Body, Breath, & Consciousness

A Somatics Anthology

A Collection of Articles on Family Systems, Self-Psychology, The Dynamics Model of Somatic Developmental Psychology, Shock Trauma, and Breathwork

Ian Macnaughton

Foreword by Peter A. Levine
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Edited by Ian Macnaughton

Foreword by Peter A. Levine

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The Therapeutic Power of Peak Experiences: Embodying Maslow's Old Concept

—Erik Jarlnaes, M.A., & Josette van Luytelaar

"In a peak experience the subject at least momentarily loses all fear, including the fear of disintegration, insanity, and death." —A. Maslow

Summary

In this article, the authors investigate the concept of peak experience and ask themselves how Bodydynamics can contribute to enhancing and eliciting peak experiences. Their findings are mainly based on a large number of interviews that Erik Jarlnaes conducted in his journalistic and therapeutic practice. They research the concept of "peak experience" as developed by Maslow and compare it with Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow." Adding from their own experience, they come to an encompassing definition and ten core characteristics. More specifically, they pay attention to body aspects and investigate connections, differences, and similarities between shock and peak experiences. They presuppose that peak experiences contain resources of energy and ego strength. Many interviewees were not aware of utilizing resources in generating their peak experiences. Consequently, they were not able to use them to improve their daily life quality. Furthermore, they had not shared their experience with other people. This lack of awareness led the authors to explore if and how peak experiences could be involved in therapy. The authors examine different approaches of peak (and shock) experiences within the frame of Bodydynamics, a somatic developmental psychotherapy system.

Since Maslow developed the concept of peak experience thirty-five years ago, it has been a continuous focus of interest for psychologists, and has been mentioned in many self-help books on personal growth. However, systematic research on the subject is still missing as well as systematic development of its
qualities as a therapeutic tool. Most books on this subject tend to give only a general overview.

Erik Jarlnaes's many years of research led him to these guiding questions: “Is it possible to elicit a peak experience?” and “How can we help people develop a new peak experience?” He became interested in the subject as a journalist interviewing athletes on their peak experiences. He discovered that the interviewing process itself deepens the intensity and the quality of the interviewed person’s experience. The interview helps people to get into deep contact with an essential life quality in themselves, something that they usually have not shared with another person, like a deep secret (in this case, a positive one).

Jarlnaes then decided to start more systematic research, by conducting “peak interviews” (an intense dialogue where the “peak” subject is unraveled in specific details) with a variety of people, ranging from top athletes (including gold medal holders and world champions), to leaders, managers, and therapists, but also “ordinary people.” In the end, this brought him to use the peak interview as a specific therapeutic tool (we describe this in the second part of the article). He also started researching literature and developing tools and exercises for therapeutic and personal development work within the frame of the Bodydymatic System (a Danish-developed body-oriented psychotherapy system that integrates psychological, social and motor development on one side and a pedagogical approach on the other).

One of the well-known top athletes that Erik Jarlnaes peak interviewed was the American track and field star Bob Beamon. When he long-jumped 8.90 meters and set an astonishing world record in Mexico City’s high-altitude thin air during the 1968 Olympic Games, he had a peak experience.

Sixteen years later, at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, Bob Beamon told Jarlnaes, “It was like jumping through a barrier, running in a tunnel, with walls of vibrant silence, time stood still, I had full access to all my muscles, to my whole body, my sensations were bright, there was a sense of joy and love…” Although the experience was still crystal clear in his mind, at first Bob Beamon did not seem to realize what had happened. Not only was he confused about what had happened to him right after the jump, but also later, when he went around asking everybody what had happened. No one could answer—no one knew. He kept searching for an answer, and one day he discovered Abraham Maslow’s books. Only then he realized he had had a peak experience.

Many people, like Bob Beamon, do not seem to realize what happened to them, and are not aware of their resource qualities. This is our primary reason for exploring if and how peak experiences could be involved in therapy.

