

Encyclopedia of Theory In Counseling and Psychotherapy
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Hakomi Therapy

Hakomi Therapy (HT) integrates the use of mindfulness, the mind/body interface, and non-violence in healing and growth processes. Sessions can be short or long depending on the agenda. A central use of HT is deep psychodynamic transformation.

Historical Context

Hakomi was first developed by Ronald S. Kurtz during the 1970s. Kurtz integrated findings from a number of existing and body-oriented psychotherapies through the filters of experimental psychology, the sciences of complex adaptive systems, and Eastern wisdom traditions. He discovered that encouraging a mindful state of consciousness in clients could greatly enhance their ability to discover the unconscious beliefs that were organizing their experience, and what was needed for transformative reorganization.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Principles and Systems Theory

The methods and techniques of Hakomi Therapy are based on its *five underlying principles* derived from the work of Gregory Bateson and the sciences of non-linear, self-organizing systems: The *unity principle* affirms that a living organic system is a whole made of parts, which in turn is part of a greater whole, where everything is ultimately connected to everything else in increasing levels of complexity. *Organicity* says that when all the parts are connected within the whole, the system is self-organizing and self-directing. Therapy therefore strives to respect organic wisdom, and looks for disconnections that need healing. *Mind/body holism* means that one's mind and body are integrated and can be used therapeutically together. *Mindfulness* is both a way of life, and a quality of awareness that helps people study the organization of their experience. *Non-violence* emphasizes one must feel safe for mindful explore exploration.

The Organization of Experience

People develop *core organizing beliefs* to make sense of the world. These filter all inputs before making them available to the consciousness. Many clients have organized basic human possibilities (e.g., intimacy, independence) out of their experience, due to wounding experiences.

Character Theory

While every person and presenting issue is unique, Hakomi *character theory* offers a non-pathologizing schema of common ways of organizing one's experience related to developmental factors. This theory helps make clear which human possibilities, like intimacy

people might have organized out of their experience.

Mindfulness -

Mindfulness enables one to focus attention on studying the organization of one's experience. It helps one gain the psychic distance to realize that, "I am not just my anger or fear. My awareness that witnesses my anger and fear is not angry or fearful. I can notice how my anger operates in relation to various inputs, and what it needs to moderate." The qualities of compassion and awareness accompanying mindful consciousness comprise what various theorists call an Essential, Organic, or Larger Self, as opposed to the multiplicity of internal ego-parts that are conditioned by historical events.

Role of the Body

One's overall experience is historically conditioned or organized. The qualities of one's relationships and dreams are used by therapists to understand the unconscious meanings that formed them. Likewise, posture, gestures, voice tone, breathing, heart rate, movement and other *bodily manifestations* can be used as beginning points for therapy.

Major Concepts

Loving Presence

Loving presence is when the therapist's delight in the client fosters a safe, collaborative, encouraging therapeutic relationship regardless of whether there is progress. Such an open presence allows the client's process to unfold naturally.

Negentropy

Ilya Prigogine, Nobel Laureate in chemistry, suggested there is a force in living organic systems, *negentropy*, that functions to create wholes out of parts. Therapists can look for and count on this force to help move clients from fragmentation toward increased wholeness.

Cooperation of the Unconscious

When there is sufficient safety and a therapeutic space free from imposed agendas, one's unconscious will allow the negentropic force to provide signals leading toward the wholeness needed, and allow the therapeutic process to unfold. If the therapeutic process is stuck, the *cooperation of the unconscious* is not present, often because the client does not feel safe.

Categories of Experience

Hakomi encourages mindful awareness of one's present-moment experience. A client can become aware of and curious about many *categories of experience* such as thoughts, sensations, emotions, memories, or meanings, that serve as *indicators* of the unconscious core beliefs that created them. The common *process* of a Hakomi session moves from open mindful attention of some category of a client's experience to continued mindfulness of the spontaneous unfolding that may involve many other categories, until it reaches the level of the core belief that organized the original indicator. The therapeutic emphasis is on the core narrative beliefs that form the client's experience as storyteller, rather than the content and variations of the client's story.

A Mindful State of Consciousness

Using mindfulness clinically involves inviting a client to change his or her state of consciousness. Ordinary everyday consciousness is fast, habitual, goal directed, effortful, with a narrow external focus that is aware of space and time. Hakomi therapists assist clients in shifting into a *mindful state of consciousness* that intentionally slows down, suspends judgments, becomes curious and exploratory in a relaxed receptive way, with an open focus that may lose awareness of space and time, like artists or children lost in their preoccupations.

Experimental Attitude

Humans are non-linear systems with emergent possibilities, as opposed to machines where one input predictably leads to one result. Thus, a Hakomi therapist maintains an *experimental attitude* seeking to cooperate with the client's unconscious leading. Every aspect of the process from saying hello to inviting mindfulness of an impulse or gesture is considered an experiment yielding new information, anticipated or not, which informs the next step.

Following and Leading

Since trusting in the signals of the client's organic unfolding is a primary task of the therapist, as opposed to diagnosing or interpreting, collaborating with and *following* the client's present-moment experience is the therapist's first impulse. When the process seems to be hindered, the therapist can lead through numerous interventions. *Leading* by the therapist is always done without attachment to the intervention employed, always experimentally tracking and contacting what experience it evokes, and weaving the result into the unfolding process. This requires that the therapist is comfortable with a measure of mystery, unpredictability, and not knowing.

Managing the Process and Gathering Information

The main thing a Hakomi therapist *manages* in a session is *states of consciousness*, making judgments about when ordinary consciousness is appropriate, and when a client should be invited or returned to a more mindful state. Once a process is unfolding, Hakomi therapists *gather information* through tracking what is happening, and generally refrain from asking explanatory questions that risk taking the person out of their mindful exploration.

