

**ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES
TO HEALTH AND HEALING**



Contemporary conventional Western medicine, the kind that is taught in most medical schools and practised by most doctors, is based on certain beliefs in how disease works in the body and how disease should be treated. We tend to accept these beliefs as universal because they have become standard. Recently, though, there has been an upsurge of discontent with conventional medicine and its emphasis on drugs and surgery and its lack of interest in prevention, and increasing interest in what is often called the holistic health movement.

The holistic approach says that we cannot separate body, mind, emotions and spirit, nor can we separate the individual from her/his environment. Disease is thought to arise from an imbalance in the body, which might have been caused by poor nutrition or emotional distress or a pollutant in the environment. This may show up in the human organism as either physical or mental disease or both, whatever the original cause may have been. The usual medical approach is to categorize the origins and symptoms of disease as physical or mental, without much acknowledgement of their interrelatedness, and to treat the symptoms of the disease with drugs that will presumably destroy the disease or the cause of the disease, or by cutting out the diseased part of the body (surgery). What often happens is that the symptom of the disease is alleviated and the underlying cause of the disease is masked. Drugs can also produce unwanted effects and cause other symptoms than the ones being treated.

The holistic approach is to try and stimulate the organism's natural ability to heal itself by the use of natural substances which will not add further stress to the body and/or produce harmful side effects, or by the use of other techniques that will help the body fight the disease. The body is doing the curing, not an outside agent like a drug. This is not to suggest that conventional medicine is never useful or valid, but to show that we have come to rely on this one approach too much, and that there are many other approaches to health and healing which have validity and which have helped numerous people. It is in our interest to recognize that there are alternatives to drugs and surgery and to make choices about our health care based on information about all the alternatives available to us.

Practitioners of most of the approaches described here work in Vancouver. Refer to the Health Collective's Health Practitioner Directory under 'Alternative Practitioners.'

ACUPUNCTURE

According to traditional Chinese medicine, a life force or energy controls the workings of the body's organs and systems. The energy flows along pathways called meridians. In a healthy body, the energy flows freely, whereas illness is signified by a blockage of energy. The purpose of acupuncture is to stimulate a more normal and balanced flow of energy. This is done by inserting special very thin needles into specific points on the meridians, only after a careful diagnostic examination which includes reading the pulses in the wrists. Some conditions that respond well to acupuncture are migraines, deafness, backpains, menstrual problems, arthritis, asthma, spastic colon, high blood pressure, and digestive and skin problems. Acupuncture is done in B.C. by a few doctors and naturopaths, but is not covered by the Medical Services Plan. Currently, in order to practice acupuncture legally in B.C., the practitioner must also be a medical doctor, but efforts are being made to allow other people, especially from Asia, with many years of training and experience, to practice here.

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

The Alexander Technique was the earliest mind/body therapy and is a series of movement lessons designed to help people to use their bodies more consciously and more efficiently by changing old patterns of movement. It was developed by an actor who discovered that losing his voice was directly related to habitual movements which constricted his neck muscles. Many actors, singers and dancers use his technique today.

APPLIED KINESIOLOGY

Applied kinesiology uses a system of simple muscle-testing procedures to check for structural imbalances, dietary deficiencies, allergies, organ dysfunctions, and even psychological factors involved in the imbalances. It is used by many chiropractors. *Touch for Health* courses teach lay people how to use Applied Kinesiology to check for weaknesses and balance the body's energy.

AUTOGENIC TRAINING

Autogenic Training is a method of self-hypnosis which leads to deep relaxation and greater powers of awareness and self-regulation. It is particularly useful for stress-related health problems such as migraines, ulcers, high blood pressure and insomnia. Courses with trained instructors are available.

BACH FLOWER REMEDIES

Dr. Bach was a homeopath who, believing that physical disease was not physical in origin but a consolidation of a mental attitude, discovered that extracts of certain flowers would relieve emotional distress and allow the person to recover more quickly from the physical ailment. His 38 remedies are divided into 7 groups to treat fear, uncertainty, despondency, excessive anxiety, etc. The Rescue Remedy combines 5 remedies for cases of shock, terror, panic, sorrow and accidents. It is necessary to study a book on Bach Flower Remedies to figure out which remedy is appropriate for individual states of mind. The remedies are available at Folklore Herbs, 2388 West 4th Ave., Vancouver. They are totally non-toxic. Other flower remedies have recently been formulated in California where a group called the Flower Essence Society expands on the work of Dr. Bach.

BATES METHOD OF EYESIGHT TRAINING

Dr. Bates was an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) who developed a series of exercises which teach people how to improve their vision by using their eyes in a relaxed and easy manner. Some are as simple as blinking rapidly to lubricate the eyes and 'palming' which means covering the closed eyes with the cupped palms and thinking about something pleasant. Some people have been able to go without glasses after practising these exercises. Instructions on the exercises can be found in various books available on the Bates method.