In this article we will:

- Explore Maslow’s definition of peak experience and distinguish it from the concept of flow, later introduced by Csikszentmihalyi. Comparing these with Jarlnaes’s research findings we will come to a more complete definition of a peak experience and an overview of peak characteristics.
- Look at differences and similarities between peak and shock and the connections between them. For this, it is necessary to explain shock trauma therapy as developed by Bodydynamics.
- Throw some light upon bodily aspects of flow and peak.
- Discuss the peak interview as developed by Jarlnaes not only as an intake interview but also as an important therapeutic tool.
- Describe some therapeutic situations in which work on peak experiences, in our view, can be helpful, even essential.

1. Peak Experience and Peak Definition

In this section we will investigate the concepts of peak and flow with the following three questions as a lead:

First, can everybody have a peak experience? Or do you have to be “psychologically mature,” as Maslow suggests, in order to have a peak experience?

Second, is a peak a moment or a process? Is it a state of being or a dynamic stream?

Third, is a peak something that just happens or is it possible to elicit a peak? Is it possible to repeat a peak experience? Can one foster a peak experience in therapy or in daily life? And, if yes, what are the conditions?
The following is built on the research of Maslow, Csikszentmihalyi, and Jarinaes. With different points of view, the interview questions differ, and thus the results are difficult to compare directly, even though all are valuable to answer our questions.

Maslow: The Happiest Moment

The concept of peak experience originally came from Maslow. He was an important representative of Humanistic Psychology in which the “self-actualizing” of the individual was a core concept. According to him, a peak experience was an indissoluble part of the self-actualizing of a person. He gave the following definition of a peak in his book Toward a Psychology of Being (1968):

... an episode or sudden wave, in which all potentials of a person are flowing together in a particularly goal-oriented and intense gratifying way, in which he is more integrated and less split, is more open to experience, in which he is more coming forward with his own specific nature or disposition, is more spontaneous and expressive, more fully functioning, more creative, humorous, ego-transcendent, less dependent on his lower instincts, etc. In these periods he becomes more really himself, more powerful in actualizing his capacities, more close to the essence of his Being, more fully human ... 

In describing a peak experience, Maslow was rather broad, mainly using quotes from artists and philosophers describing their experiences in mystical or religious terms, or in terms of beauty. This creates the impression that, although in theory everyone has the possibility to have a peak, only very few people do have such experiences. Maslow identified personality traits of “peak persons,” although in his later works he tended more to “secularize” the experience to everyday activities, so to be accessible to more people.

In his eighty research interviews, Maslow was focusing on the happiest moment. He was referring to a moment or a state rather than to a process, so his descriptions tend to be static.

Csikszentmihalyi: The Process of Flow

Csikszentmihalyi tends to look into the dynamics of peak experience more than Maslow. He conducted research on thousands of individuals from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds and discovered that at least thirty percent of them have peak experiences. He refers to a state of consciousness—a process as well as the peak moment. He defines peak experience, which he named randomly optimal experience, autotelic experience or flow (experience) as follows:

An optimal experience is the feeling that the required technical ability and the challenges are in balance with each other in a goal-oriented rule-oriented action system that makes clear how one is performing. The concentration is so intense that one has no attention anymore for matters of lower importance or worries about problematic questions. The self-consciousness disappears and the time frame distorts.

His concept of flow is shown in the diagram below, where challenge and skills come together in balance, and lead to a flow of high-level energy. However, if one’s skills at a certain moment are “too high” in relation to the challenge present, one loses interest in the activity, and starts feeling bored; if the challenge becomes “too high” in relation to the skills, one experiences anxiety. Both conditions stimulate you to get into a flow-situation again, this time of a higher quality than the original flow-situation.