Characteristic Techniques

Tracking and Contacting

In addition to following the meaning of a client's verbal expressions, *tracking* in Hakomi involves being aware of the bodily expressions of the client's internal experience. Tracking allows the therapist to join immediately and deeply with the client through informing the construction of a simple *contact statement* meant to demonstrate understanding of what seems experientially primary; "A little sad, huh?" The "huh?," or some equivalent, indicates a willingness to be corrected, as opposed to being invested in one's interpretation. *1st order contact* is used in ordinary consciousness to build a bridge of interpersonal understanding; "You really tried hard." *2nd order contact* serves to deepen intra-psyche mindful exploration; "Some emotion arises?," with the implication in the therapist's voice that perhaps this is something worthy of more mindful, curious attention.

Accessing and Deepening

Accessing is the stage of the Hakomi process that invites a transition from ordinary consciousness to a mindful state of consciousness where an issue can best deepen into relevant core material. It can be done in many ways, often through referencing the body. "Why don't we slow down and notice how this conflict with your boss registers in your body?" *Deepening* encourages clients to stay in an intra-psychic mindful relationship with their own experience while naming it, but not break continuity with it by returning to a conversation with the therapist.

Experiments in Mindfulness

The many *experiments* that can be introduced to foster the unfolding of a session are always done in a state of mindfulness, and often follow a standard form. First, there is an invitation to self-study in mindfulness: "Notice what occurs spontaneously when. . ." Second, there is a description of the experiment to come: ". . . when I say these words," or "when you begin to reach out for your partner." Third, a *pause* allows the "noise" of the instructions to subside. Fourth, the actual experiment is done, for instance saying the words, "It is okay to see." Fifth, tracking and contact are used in the service of deepening.

Taking Over

The organic signals attempting to lure the person towards healing and wholeness are often not easy to detect because of the "noise" surrounding them due to hypervigilance, bodily tensions, multiple parts in conflict, and more. *Taking over* techniques are a unique way Kurtz devised of dealing with defenses by doing for someone what they were already doing for themselves. *Supporting defenses* in this way promotes safety and relaxes tensions, lowering background noise and allowing the signals to emerge more clearly. If a client hears a voice in his or her head saying "Oh no, it isn't!" in response to the experimental words "It's okay to see," the therapist or a group member could take over saying the "Oh no" when the experiment is repeated. Likewise, if the client's shoulders tighten in fear, the tightening can be taken over physically by a group member or therapist, with coaching from the client on how to do it precisely right. When fearful defenses are supported instead of confronted, safety is provided from without, and the client is freer to explore more deeply within.

Jumping Out of the System

Sometimes resistance or defenses show up systemically between client and therapist. The technique of *jumping out of the system* can be helpful. The therapist must first become aware of the system. Then the system itself can be named non-judgmentally, and itself become the focus for mindful exploration. Therapist: "I notice that you talk fast, almost like you are not sure there is enough space to have your say?"

Child States

When mindfully following a thread from an initial experience that deepens into various categories of experience, a therapeutic regression may lead to an earlier memory and a *child state of consciousness*. In this dual state of consciousness clients experience the reality of early episodes, as well as knowing they are in a current therapy session. This state can be a creative space for transforming core beliefs the child developed that have become over-generalized to relationships where they are no longer as functional.

Riding the Rapids

Deepening into early memories and core material may result in another state of consciousness termed "*riding the rapids*," characterized by spontaneous strong emotional release and simultaneous attempts to hold back the emotion, a state not conducive to mindfulness. Such expression can be supported verbally and with nonverbal taking-over techniques until it resolves.

Missing Experiences

When mindful exploration deepens toward core material, what the person has organized out of their experience as dangerous becomes more evident. This *missing experience* can then become the focus of experiments in mindfulness designed to help the client reconsider the previously negated possibility. If the client's core belief is, "I can't risk accepting support because of the memory of hurt and disappointment. I need to stay self-reliant," the positive content for a missing experience experiment would be some version of the precise opposite: "You don't have to do everything yourself," "It's okay to be supported," or physically leaning into another person's support. The common result of such mindful experiments is to evoke clients' verbal and nonverbal barriers that block or disconnect them from the possibility of gratifying support.

Exploring Barriers

Mindfully exploring the barriers raised against experiences previously organized out is the essence of where transformative therapy happens. For barriers to moderate, they need some condition of safety, nurture, or assurance not present when they formed. The therapist can experiment with introducing the needed condition in conjunction with the missing experience.

Transformation

Transformation in Hakomi happens when one is able to organize into one's experience an aspect of life previously organized out. One who was painfully unsupported while young, and compensated by becoming self-reliant is enabled to distinguish past from present, and allow in available support. Transformation requires an experience to counteract a previous experience, as opposed to simple insight into what happened.

Therapeutic Process

The linear structure of a Hakomi session, which must always accommodate to what arises spontaneously, typically includes these steps: 1) Establishing an interpersonal *therapeutic relationship* that provides the conditions of safety and trust necessary for mindfulness. 2) *Accessing*, by inviting a transition from ordinary consciousness to a mindful state of consciousness. 3) *Deepening*, by maintaining a mindful state, and trusting where it leads. 4) *Processing*, through discovering core material, experimenting with missing experiences, and working through barriers until transformation is made possible. 5) *Integrating and completing* while ending in ordinary consciousness.

Gregory J. Johanson

See also

Gestalt, Focusing, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, Internal Family Systems Therapy, Person-Centered, Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy, Schema Therapy, Coherence Therapy.

Further Readings

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