

**Trauma Healing and Transformation:
Body Mind Spirit Practices for Grassroots People
Patricia Mathes Cane, Ph. D.
Dissertation for The Union Institute & University, May 2000**

Trauma Healing and Transformation is a program developed in response to people traumatized by Hurricane Mitch and political violence in Central America. The issue investigated was: Body-mind-spirit practices promote the healing of traumatic stress in grassroots people. Research included a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including questionnaires, focus groups and in-depth interviews. The problem addressed was the lack of resources for grassroots people affected by personal and communal trauma, and lack of research regarding the use of holistic methods for healing trauma.

Research was carried out in 1999 in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala through pilot trainings with grassroots people affected by the trauma of Hurricane Mitch and years of political violence. Using methods of popular education, body-mind-spirit practices, such as Tai Chi, acupressure, visualization and breathing exercises, were taught to grassroots leaders as a way to release energy blocked by traumatic stress. Leaders in turn shared the practices with their communities as a way to empower people to take on their own healing process. Research findings supported the issue and showed a lessening of symptoms related to traumatic stress as a result of the use of body-mind-spirit practices. Findings from focus groups and in-depth interviews also showed the value of specific practices with different kinds of populations. Leaders used the practices with a variety of people: indigenous, refugees, prisoners, youth, battered women and children, religious, and unionists.

Based on the research, a manual was developed to serve as a popular education resource. The manual, *Trauma Healing and Transformation: Awakening a New Heart with Body-Mind-Spirit Practices*, is based on a holistic view of the person and the society, offers body-mind-spirit practices to promote and support the inherent healing capacity of the person and the community. The manual is not a treatment program, nor is it meant to replace one-on-one therapy where available for persons whose signs of trauma are severe. The manual can complement and support already existing community resources, cultural practices, and mental health programs.

Research Findings

A number of significant findings have come from this research project on the use of holistic practices with grassroots people in Central America. The findings provide a basis for the manual **Trauma Healing and Transformation** and underscore the contribution that such popular education materials can make for the wellbeing of grassroots people.

Summary of Findings

The findings from quantitative and qualitative methods, questionnaires, focus groups, and in-depth interviews can be summarized as follows:

1. The majority of research participants positively supported the use of body-mind-spirit practices for grassroots people.
2. Although there were no control groups in a before and after design to determine if changes occurred as a result of the holistic practices, the research, taken as a whole, nonetheless affirms the issue: Body-mind-spirit practices promote the healing of traumatic stress in grassroots people.
3. In answer to the question: Are physical and emotional symptoms of trauma lessened or healed with the use of body-mind-spirit practices? With the regular use of some holistic practices, there was a self-reported decrease in the majority of traumatic stress symptoms (headaches, body pain,

- insomnia, etc). Participants affirmed that the use of body-mind-spirit practices had a positive healing effect on their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. This was indicated in questionnaires, focus groups, and in-depth interviews.
4. In answer to the question: Which body-mind-spirit practices are most useful or effective with individuals and grassroots groups? Questionnaires and focus groups provided valuable information regarding each of the specific practices and their use with different cultures and in different situations. Participants noted that it was important to include in the manual a variety of practices to meet the needs of many different kinds of groups and cultures. Many significant suggestions for the manual were given in the evaluations of participants, including comments on training methods, information on cultural considerations, difficulties with practices, and stories and testimonies from the field to accompany different practices.
 5. All participants agreed that a grassroots manual of the body-mind-spirit practices was needed, since nothing of the kind was currently available.
 6. Leaders asked for Popular Education materials that would include a variety of approaches to make the practices accessible to people of different levels of literacy.
 7. Many leaders asked that the materials develop different aspects for each of the practices theory, explanations, examples, testimonies, photos, suggestions for leaders, resources for further study, and personal experiences.
 8. Some suggested that a section of the manual cover Popular Education methods for group leaders as well as principles of team leadership.
 9. Many participants commented that consideration be given to the multicultural application of the body-mind-spirit practices in light of the wide variety of groups and leaders that would be using the manual.

Summary of Literature Review Findings

A number of valuable learnings came from the literature review to provide a rationale for the method and approach of the manual. They can be summarized as follows:

1. In surveying the relatively new field of Traumatology, very little research was found regarding the application of body-mind-spirit practices for healing traumatic stress.
2. The approach of Traumatology is generally based on a Western medical model of treatment of symptoms. Experts in the field readily admit that research regarding the treatment and healing of trauma is in its early stages.
3. Regarding populations affected by traumatic experiences such as war and natural disasters on the international level, most research involved the application of Western psychotherapeutic methods for the study and healing of trauma. Little has been done to access the communal resources, the natural practices, and the wisdom and traditions of grassroots people for their healing process.
4. In contrast to the therapeutic one-on-one treatment model of Western medicine, a holistic model using a popular education approach seems to be a valid way to reach large numbers of grassroots people.
5. A popular education approach can be a means to help people affected by trauma empowering them to take on their own healing process through reconnection with their own energy system and their body-mind-spirit wisdom.
6. Healing traumatic stress involves the unblocking and releasing of stored traumatic stress, and the balancing and nourishing of the core energy system of the person.
7. Healing trauma is a systemic process involving the healing of the person and the community.
8. It is not sufficient to deal only with the traumatized individual when there is a global pattern of intergenerational trauma. A change in consciousness is necessary that looks to healing and transformation in the community and the society through the active cultivation of attitudes and values to recognize the deep interconnection of all being and to promote forgiveness, nonviolence, partnership, and compassionate action.