![Flow Diagram](from Csikszentmihalyi, M., 1990, p.107)
For example, A is a boy who is learning to play tennis. The diagram shows A at four different points in time. At the start (A1), he has few tennis playing skills and his only challenge is to play the ball over the net. He will enjoy this because the degree of difficulty is in balance with his limited skills. That is, he probably is in flow. When he continues exercising, he will play better tennis and start to feel bored with just the same challenge (A2). Then one day he plays against a better opponent and he discovers that tennis has more challenges than he thought. At this point (A3) he starts to be anxious because of his rather moderate performance.

Neither anxiety nor boredom are positive experiences, so A is stimulated to get into flow again: from A2 he can choose a little more advanced opponent to match his level and try to win (A4). From A3 he can increase his skills by more exercising (A4). Both A1 and A4 are flow situations. Even though both create equal enjoyment, A4 is more complex than A1.

These dynamics explain why flow activities lead to growth and discovery. The complexity and the development of the self is the essence of flow. People cannot enjoy the same thing for a long time. When we stay at the same level, we get bored or frustrated. The desire for pleasure leads to an activity that expands our capabilities, and the discovery of new ways to make this capability concrete.

Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as the moment where process and product come together: “An act is performed seemingly without effort; the goal of the stream is that it has to keep streaming.” In his view such optimal experiences can happen by coincidence. However, more often they are the result of a structured activity of the individual or the ability to create flow, or both. This statement clarifies that in his view it is possible to actively do something in order to get a peak experience, or to repeat one.

The Process and the Moment

In his definition of flow, however, Csikszentmihalyi mixes the concepts of flow and peak. From the results of our peak interviews, we prefer to make a distinction between them. We define flow as the process, the working toward, or preparation for the peak moment. It is a process of coming into a state of high-level energy that increases the probability of attaining a peak experience. A peak can be prepared for, but cannot be counted on to happen as a consequence.

We agree with Csikszentmihalyi that at first sight peaks seem to happen spontaneously, but on closer investigation they often appear to be the result of a kind of preparing—a “structured activity.” In our view, one can increase the probability of a peak by preparing for it (without guarantee that it will happen), both in daily life and in therapy.

Based on Erik Jarlnaes’s interviews, we hypothesize that a much higher percentage of people (than Csikszentmihalyi’s thirty percent score) have had peak experiences. In fact, we think nearly everyone has. The difference in results could be explained by the different methods used. Jarlnaes’s initial interview question was whether a person recognized the peak qualities, while Csikszentmihalyi’s did not use interviews but sampled daily experiences from his subjects by a random time schedule and then attributed flow qualities to these experiences afterwards.

We asked many people whether they recognized peak experiences. Most of them promptly answered affirmatively. However, some of them required a longer interview. Only a few people who started on the diagram with very low energy (low on skills and low on challenge) reported to have had no peak experiences at all, but they definitely had flow experiences. Like Maslow, Jarlnaes focused on the happiest moment, but added questions about the dynamics of getting into and coming back from a peak, next to the peak moment itself. Getting access to these dynamics can, in our view, help people to integrate peaks into their life and thus heighten their life quality.

Peak Experience and Peak Performance

Here are a few words here on the concepts of peak experience and peak performance, as many authors confuse them. Notably, Csikszentmihalyi makes no distinction. In our view, a peak performance is referred to mostly in sports. It is a top achievement in the realm of competition, a comparison that is measurable in quantity and in terms of winning and losing. A peak performance is a planned action with regard to strengthening skills that is focused on consciously.
A peak experience, however, is not measured in quantity but in terms of quality. It is unique in itself for each individual and not comparable with peaks of others. It refers to “being,” not to “doing.” This is the subject of our article.

