

HOLISTIC PRACTICES AND POPULAR EDUCATION
FOR HEALING TRAUMA WITH GRASSROOTS PEOPLE

Patricia Mathes Cane
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In response to people traumatized by Hurricane Mitch and political violence, grassroots leaders were trained in energy-based body-mind-spirit practices and popular education methods to promote self-help healing among people in Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador in 1999. The study addressed the problem of lack of resources for grassroots people and lack of research regarding the use of holistic methods for healing trauma. Research investigating the effects of the use of holistic practices included quantitative and qualitative methods: questionnaires, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. Tai Chi, Pal Dan Gum, acupuncture, visualization, breathwork, ritual, polarity, massage, the labyrinth, body movement, and intuition work were taught to grassroots leaders who in turn shared practices with their communities to empower people to take on their own healing process. Practices were used with indigenous, refugees, prisoners, unionists, religious, youth, battered women and children. Findings showed a lessening of symptoms related to traumatic stress and posttraumatic stress disorder (DSM-IV, 1994) with the use of holistic practices. Findings from focus groups and interviews likewise showed the value of the different holistic practices for self-healing as well as the benefit of specific practices with different kinds of populations. For example, Tai Chi, polarity, and acupuncture were very helpful to Mayan communities in Guatemala. Breathwork and Pal Dan Gum exercises were effective with men and women prisoners in Honduras. The study led to the development of a manual in English and in Spanish of the different holistic practices that could serve as a resource for individuals and communities. The popular education (Freire, 1997) holistic approach

was found to be a way to promote the inherent healing capacity of the person and the community, and to complement and support community resources, cultural practices, and mental health programs.

The study under the auspices of Capacitar, an international project of empowerment and solidarity, grew out of twelve years work with grassroots people. As Capacitar founder and director I worked in twelve countries and eleven states in the U.S. teaching simple body-mind-spirit practices that people could use for themselves, their families, and communities. Most of these people had few economic resources and little access to Western medicine or psychotherapy. Through the years I noticed the profound changes in people who participated in workshops, especially in those places affected by violence. The workshops shared energy practices from different cultures which people had used through the ages to regain balance and harmony in the energy flow of the body, mind, and spirit. Instinctively U.S. and Central American participants recognized the benefit of these practices for self-healing.

In a review of the literature of traumatology few studies were found using a holistic approach for healing trauma. Peter Levine (1977) in Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma, describes symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as caused by blocked energy or a “freezing response” in the person. “A threatened human must discharge all the energy mobilized to negotiate that threat or it will become a victim of trauma. This residual energy does not simply go away. It persists in the body and often forces the formation of a wide variety of symptoms” (p.20). In light of Levine’s theory, healing can occur through a release of undischarged energy as well as through a strengthening of the natural flow of energy, which are the outcomes of the regular use of body-mind-spirit practices (Raheem, 1987). Juan Almendares, M.D., founder of the Center for the Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, Prisoners, and their Relatives in Honduras (CPTRT), has one of the few international clinics that uses only holistic methods. In an in-depth interview Almendares described how he chose to use

natural remedies and holistic practices that would be easily accessible to the poor and the grassroots people who came to his clinic.

This study also addressed the need for healing and transforming patterns of violence and intergenerational trauma (Bloom, 1997). To work only with healing individual trauma is like putting on a bandage to cover a festering wound. In cases such as political violence, societal patterns have institutionalized the problem and the resulting trauma (Herman, 1992). Most participants in Capacitar workshops were activists (religious, union leaders, feminists, and grassroots popular educators) who had worked for years for justice, nonviolence and peace. The body-mind-spirit practices gave them the energy and strength to work more effectively for the long haul in promoting nonviolence and social change in their societies. To begin a process of healing and transformation means addressing the whole system—the individual, the family, and the society (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). The violence that has traumatized men and women through the centuries no longer serves the human family. Healing therefore involves a transformation of values and consciousness on personal, communal and societal levels.

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Contact:

Patricia Mathes Cane, Ph.D.

Capacitar Inc. 2901 Park Avenue Suite B 12 Soquel, CA 95073

www.capacitar.org

Patacane@aol.com