

Body-Oriented Therapy in Sexual Abuse Recovery: A Study of Efficacy, Dissociation, and Process

Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the effects of two body therapy approaches: a standardized massage and body-oriented therapy. The study also examined the role of dissociation reduction on health outcomes, and explored the body-oriented therapy process. Body-oriented therapy involves the combination of hands-on bodywork and verbal therapy focused on somatic and emotional awareness. This study examined changes in psychological symptoms, physical symptoms, body connection indicators, and the subjective experience of body therapy. A 2-group repeated measures design was employed. The sample included 24 women with childhood sexual abuse history, currently engaged in psychotherapy. Participants were randomly assigned to receive either body-oriented or massage therapy; they received eight one-hour bodywork sessions from one of four research clinicians. The results demonstrated significant change across time on all outcome measures for both the massage and body-oriented therapy groups, providing support for the efficacy of bodywork therapy in recovery from childhood sexual abuse. There were no statistically significant differences between intervention approaches (massage vs. body-oriented therapy), however qualitative analysis revealed that the intervention groups differed on perceived experience of the intervention and its influence on therapeutic recovery. Access to somatic experience in body-oriented therapy facilitated somatically-based insight and self-understanding and influenced abuse recovery by providing new ground for self-knowledge. In contrast, the standardized massage group increased self-care behavior and relationship to bodily self; these were perceived as positively influencing abuse recovery by stimulating self-efficacy

and engagement in psychotherapy. The contrast between the experience and impact of the interventions raises important clinical and research questions about the differing role of these approaches on sexual abuse recovery. The greatest positive change in health outcomes, for both groups, was the reduction of dissociation. The reduction in dissociation across time was strongly associated with positive psychological and physical well-being, suggesting that dissociation reduction may serve as a mediator of health outcomes. Likewise, high dissociation at baseline predicted positive health outcomes, suggesting that body therapy interventions are particularly useful for trauma treatment. Study of the body-oriented therapy process suggested that this approach facilitated the integration of psyche-soma, considered foundational for health and healing in body-psychotherapy. This study demonstrated the feasibility of body-oriented therapy intervention training and implementation, and the development of ethical protocols and study design for a vulnerable population. The results provided preliminary evidence of the efficacy of massage and body-oriented therapy, and the central role of dissociation in the body therapy process.