2. Peak Characteristics

_In the end we are only worthwhile because of the essential that we embody, and if we don’t embody this, life is wasted._—C.G. Jung

As a result of approximately three hundred interviews since 1982, Jarlnaes discovered certain characteristics that are usually present in a peak experience. He found that these common characteristics apply to a wide variety of people—world champions, Olympic Gold medal winners, Danish champions, organizational managers, military people, artists, and ordinary people—and to many different types of experiences. Combined with Maslow’s and Csikszentmihalyi’s peak characteristics, we can list ten core characteristics—some of them psychological ones, other ones on the body level:

1. Changed time perception, i.e., time seems to stop or to expand in the infinite—to slow down, or the opposite, to speed up.
2. Changed or distorted space perception, physical sizes or shapes change, e.g., a golf hole suddenly becomes as big as a bathtub so one cannot miss it. The experience becomes “framed,” i.e., standing out from the background in a strong energy field.
3. In general, all senses become more sensitive. There are changes in all sensory perceptions, like color, smell, and sound. Colors can change and become brighter; a snow-dressed tree can “change” its color into strong green; a silence can become vibrant and a sight can become very sharp.
4. People report having had a transpersonal, transformational, or religious experience. They have a feeling of awe; they feel it as fulfilling their life goal and they express it like “if I would die right here it would be all right.”

5. The body is always involved, sometimes physically, but also there can be a changed perception of the body, of body sensations and body movements. People often illustrate their peak story with movements of hands and arms in order to show an expansion—something big, bigger than they are.
6. The feeling that goes with the experience is one of softness, love, bliss, ease, wholeness, grace of the body (also indicating the lack or absence of fear). People always remember a piece of the experience very clearly, like “a spark”; at least one part stands out crystal-clear no matter how many years ago it happened.
7. A peak experience is not easily shared; usually it is experienced as something unique for a person. When they are not really seen by others in this experience, many people feel alone or isolated with it, sometimes even get stuck in it.
8. There is an inner sense of meaning, like having received a “message,” sensing a life direction, or life essence; hearing a voice speaking to them.
9. The activity in which the peak is embedded is often goal-directed.
10. The experience involves a very high level of energy or a high charge.

These characteristics lead us to the following description of a peak experience:

_A peak experience is the moment when a person feels everything come together, when one feels the profound joy of great achievement. It is a boundary-expanding experience, even when it does not lead to a gold medal. A peak experience is one of the greatest events of a person’s lifetime, where normal perception expands so that a person can perform beyond their normal capabilities. It is an experience where time stands still, physical sizes or shapes appear to change; colors intensify. There is a feeling of softness, bliss, openness, and love; it feels like a transformation. A person may not share the details of the peak experience with anyone, but will always remember it clearly and precisely._
3. Differences and Similarities
Between Peak and Shock

Working from Bodydynamics, we discovered that there are connections and some striking similarities (but also differences) between peak experiences and so-called shock experiences. We will explain the concept of shock from the viewpoint of Bodydynamics trauma theory.

A shock is defined as a traumatic event with the following characteristics:

• The situation is actually life threatening (or experienced by the client as such).

• The situation has not been worked through or it has not been possible for the client to react to (or reexperience) the situation in an appropriate way, i.e., using the ego and the biological reflexes of orientation, fight or flight that we share with many animals.

• The client, instead, has reacted from the deep and primitive instinct pattern of paralysis.

Extrapolated from animal research, we assume that people react instinctively in a sudden dangerous situation in one of three ways: fight, flight, or freeze. It is a survival reaction—and it is necessary to add that sometimes one does not survive.

Bodydynamics follows Levine in the assumption that shock is in fact a kind of freezing in a situation where people have lost the possibility of moving, i.e., a fight-or-flight reaction. This is demonstrated in numbness, partially going “out-of-the-body” (dissociation) and a “holding” in specific muscles. The bodily freezing in the moment then expands into one’s life; life patterns become frozen, and one gives up activity. The result is a diminished quality of life.

An example: When the ferry boat Estonia sank in the Baltic Sea in 1995, many young people sitting in the bar got numb and did not move from their chairs in the restaurant on the top deck—while others did move (flight) and escaped from the ship, and eventually survived.