BIOENERGETICS

Bioenergetics was developed by Alexander Lowen out of his training with Wilhelm Reich. **Reichian therapy** is based on the understanding of the way in which emotional traumas cause muscular contractions which become fixed patterns of tension and block the flow of energy in the body. By releasing the tense muscles (or "body armouring") through massage, pressure and breathing techniques, repressed emotions come to the surface and can be expressed and released. **Bioenergetic therapy** is based on the same understanding of the way in which our physical posture and tensions reflect our emotional history and our attitudes to life, and works on releasing muscle tension through a series of exercises and postures. It also includes verbal analysis to help the person understand and integrate the emotional and physical changes brought about by these powerful techniques.

BIOFEEDBACK

Biofeedback uses technology to achieve the same results. By using machines which monitor brain waves, a person can observe how her/his brain wave patterns change as she/he relaxes and can learn to control her/his involuntary physical processes such as blood circulation and heartbeat, and control conditions such as high blood pressure and migraines.

CHIROPRACTIC

Chiropractic theory holds that disease, whether functional or organic, involves a disturbance of the nervous system. In order to keep the nervous system free from disturbance, chiropractors focus on the spine (the centre of the nervous system). Chiropractic adjustments or manipulations correct the subluxations (displacements) of the vertebrae of the spine, thus creating the right conditions for the body to heal itself. Many conditions such as migraines, back pain, nerve deafness and allergies, have been known to be helped by chiropractic treatment. In B.C. 12 chiropractic treatments per year are covered by MSP. Some chiropractors charge extra. **Osteopath** is similar to chiropractic in that it also deals with manipulation of the musculo-skeletal system.

CLINICAL ECOLOGY

Clinical ecology is a new science which is concerned with the environmental causes of physical and emotional problems. Many conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, migraines, hypertension, arthritis, asthma, eczema and rhinitis are sometimes caused by sensitivity to foods, drugs, chemicals and irritants in the air and water and in our home and work environments. These conditions frequently remain undiagnosed as allergic reactions and many sufferers end up taking drugs. Allergic people have sometimes ended up in psychiatric institutions because their behavioral problems were thought to be strictly emotional. Many so-called hyperactive children are allergic. Clinical ecologists use sublingual (under the tongue) and intradermal (injections) tests, and in some cases blood tests, to check for allergies. (Muscle testing can also be used to check for allergies: see section on APPLIED KINESIOLOGY). Treatment can involve rotation diets, megavitamin therapy (often by injection), immunotherapy (desensitization by administration of progressively larger doses of allergenic substances) and the strict avoidance of environmental irritants. Clinical ecologists are medical doctors and are therefore covered by MSP, but there are very few in practice in B.C. PLAINAIR is a self-help group formed to help those who suffer from environmental allergies. Their address is P.O. Box 46711, Station G, 3760 West 10th Ave., Vancouver, B.C. V6R 4K8.

THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD

The Feldenkrais Method of body awareness aims to break down habitual patterns of movement and behaviour and replace them with more awareness and the ability to be spontaneous. The lessons are a series of very gentle exercises which act in a subtle way on the nervous system and reestablish connections between the brain and the musculature which have been short-circuited by tension, bad habits and psychological or environmental influences.

HERBAL MEDICINE

Herbal medicine is the art and science of restoring health by the use of plant remedies. Unlike drugs, which are substances isolated or synthesized in laboratories, herbs contain all the naturally occurring properties of the plant, including those not yet identified

by science but which most likely have a role in the healing process. The purpose of herbal medicine is to restore health by stimulating the self-healing capabilities of the body. Evidence of the use of herbs for medicinal purposes are found in virtually every culture and on every continent. Herbal medicines can be extracted from various parts of a plant and are taken in a variety of forms. There are herbal remedies for virtually every condition. Some herbal remedies, such as mint tea for indigestion, are well known and easily available. Some herbs can be toxic so it is best not to take too many without consulting a herbalist. Naturopathic doctors sometimes recommend herbs. Consultations with them are covered by MSP, but consultations with a herbalist are not.

HOMEOPATHY

Homeopathy is a natural system of healing, the underlying principle of which is that a remedy can cure a disease only if it is able to produce symptoms similar to that of the disease in a healthy person. The idea of using medicine which produces a reaction similar to the disease itself is the direct opposite of the approach taken by conventional medicine which is based on healing with the use of drugs which are contrary or opposite to the disease. (This approach is called allopathic medicine). Homeopathic remedies are extremely diluted natural substances which have been vigorously shaken. They heal more effectively than a conventional drugs, and with no side effects, although the condition of the person will get worse before it gets better (which is known as an aggravation). The small doses stimulate the body to heal itself. The homeopath, after careful questioning of the patient and observation of her/his condition, selects one remedy which seems the most appropriate. After a period of time, if it doesn't seem to be working, s/he will try another remedy or repeat the original one. If it has had an effect, another remedy appropriate to the now changed condition of the patient is given. The remedies are chosen not to combat a particular disease (as in the allopathic approach) but because they seem suited to a number of aspects of the person, both physical and psychological. The concept of "disease" is therefore much broader than in conventional medicine. Homeopathy deals with the whole person and, as such, is a truly holistic approach to healing. A homeopathic doctor is trained strictly in homeopathy, although some naturopathic doctors use homeopathy. It is not covered by MSP.

