is the capacity of a person to bounce back from the stresses of life while also acquiring the skills necessary to thrive.

Since physiology (the body) and neurobiology (the fight, flight, or freeze response) have an impact on psychology (thoughts and emotions), in our treatment program we are employing an interdisciplinary approach in which recovery and resilience are addressed from the perspectives of both neurobiology and psychology (Nordstrom, 2021). We believe that a healthy body and a well-balanced neurological system are important for achieving and maintaining equilibrium and well-being on all levels, including the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. To help participants access the full spectrum of physical and mental health, as well as emotional and spiritual well-being, the curriculum is divided into four sections: Physical Down-Regulation, Emotional Management, Cognitive Skills, and a Greater Purpose.

### **Recovery and Resilience in Relation to Humanistic Psychology**

The treatment program was developed from a humanistic perspective, based on the core principle of humanistic psychology, which aims to address the "full range of human experience, not just the aspects that are most readily measurable and under environmental control" (Crain, 2010, p. 388). This means that, rather than focusing exclusively on mental illness and what is not working well, humanistic psychology's fundamental tenet is to emphasize the positive characteristics of human beings, such as the fact that humans are free, creative individuals with an innate desire to learn new things and develop into truer or more authentic versions of themselves, also known as self-actualization (Maslow, 1968, as cited in Crain, 2010).

To gain a deeper understanding of the highest need, self-actualization, Abraham Maslow, a key figure in the development of humanistic psychology, examined the lives and experiences of the healthiest and most creative people he could find (Crain, 2010). In his work, Maslow

discovered that when basic or deficit needs such as physiological needs (first hierarchical need), needs for safety and security (second hierarchical need), social needs related to love and belonging (third hierarchical need), and self-esteem and significance (fourth hierarchical need) are met, people have a foundation for satisfying the innate human need for growth and self-actualization (fifth hierarchical need) (Crain, 2010).

### **Physical Down-Regulation in Relation to Humanistic Psychology**

In the first section of our treatment program, which relates to *Physical Down-Regulation*, the primary goal is to help our clients satisfy their first two hierarchical needs, namely the need for physiological balance and for safety and security. We place great emphasis on helping our clients stabilize and down-regulate their nervous systems. In addition to body-based therapies, such as yoga and neurogenic tremoring, we emphasize sleep hygiene, nutrition, and functional fitness. We have found that clients who are fatigued following a functional fitness class sleep better and eat healthier. In addition, research has shown that people who sleep better are significantly more likely to continue exercising. More details about the research on this positive feedback loop between exercise, sleep and nutrition can be found in Dr. John Ratey's book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* and Dr. Mathew Walker's book *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams*.

### **Emotional Management in Relation to Humanistic Psychology**

Once we have determined that our clients' nervous systems have stabilized and down-regulated, which we observe not only during our communication with them but also through self-surveys and monitoring their heart rate variability, we integrate various emotional management and regulation skills, relating to the second section of the treatment program called *Emotional Management*. Among other things, we practice emotional awareness and the capacity to be

present in the body with active feelings, also referred to as "felt-sense." The term felt-sense refers to a finding by psychotherapist and researcher Eugene Gendlin, PhD (1982) that in successful therapy, patients instinctively focus on a subtle inner bodily sensation that provides information about how to resolve the client's current problem.

Thus, in the second phase of treatment, we focus more on the third and fourth hierarchical needs for love and belonging, as well as self-esteem and significance. During this phase, we observe that our clients develop a stronger emotional connection with themselves, which makes it easier to connect with others. That is, according to Dr Stephen Porges' research on the subject, when the nervous system has down-regulated the stress response and activated the social engagement system, it appears to be easier for the client to feel safe when connecting with others (Porges, 2011). This, in turn, facilitates the formation of satisfying relationships. Additionally, the introspective and reflective nature of our program fosters self-awareness and an understanding of one's past, which enables one to learn from one's experiences while also growing and developing new skills.