Different body psychotherapies include “finishing” the frozen (or unfinished) movement to cure a shock trauma (e.g., Ogden’s Sensorimotor Psychother-

apy or Levine’s Somatic Experiencing). Bodydynamics developed a “working-with-shock recipe” where a unique running technique is practiced (in combination with working through the shock story) for the body to learn the flight reaction. The flight reflex is also relearned in the same procedure.

In addition to that, therapeutic work with peak-shock combinations showed the possibility to use peak experiences to help resolve shock. Peak and shock have many characteristics in common—like changed or distorted time and space perception. Often both are intrinsically connected: often a peak and a shock come together in the same situation and get mixed up. For example, interviews with Estonia survivors indicate that when the disaster happened time stood still, their sight got tunnel-sharp while their hearing got blurred. At the same time, they had a kind of peak seeing the beauty of the ship sinking into the waves.

Shock experiences are negative by definition. Although they have many of the same features as peak experiences, there are also features that change the whole experience into one that diminishes the quality of life. There is freezing instead of flow. The one feature that greatly diminishes the quality of life is guilt, e.g., the guilt of being a survivor, the guilt of not having helped others. It is possible to relieve the guilt and resolve the shock if one can “free” the peak part in it, or clarify its “inner message.”

Containing High-Level Energy

An important aspect of a peak (and of a shock) is the state of high-level energy experienced, both psychologically and bodily (in the muscles). The Bioenergetic concept of “charge” is related to this and refers to the body energy that can be charged or de-charged. Csikszentmihalyi’s diagram, where he explains that challenge and skills come together in balance and lead to a flow of ever-increasing high-level energy, is helpful here. It is conditional to get a peak experience. Some people describe this state as the air being so dense that one can nearly cut it with a knife. Others describe strong physical vibrations. High-level energy is also referred to in descriptions like, “She could not stand the intensity of the situation,” “The tension was too high for him to function,” or “He got cramped in his play.”
People can have difficulty containing this high-level energy (or charged state) in their peak (or their shock). This often results in losing the peak or “freezing” in shock, which can cause psychological or psychosomatic problems.

Containment work therefore is the core of Bododynamic peak/shock work, where the therapist stimulates the “energy management” on the psychological level as well as the muscular level, and builds vertical channels along the spine, by physical and energy exercises.

The peak energy is built up slowly compared with the shock energy, which is more abrupt and explosive of nature. However, Bodynamic peak/shock work avoids the total energy surge. The therapist works around the core of the client’s shock, looking for the location of the peak moment, and insisting on dealing first with the peak energy rather than the shock energy (especially by contact, talking, and body sensing). In fact, one works with alternately raising (charging) and containing the energy.

4. The Body in Flow and Peak

The body is involved both in the preparing (to get into the flow) and in the peak moment itself (where it changes the perception of the body, sometimes described as “moving with a kind of smoothness or grace”). Flow is about the body. Flow is like warming up, preparing the body, making it warm and strong, to get into a state of high-level energy.

Here is an example from Jarlnaes’s own experience playing table tennis with a friend: “By playing, he first warms up the body, specifically the parts to be used. Then he and his friend move into flow—a steady playing rhythm. After playing like this for some time they are ‘ready’; then one of them adds a ‘challenge part’—something new and unexpected—and then the peak can come in.”

Getting into flow is a precondition. It can even be physical hardship and requires discipline. One example is a violin player, daily practicing for many hours, in order to get into the flow. Often the peak happens unexpectedly, “suddenly there is music instead of just practicing.” Another frequent example is that of athletes surpassing world records during training.

Enduring physical hardship is a way for many people to prepare for a peak.