HYPNOSIS

Hypnosis, done by a skilled practitioner, can induce a light, medium or deep trance state. This is a state of deep relaxation when the mind is free of inhibition and open to suggestion (although it is a myth that under hypnosis you might do something which is ordinarily against your principles). It is useful as a way of exploring old hidden memories and repressed feelings, or as a way to change habitual behaviour such as overeating, smoking and drinking, and to overcome phobias (irrational fears). Some doctors and psychologists are trained in the use of hypnosis. Self-hypnosis is similar to deep relaxation or autogenic training; we can give ourselves messages about things we want to change in ourselves when we are in a deeply relaxed state.

IRIDOLOGY

Iridology, or iris diagnosis, is the diagnosis of disease based on observations of the iris of the eye. The examination is done with a strong light source and a magnifying glass. The iris is divided into zones which correspond to systems and organs of the body. Markings such as dots or lines in the iris indicate the condition of the system or organ to a trained iridologist. Diseases, imbalances, nutritional deficiencies, etc. can frequently be detected earlier than with conventional medical tests.

MASSAGE

Massage may well be the oldest known form of medicine. Various forms of massage have developed in different parts of the world. The usual form of massage encountered here is often referred to as Swedish massage. It is used both remedially for specific ailments or injuries to muscles, joints and generally for relaxation and improving the blood and lymph circulation. There are many physical benefits from massage, as well as benefits to our mental well-being from relaxation. In B.C. 12 treatments per year by a licensed masseur or masseuse are partially covered by MSP.

MEDITATION

Meditation is an ancient discipline which can bring the same kind of relaxation, awareness and control over bodily processes as the contemporary techniques. There are many forms of meditation (using breathing techniques, chanting, looking at visual symbols, etc); all provide the benefits of reducing physical tension and calming the mind, although these are merely the most obvious results of practices based on complex theories and spiritual beliefs. There are many books on the subject and many teachers and schools of meditation to choose from.

MEGAVITAMIN THERAPY

(Orthomolecular Medicine)

Orthomolecular medicine means "the preservation of good health and the treatment of disease by varying the concentrations in the human body of substances that are normally present in the body and required for good health" (Linus Pauling). Mostly, this means large doses of vitamins in cases where severe deficiencies are thought to be the cause of physical and/or emotional disturbances. Many people labelled as schizophrenic have returned to mental health after taking large doses of Vitamin B (niacin), usually in conjunction with other vitamins, minerals and amino acids. (The pioneer of this approach to treating schizophrenia, Dr. Abram Hoffer, now practices in Victoria). Other research has been done on Vitamin C which in large doses seems to have a role in preventing or lessening the severity of conditions ranging from the common cold to cancer. Large doses of vitamins can be dangerous to our health so a program of megavitamins should only be undertaken under the supervision of a health practitioner.

NATUROPATHY

The naturopathic approach is concerned with the interaction between the mind, body and emotions of the individual and her/his relationship to the environment. The naturopathic physician therefore treats the whole person, not the symptom of the disease. The methods used are non-invasive (non-surgical) and

non-suppressive (do not suppress symptoms and mask underlying causes of disease) and are intended to build up the individual's resources and promote self-healing. They can include vitamin and mineral therapy, herbs, homeopathy, acupuncture, spinal manipulation and nutritional counselling. In B.C. consultations with naturopathic doctors are covered by MSP up to \$110 per year.

POLARITY THERAPY

This system, developed by Dr. Randolph Stone, treats a person in a holistic way, based on the belief that the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of a person's being are always in a dynamic (ever-fluctuating) state. The system includes a vegetarian diet, special exercises, the use of affirmations (e.g. I am a good person; I feel love for myself and others) for a healthy attitude, and polarity manipulations which involve touching various points on the body to balance the body's energy.

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

Progressive Relaxation is one easy to learn method of relaxing by systematically releasing tension from different muscle groups and allowing for deeper breathing which calms the mind and the body. It can be learned from books or tapes, but is best learned in a class.

REFLEXOLOGY (Zone Therapy)

Reflexology, or Zone Therapy, is massage of the feet. In reflexology theory, areas in the feet are linked to various organs of the body. By touching the feet, a trained practitioner can diagnose problems in various organs, and by massaging specific points can stimulate a flow of energy to the affected organ, thus creating a condition for the recovery of the organ's health. Some massage therapists use reflexology, and treatments and classes are available at several centres in the Lower Mainland.