### **Cognitive Skills in Relation to Humanistic Psychology**

As we build a foundation upon which the client acquires the skills necessary to meet the four lower hierarchical needs, also called deficit needs, we also gradually begin to address the client's fifth higher need, also called growth need (Maslow, 1943). Although clients develop and learn new skills throughout the program, through psychoeducation, peer support, and learning and drawing conclusions as they integrate past experiences, it is not until the third phase that we place a greater emphasis on developing the cognitive skills necessary for personal growth and even self-actualization. These include recognizing and defusing daily triggers, setting and achieving short- and long-term goals, learning effective time management, and improving one's

ability to prioritize and make value-based decisions. Additionally, a significant part of our meditation, self-reflection, and group discussion practices is to discover who I am on a deeper level, the truer or more authentic self, that we believe is the part of us that desires expression during the process of self-actualization.

### **Greater Purpose in Relation to Humanistic Psychology**

Over the course of the program, the client develops a stronger connection with themselves. For instance, through meditation and various other introspective exercises, the client frequently overcomes feelings of hopelessness, guilt, shame, and so forth, and develops a stronger sense of self-compassion, empathy, and even a sense of oneness with life, God, or nature (different terms are used depending on the client's spiritual belief system). By gradually peeling away various unresolved emotional layers, it appears as though the client approaches the deeper human need to be a part of something greater than themselves and to believe that their life has meaning.

This section of the program is called *Greater Purpose*, and it bears some resemblance to Lawrence Kohlberg's final stages of moral development. While adult norms, and the consequences of following or violating them, influence the initial stages of moral development, Kohlberg asserts that the final stages are influenced by an individual's growing understanding of universal ethical principles and ability to make just decisions when viewing a situation through the eyes of others (Crain, 2010). The final stages are not so much about applying moral reasoning as they are about spiritual development as a result of self-reflection and integration of personal experiences (Crain, 2010). That is, after developing into a person who understands what is fair or right for the greater good, an increased sense of connection with oneself and others

provides some individuals with the emotional support necessary to stand up and work for what they believe is right and what provides them with deeper meaning.

### **Building Trust in Life and Oneself**

When a person has suffered for an extended period of time or has been repeatedly exposed to trauma, as many of our clients have, our experience indicates that they frequently lose trust in themselves and their ability to make sound decisions. Particularly when the adversity is related to something they believe they could have avoided had they made a different choice, such as avoiding a dangerous situation or not trusting a certain person who later turned out to be harmful. The overall objective of this program is assisting the client in reconnecting with their inner guidance system and teaching them how to interpret their feelings and somatic markers more accurately, enabling them to make more informed decisions. When this occurs, our experience has been that the client develops a greater sense of confidence and trust in themselves and the world around them.

This process of establishing trust is quite comparable to Erik Erikson's first stage of psychosocial development, during which a person builds initial social bonds with primary caregivers. The critical factor is that newborns recognize consistency, predictability, and dependability in the activities of their caregivers (Gardiner et al, 2010). They acquire a basic trust in a parent who is consistent and trustworthy (Gardiner et al, 2010). Because this is their first encounter with the world, the dynamics of this encounter are later mirrored in their level of trust or mistrust of the world in general.

Moreover, it seems that as we heal and learn from the past, we also develop a stronger sense of connection to what Maslow calls the innate nature of human beings, a sense of inner wisdom that drives us toward health, growth, and self-actualization. No matter how much we

have lost connection to this inner core, it rarely disappears altogether (Crain 2010). It remains "underground, in the unconscious, and speaks to us as an inner voice waiting to be heard" (Crain 2010, p. 393), and according to Maslow and the principles of humanistic psychology, all effective treatment is founded on this inner "will to health" (Maslow, 1968, as cited in Crain, 2010, p. 393). To summarize, our treatment program is founded on some of the most fundamental principles of humanistic psychology, specifically meeting a person's hierarchical needs while also assisting them in developing a stronger connection to their inner voice, which will guide them on their path to self-actualization.



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