It is a kind of “ritual.” For author Josette van Luytelaar, trekking can be a peak experience. It needs the ritual to build up walking condition, to get into a certain walking rhythm (flow). The ritual presupposes that you have to suffer before there is a reward. And then suddenly the reward—the peak—can come in: “I felt I walked no longer on the earth, but above it; I felt it was not hard work; I could continue to go straight upward forever, like I had wings. The view was breathtakingly beautiful, and the color of the sand intensely red.”

Stimulating the senses or sensory experiences is another commonly used way to get into the flow: seeing art works or nature, creating art, hearing or performing music, tasting haute cuisine food, moving, dancing, playing sports, and having sex.

Csikszentmihalyi also mentions the preparatory role of the body in flow. He sees many similarities between flow and eastern body-training methods like yoga and martial arts (e.g., qi gong, tai chi, judo, and aikido). Both aim for control over consciousness, for a harmonious one-point direction of the mind. Both try through intense concentration, which can be achieved by physical discipline, behavioral habits, or rituals and sensory training, to reach a state of mind where happiness or nirvana is experienced. A difference, however, is that flow as a Western technique tries to strengthen the self (centering), whereas yoga and other Eastern methods aim for disappearance of the self (melting into the universe).

Bodynamics developed a special technique to get the body into flow: the so-called “slow flow” movement practice, in which never-ending slow motion movements in a continuous rhythm are exercised with the help of music. It is a movement series in which there are elements of challenge, skills, and balance. It is a ritual that brings people into a state of flow by elements such as concentration, relaxation, breathing, and body centering.

5. The Peak Interview

As mentioned, Jarlnaes developed the so-called peak interview in his research. This is not just a journalistic interview, but mainly a therapeutic instrument. It is the first therapeutic interview and its goal is to get a client’s peak experi-
ences to a conscious level; to enhance the process of resourcing; and to elicit new peak experiences. This includes an actively participating role of the therapist/interviewer.

The interview can be introduced like this:

“Let us talk about one of your better experiences in life, no matter how old it is—an experience where you may remember something very clearly and you may have never shared it before. It will likely be characterized by a sense of ‘time stops,’ when your senses became very sharp, and you experienced a deep feeling of happiness.”

Then, in our view, the following elements should be included:

1. To bring into consciousness elements that played a role in (getting to) the peak, in order to deepen the experience and add more energy or charge to it. This can be done by helping a person to tell the peak story in the here-and-now, and in as much detail as possible, by asking concrete questions like, “How does it feel in your body right now?” “Could you describe it in the present tense?” “What does it look like?” or “What movement is associated to it?”

2. To be in tune to awareness of the body part of the peak. Interviewing includes asking about the body sensations and body movements, in addition to the feelings and thoughts connected with the peak experience. The body aspect is important, as we have stressed before, but is sometimes easily lost because a peak can be an out-of-body experience. From the interview, the therapist elicits body statements. The next step is to ask for body movements that let the interviewee sense the sensations he/she had during the peak experience.

3. To pay attention to the peak moment, but also to add questions about the process of preparation and getting into flow, and about the “cooling down” afterwards.

4. To focus on the contact between interviewer and interviewee. This is one way of raising or charging the client’s energy level, and it also helps the client to contain the high energy level.

5. To focus on the importance of sharing the experience. Usually this is the first time the peak experience is shared, and this in itself can free the client from being stuck in isolation (as in the example of Bob Beamon), and bring him/her into the flow again, sometimes into a new peak.

6. To check which peak elements are (not) integrated in the person’s daily life.

7. To search for the “peak message,” to pay attention to where the person feels he is in contact with the essence of his being, his life direction.

6. Therapeutic Applications

Therapists can apply work on peak experiences in different realms. Peak work is recommended in counseling or in personal growth issues, where the client’s wish is to develop a higher quality of life (resourcing from peak).

Working on peak experiences can, in our view, be very useful, even essential, for clients suffering from shock trauma (peak-in-shock work).

