

Mind, Body, Heart and Spirit
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, May 7, 2023
Paula Gribble, DLFE and Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Time for All Ages
My Body Has Big Feelings, Too!
Paula Gribble, DLFE

Good morning! How are you doing? How are you feeling? Hmmm...I bet there are lots of different answers people could give...But I feel like there's something missing. We usually ask people how they are doing or feeling, but we don't often ask them how that is in their body. How are you doing? How are you feeling? And how is that in your body?

And not only do we not ask that question, but we often skip it for ourselves. We might process how something happening feels in our brain or our heart, but the rest of the body processes it too. Especially when it's big feelings. Big feelings and big thoughts are different from other feelings and thoughts, and each person is different. I think we have to understand that sometimes people feel big and think big when we don't. And we also have to understand that some people don't feel big and think big when we do. Because we're alike as people, but we are not the same. Instead, maybe we can concentrate today on what we can do with big feelings and thoughts. And today, I want to talk about the body and asking that question, How does that feel in your body? Because this focus can help us better work through those big feelings and thoughts.

So, what happens in your body when you feel super sad, or super glad, or super mad. You might feel like not eating, or you might feel like eating a lot. You might feel like all you want to do is sleep, and you might not be able to sleep at all. You might feel shaky and jittery, or you might be frozen in shock. You might feel like singing and shouting, or you might be at a loss for words. Y You might feel like your heart is going to jump out of your chest, or you might feel like a rock. You might feel like your head will explode, or you might feel completely full of air. When I am feeling big things, I notice that my breathing is different, my stomach starts rumbling, I feel a knot in my throat, and I feel pressure in my chest. Tears come easily. And – if you can believe this – I talk very softly or hardly at all.

So now I have taken classes and read books and read online...and I have learned that there are things we can do that not only help with our big feelings, but also with the ways our bodies are feeling. And what I also learned is that there are really good tools you can use too. I'll share two today. First is an alphabet game. (This works alone or with others). And there's two ways to do it. The first is to pick a topic...like foods, for example...and list things in that topic for each letter of the alphabet. Like if it's foods you might say A is for apple, B is for banana, C is for cookie, and so on. The other way is one that I find really works, and it's great to do with family, but you can also do it yourself. You say, "My name is _____, and I am from _____, and I sell _____." And you do this for each letter of the alphabet. Like if I started with A, I might say, "My name is Albert, and I am from Arizona, and I sell Apples." That's one of my favorites.

The second tool I'll share is a game with your senses. While focusing on breathing, you count down from five while naming things for each of the senses. 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. You can even change the numbers for which senses. It really works to calm myself!

I think we all have big thoughts and feelings. And there are lots more ways to work through them. But I do think it's important to remember your body as you work through them. So ask yourself, How am I doing? How am I feeling? AND don't forget to ask, How is that in my body?

Sermon
Mind, Body, Heart and Spirit
Rev. Margret

Who you are, who I am, who each of us is, is enough, and more than enough, just as we are. That is a message I think we all need to hear speak and affirm as often and as clearly as we can, because it is so very true, and so important to know.

May is Mental Health Awareness month, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness NAMI - is celebrating with the *More Than Enough* campaign! The description of their campaign echoes our Unitarian Universalist values, as they call us to use this month as an "opportunity for all of us to come together and remember the inherent value we each hold — no matter our diagnosis, appearance, socioeconomic status, background or ability." As the NAMI announcement says, and I so deeply affirm for myself and for all of us, "We want every person out there to know that if all you did was wake up today, that's more than enough. No matter what, you are inherently worthy of more than enough life, love and healing. Showing up, just as you are, for yourself and the people around you is more than enough."

This lesson, about the inherent value each of us holds, is sometimes hard to hear, hard to learn. The world is filled with messages of judgment, of stereotypes and prejudices, that can lead us to feel "less than," rather than enough. And sometimes we work so hard to deny our own reality, to conform to the societal expectations around us, that we do not love, cherish and care for ourselves as we should.

Paula

Wow, Rev. Margret, that last part you just said really got me...and it bears repeating. "...sometimes we work so hard to deny our own reality, to conform to the societal expectations around us, that we do not love, cherish and care for ourselves as we should." That just gets to the heart of the message I wanted to share today.

When we undergo events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening, we experience trauma. And whatever the cause of the trauma, it can have lasting adverse effects on our functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being. This can trigger feelings of shame. Somehow, we feel embarrassed or humiliated, and often that spirals into the perception of having done something dishonorable, immoral, or improper. Even when it's something done to us or that we simply witnessed, with no responsibility or control.

Trauma alters our brains, and either dampens or releases hormones that bring on mental and physical changes. Just like having clinical depression or anxiety alters us physically and mentally. It's a real thing, not one we're making up or over-exaggerating or one where we're "being over-sensitive." And yet when we react to trauma or our mental health status, we feel shame. As if we don't have enough stigma coming from external sources. As if there aren't people even now who don't understand trauma and mental health struggles, and downplay its significance. No, even with all that, we feel this need to be critical of ourselves, like we're inherently flawed.

Shame is toxic to our well-being, and repeated self-shaming only leads to more trauma which leads to more shame, which leads to...you get where I am going. It becomes internalized and results in an overly harsh evaluation of ourselves as whole people. Because at the heart of it, self-stigmatizing and feeling shamed are just ways we convince ourselves we are broken. We feel that if we have a mental health diagnosis, or if we've experienced large-scale trauma...we're somehow less than. And if someone tells us we have a physical chemical imbalance, then we not only feel flawed, but also abnormal and unfixable. I want to tell you this is the shame talking. It's the voice of toxicity that says we'll never be enough. So what's the antidote to all that shame and self-stigmatizing? Mending. Yes, our theme this month is the exact thing we need right now for our mental well-being. Mending.

