

## **The Role of Hellerwork in a Holistic Health Perspective**

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There is a growing momentum toward a holistic health perspective. Values of the holistic framework emphasize prevention, client participation, life-style choices involving nutrition, exercise, and relaxation, and a multi-discipline approach to health maintenance. The old model of "treat the symptom, ignore the person" is fading with the emergence of the viewpoint that recognizes the wholeness of the individual.

Within this holistic model is a field known as Somatic Education. Somatic Education addresses the whole person in relationship to movement, physical and psychological awareness, learning, and their environment. The focus is on the body "as experienced from within the body." Hellerwork is a Somatic Education discipline that is making an enormous contribution to this emerging model of health and well-being.

In Hellerwork the entire musculo-skeletal structure of the body is considered and related to the individual's sense of well-being. Structure is viewed as relationship: relationship of the whole to the gravitational field in which it exists; relationship among parts within the whole; and relationship of structure to function. Isolated changes or symptom alleviation are not the concern of Hellerwork. Changes are perceived in relation to the whole body and whole person, and are aimed at improving the total energetic economy of the individual. Holistic theory states that how we live is central to the health we experience--that is, how and what we eat, exercise, relax, breathe, love, and think. Perhaps most important is how we negotiate those personal psychological issues that weave through the tapestry of our lives. Even at the very best, there are periodic rough spots, occasional frustration, and stress. At the other end of the continuum, there is intense frustration, chronic conflict, and debilitating disease.

From the beginning of our lives, we are engaged with issues that set the foundation for our psycho-physical well-being. For example, we begin to develop a deep sense of basic trust in life as we successfully handle the terrain of infancy. If the conditions of our infancy are such that we do not develop that sense of trust, the psychophysical effects can cast dark and negative shadows over many ensuing years. There are issues to be mastered in every stage of life, and typically new stages resurrect old unresolved issues. These issues center around such themes as autonomy, competence, lovability, identity, intimacy, creativity, and spirituality. Our successes or failures in these are most critical to our psychophysical well-being.

From the very beginning of our lives, we accumulate tension. Chronic tension is far more prevalent, extensive, and pervasive than most people imagine. Acute tension, is readily felt--such as stiffness in the neck or back. Chronic tension, however is typically outside of conscious awareness. Large areas of the body are simply unavailable to kinaesthetic awareness.

The strains of life's frustrations, the wear and tear of navigating our personal ships in rapidly changing sociological waters, the cumulative effect of poor health habits and physical accidents, are all embodied. All can be seen by the trained eye, felt by the experienced hand. All affect the structural integrity of our bodies. All affect the responsiveness and aliveness of our human tissues. All affect the quality of our participation in life.

Relieving wear and tear, improving the structural integrity of the human body, and educating the client in developing awareness are central objectives of Hellerwork. The value of improving structural integrity is inestimable and powerfully lessens the effects of aging.

Hellerwork is a multi-level educational experience. Much is communicated in the quality of touch. Learning to let go, to accept pressure, to surrender in the sense of yielding and flowing, to create higher levels of aliveness, to learn to "feel" one's body from the inside, are among the lessons taught in Hellerwork. Physical awareness improves as clients learn to use their bodies in ways that minimize effort and tension. This heightened awareness is paralleled psychologically as clients explore how their thoughts, attitudes, and feelings have an impact in and through their body.

Hellerwork works with and educates a whole person. While not interested in symptom relief, it perhaps offers one of the best adjunctive approaches to chronic muscular pain syndromes. It emphasizes prevention and educates clients in self-care. It teaches the powerful relationship of the body and the mind. With its potent range of application, Hellerwork is assuming a prominent place in our current holistic health paradigm.

*About the author:* Don St. John is a Mind-Body Therapist with over 25 years experience. He has a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology with training in Gestalt, Reichian, and Hakomi therapies. Don assisted Joseph Heller in founding the Hellerwork School and was its first director of administration. He is also trained in Hanna Somatic Education. Don was a senior trainer in the international school of Hellerwork, and in recent years has been most influenced by the work of Peter Levine, Emily Conrad, and Susan Harper. He leads workshops internationally

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