Some people can experience a shock connected with or during the peak moment, which prevents repeating the peak experience or peak performance and integrating it in their life. They get stuck, for which they seek help. Other times it is clear that people do not try to achieve the peak-state again, either because they do not know it is possible, or because they have never thought about it, or believe they are alone with this experience. In these cases, peak work is also helpful (shock-in-peak work).

Below we will give examples of these different kinds of work.

Resourcing from Peak

Often people strive for the qualities inherent in peak experiences, without consciously knowing the resource elements. When people get conscious of their peak experiences, they attain the possibility to actively choose when, where, and how they can pursue and integrate these aspects in their daily life. This work is very valuable. First, the client shares—often for the first time—a peak experience with the therapist or counselor, which is often a new peak in itself, as it
frees the person from his or her believed “existential loneliness.” Moreover, having the elements transferred and installed in daily life, the client is able to create resources to a rich new liveness and happiness and even enhance them.

“Resourcing” in Bodydynamically terms means giving clients more options in life by putting them in contact with their ego strength, e.g., the ability to say no or stop, the ability to sense what you like to do, the ability to assert yourself.

The Window to Life Quality

A fifty-five-year-old female workshop participant had a special sunlight experience. Sitting for a written paper examination together with other students when she was eighteen years old, suddenly the sun broke through the large windows in the room and totally engulfed her. In that moment, her posture straightened with confidence, and she suddenly knew all the answers to the questions (they turned out to be correct). She then quickly finished her paper.

When asked about her working conditions, she said that her office had only small windows facing north with very little sun. However, since she was the manager, she was able to choose another room with large windows facing west. When she returned for the next workshop module, she reported that her quality of life had definitely increased, she experienced more joy, felt more present in her body and psychologically. Her colleagues picked up her changed energy, so that they also experienced more joy and became more productive.

The Message of the Body Movement

Interviewing E, a female client of forty-four, she told about a peak experience: While skiing downhill in nature, among big trunks of trees in the snow, she got into a flow. Suddenly she felt the movement opened her up, and then a feeling of total freedom, of letting go, of floating, engulfed her. During the therapy session, she was brought back to the experience by letting her consciously repeat the body movements she made spontaneously during her telling of the story. These mainly included a movement of her hands from her head down all along her body and then to the front of her. When asked to repeat and exaggerate the movement, she suddenly got the message of her peak: “This is what I have to do in my daily life more,” she said, “to let go of control.”

Improving a Jazz Musician’s Teaching Skills

A famous jazz musician had a problem. He did not know how to teach students his method of improvising (which lead him into a peak). During our interviews, he realized that his improvisations were intuitive—not practiced or planned. He was unaware of how he attained the peak. Using knowledge of the peak-experience work, he came to understand how he prepared himself to get into the flow, and from there to the peak. He did this by conducting several rituals: by cleaning his instrument first, by doing breathing exercises before playing, and by concentrating on one particular tone. He would then exercise for some time. This gave him the insight into how he could also teach his students how to get into the flow.

Peak-in-Shock Work

Working on peak experiences can, in our view, be very useful—even essential—for clients suffering from shock trauma. There is always a connection between a peak part and a shock part in the same situation. If you can “free” the peak part or get its “inner message” clear, resolving the shock is much easier. In this sense, peak work has therapeutic value. From work with Estonia survivors and others, it shows that guilt—from surviving at the cost of other people’s lives—disappears when the clients get hold of their peak quality energy, their personal dignity.

Therefore, in therapy we focus on resources in the peak part, building the bridges in the dissociation. Mainly we look for a moment of light before the shock, instead of going into the shock. Below we will give different examples of peak-in-shock work.

The Forest Worker Overcoming Shock Trauma

A forty-year-old Canadian forest worker accidentally cut off all the fingers on one hand with a chain saw. He was alone at the time of the accident, so his reaction was very important. Not only did he have to stop some of the bleeding, but he also had to decide how to survive the next hour. Should he call the local emergency station and ask them to find him, or should he take his car and drive to the station, so they could take him from there to a hospital?
The Strength of Dissociation

A thirty-five-year-old Iranian refugee came into therapy because he “acted crazy” when he had verbal fights with his wife. He was a soldier in the war between Iran and Iraq in 1990, where the two sides had trenches that were alternately “run over” by the other side. One time his trench was run over, and all his comrades died except him.