Now let me be clear. Mending doesn't make the bad thing disappear. Mending doesn't take away the chemical imbalance. Mending doesn't make something new. It just repairs it. When you mend an item of clothing, the rip isn't gone, it's just repaired. And truth be told, it might come undone again and need to be mended again. And that's okay.

Did you know that people who have experienced repeated or extended trauma are: 2 times as likely to smoke, 4 times as likely to have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 7 times as likely have issues with alcoholism, 10 times as likely to have used street drugs, and 12 times as likely to have attempted suicide? And that's just a few ways it can manifest in our lives if we don't understand the self-shaming and self-stigmatizing.

So what do we do to mend? Well, we first breathe. Then we might talk with someone, take medication, and learn tools like the ones I mentioned in the Time for All Ages. But the root of mending, and the true antidote to shame... is self-compassion. Oh, you might say, thanks Paula for clearing that up. I'll just have self-compassion and be mended right away. I'm not saying it's easy. Believe me, it IS NOT. But there are tools out there to help, and like I said, it's an ongoing process of mending.

SO how do we get there? A good place to start is just thinking of how you give compassion to others. Dr. Kristin Neff, a pioneer in the field of self-compassion research says this: *Having compassion for oneself is really no different than having compassion for others...First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others' suffering so that your heart responds to their pain...When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way...Finally, when you feel compassion for another...it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience... Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are having a difficult time...you stop to tell yourself "this is really difficult right now," [and ask] how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?*

Next time you are feeling the shame come on, feeling that your trauma or mental health makes you irreparably flawed...I invite you to try self-compassion instead. It just might help you mend.

Rev. Margret

Thanks, Paula, we can all use those reminders about self-compassion as we work to mend our hearts, minds, bodies and spirits. One thing I know is that trauma does not have to be a catastrophic event, it does not have to be a war or a fire or a threat to our lives in order to create a tear in our fabric that calls for mending. The events that shape us can be routine, can be subtle, and still leave a lasting effect.

Looking back on my own life, I now understand that I drove myself into physical illness, mental imbalance and spiritual desolation by striving to meet expectations set by my family and community – expectations at home, at school, in music and outside activities – the expectation that I would consistently show up and perform at a high level, that I would do only those things I could do well, and that I would use reason and judgment to guide my behaviors. Even my rebellions as a teen and young adult were well planned and implemented with care. The result? By the time I was in my early 30s I had myriad physical pains and limitations, and a very sharp and unforgiving way of being in the world.

It might have helped me if early in my life I had received that message about being enough, and more than enough, just as I was – but the good thing is that the breakdowns in those early years have led me to changes that have resulted in my being a healthier, more balanced person in these later years of my life.

When I finally realized I was in physical and emotional breakdown, and that pain and anxiety were not normal human states, and when medical doctors told me there was nothing wrong with me, I went off the map of standard biomedical science to seek out healing gifts that would mend my body, mind and spirit. I discovered integrative movement, bodywork and energy work, and became both a receiver and practitioner of those healing modalities. A wise doctor pressured me into taking up the practice of meditation, which I resisted as long as I could – and thank goodness for the compassionate coach who helped me get through the troop of screaming monkeys in my head, to the place where I could actually quiet my mind. And over time, I gained the gift of perspective, learning that not everything is an emergency, not every problem requires me to fix it, and figuring out what to hold on to and what to let go. I am definitely a work in progress, continuing to learn to use those mending resources to bind up the tears in my spirit.

And yes, more often than I like, I find myself in a situation when I feel I am not enough. Sometimes it happens in my work, or in an activity or project – and it might be happening a little more frequently these days. I know that everything seems harder now, three years into the pandemic that refuses to end, and it can start to feel like I am working harder and not getting as far as I expect to. But the hardest times for me are when I am in a relationship where I feel like who and how I am is simply not enough. I can start then to slide into real sadness, anxiety, self-blame – if I am not enough, it must be my fault, right? I am not smart enough, not caring enough, not strong enough, not patient enough And on and on and on.... Just not enough.

That is when I need to remember the gift of perspective. Therapist Amanda Dodson said it beautifully in an article she titled, *We Shouldn't Have to Be So Resilient*. She used to counsel her clients to cultivate resilience, but now, she says, “.... I am tired of being resilient.Simply put, I just don't want people to have to be so resilient anymore... I'm certain that we shouldn't be expected to continue to build our little towers of inner strength so high... Aren't we tired of being so strong? Aren't we exhausted by working to improve ourselves while the detritus of each new disaster rains down around us? [Maybe it is time to just sit this one out.] Surround yourself with the people, sights, smells, and sensations that bring you a momentary sense of safety. Let the fact that you are intact in this moment be enough.... accept that in this moment, you are who you are, and that person is enough. The person you are might be good enough for this world just as you are.”

The best of current neuroscience, dating back a few decades now, tells us that we are integrated organic systems; that our mind, body, heart and spirit are interconnected in marvelous ways. From the messenger systems of neurotransmitters and neuropeptides that keep us in

communication to the hormonal and chemical systems that keep us in balance, we are designed to ebb and to flow, to bend and to stretch, and when we find we have broken, we are designed to mend, supporting each other in a healing community.

The short video we are about to share features Rainn Wilson, best known for the TV show *The Office*. Rainn practices the Bahá'í faith, and his message reminds us that we are more than our bodies, that we are part of a larger universal system with a spiritual essence.
(<https://www.facebook.com/reel/2473091186190775?s=yWDuG2&fs=e>)

We are beings and becomings, creatures of matter and energy, physical and spiritual, and the mending of our lives calls us into wholeness centered in the power of love. Love is manifest in community, as we sing and dance and speak together, giving and receiving comfort in all the complexities of life.

Sources

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