REIKI

Reiki is a Japanese word derived from "rei," meaning universal and "ki," meaning the vital life force. Reiki can be defined as the art of activating, applying and balancing the universal life force energy that dwells within every living being, animal and/or plant. It is a method of hands-on-healing that can be used for stress reduction, deep relaxation, and for healing of specific health problems. During a normal Reiki treatment the practitioner gently places his or her hands on or over the recipient's body in 12 prescribed positions for a period of at least five minutes in each place. Sometimes additional positions are used and more time is spent on "trouble areas." The treatment facilitates, for the recipient the process of opening up to, receiving and then channeling the Reiki energy.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

There are a number of approaches to relaxation that can be learned in classes, from health practitioners (sometimes covered by MSP) and from books and tapes. Many ailments and diseases are stress-related and can be prevented or controlled through the use of a systematic relaxation technique. Some conditions that respond particularly well are headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, anxiety, nervousness, insomnia and fatigue, and there aren't many that could not be helped by reducing the body's stress level.

ROLFING (Structural Integration)

Rolfing, or Structural Integration, is a method of very deep massage which allows the body to return to a normal structural or postural position. As with Reichian or Bioenergetic therapy, old emotional traumas which caused the body to become tense and rigid come to the surface as the body becomes more flexible, and a change in personality follows. **Postural Integration** uses similar deep connective tissue massage techniques, and also uses other therapeutic techniques such as Gestalt to help the person deal with the emotions that are released.

SHIATSU

Shiatsu is a Japanese form of massage using mostly thumb pressure on points on the meridians (energy pathways) of the body. Most of these points are the same points used in acupuncture and the theory of disease as being related to blocked energy is the same. Like acupuncture, shiatsu stimulates the healing process in the body. Some massage therapists use shiatsu.

T'AI CHI

T'ai chi is an ancient Chinese system of movement with its base in the philosophy of yin/yang (opposite and balancing energies). The movements, a sequence of thirty nine forms, reflect this philosophy and are inspired by nature—birds, animals, clouds, winds. Chi refers to the flow of energy which, if blocked, creates disease. The graceful flowing movements of t'ai chi release blocks to a natural flow of energy and therefore promotes healing and good health. There are many schools of t'ai chi and the different schools teach different forms of movement.

VISUALIZATIONS AND AFFIRMATIONS

Visualization is the use of mental imagery to effect positive changes within ourselves. As an example of how visualization can be used, you can, after going into a relaxed state using a relaxation technique or deep breathing, imagine yourself in a situation where you would normally feel anxious and upset. Then imagine yourself becoming calm, relaxed and in control of the situation. You can also use affirmations—positive statements about yourself—that you can say to yourself to reinforce the mental imagery. Visualization can play an important part in the healing process. Cancer patients have been known to improve or recover by using images of healthy cells destroying malignant ones. There are no limits to the ways in which mental and physical wellbeing can be enhanced by visualization, and it can be self-taught from one of the many books now available on the topic, or learned with a therapist or other health practitioner.

YOGA

Yoga is an ancient philosophy from India which embraces all aspects of human life: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Hatha yoga, which is the form of yoga best known and widely practised in the west, focuses on the physical body. It was intended to prepare the body for meditation, but is used now by many people to release tension and develop physical strength and flexibility. It does this through breathing techniques and through a series of postures called asanas. Many ailments caused by tension and poor posture are likely to improve or disappear with the practice of the asanas, and more beneficial changes in physical and mental health will happen as the student of yoga becomes more aware of her/his body and its potential for change. Yoga is very good for older people as it is a gentle form of exercise which stresses flexibility. There are many yoga classes available in most larger cities and many variations in the way the asanas are taught. The best guide in looking for a yoga teacher is to try to find one who is sensitive to individual differences and encourages each student to progress at her/his own pace in a non-competitive atmosphere. In Vancouver, therapeutic yoga classes which are covered by MSP are given by teachers of Iyengar Yoga. Contact Dr. Bruce Carruthers at: 733-2777.

These are only some of the so-called "alternate approaches" to health and healing. There are books on most of these topics in the Health Collective reference library and for sale at Banyen Books in Vancouver.

Two books that provide overviews and are useful as references are *A Visual Encyclopaedia of Unconventional Medicine* edited by Ann Hill (Crown Publishers Inc.) and *Mind Therapies/Body Therapies* by George J. Feiss (Celestial Arts).

The Common Ground directory, which is distributed free in the Lower Mainland at many bookstores and health food stores, lists many practitioners of alternative forms of healing. Subscriptions are available from Common Ground, Box 34090, Station D, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 4M1.

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