The therapist’s diagnosis was that he had developed a shock trauma from the war, which lead to dissociating and strange behavior in fight situations in his daily life, like the verbal fights with his wife.

The therapist’s job was to help him understand how he survived and to accept this as a resource.

The peak moment came when a bullet hit him and his consciousness “left his body.” He did it so well that the Iraqi soldiers did not want to waste another bullet on him: he was so “far out,” looking “so dead” that they left him for dead. (He was saved, and later he came to Sweden, where he came into therapy with a colleague.) He described this moment as having peak characteristics, like time stood still; he suddenly experienced leaving his body and perceived it from the outside, from high up, where his soul went.

First, he had difficulty accepting that he himself had the talent and power to play dead, like being God, but he could accept the importance of Allah, who gave him that power. When this was in place, he accepted his strength in being able to leave his body whenever a situation was too intense, e.g., a fight. With this strength as a resource, it was easier to solve the specific problem, so eventually he could stay in contact with his wife during a verbal fight.

A Trapped Climber Cut Off His Own Arm to Survive

Sometimes people report this kind of work spontaneously. Recently the newspapers reported the exceptional survival of the Colorado climber Aron Ralston. Ralston was trapped by an 800-pound boulder while climbing a canyon. On the fifth day of his ordeal, he cut off his own arm with a pocketknife in order to save his life. He walked out of a remote Utah canyon alone, bloody and dehydrated. In his first public statement in a news conference, he
made frequent references to prayer and spirituality. He said he felt a surge of energy on the third day, which happened to be the National Day of Prayer. "The source of the power I felt (to do the unthinkable, to cut off the arm) was the thoughts and prayers of many people, most of whom I will never know," he said in the interview. "I felt they were all praying for me." From our perspective, a more useful exploration of the peak message could be his asking himself the question: "I may never fully understand the spiritual aspects of what I experienced, but I will try." Understanding the peak in that way might help him to overcome the shock.

**Shock-in-Peak Work—Bob Beamon’s Shock-In-the-Peak**

We end this article by continuing Bob Beamon’s story:

After his world record jump, Bob Beamon had never jumped again. When he realized he had had a peak experience, the next question came to him: how to overcome this limitation and be able to jump once more. Our explanation is that he experienced a shock connected with the peak moment, which prevented his repeating the peak performance, and then he got stuck. Because he experienced the peak as coming out of the blue, not from his own effort, he became afraid. In a way he dissociated from the experience, and closed off. Here Csikszentmihalyi’s diagram comes into play: When the challenge to repeat the peak performance becomes too high in relation to the skills of the person, it leads to anxiety.

It is our premise that therapeutic work could help him become aware of the fact that the peak did not happen just spontaneously, but was in fact the result of his own "structured activity," his preparation. (Partly, Bob already experienced this in the peak interview with Jarløsøs). In this way, he could regain control over the situation, regain trust in his ability, build up trust in the possibility of repeating the peak, and get into flow again.

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**7. Recommendation**

In this article, we collected the latest findings and insights on the value of therapeutic use of peak experiences in Bodynomics. Developments are still ongoing and we can only draw tentative conclusions. Further systematic research and experimental practice is necessary.

However, we hope we have been able to transfer our enthusiasm for this approach to our readers and positively recommend the therapeutic work with peak and flow. It is very consistent with basic principles of Bodynomics, like the resource of mutual connection and emphasizing a person’s positive capacities instead of (only) focusing on disabilities and dysfunction.

The authors wish to thank Tineke Dirksen for her skillful editorial advice.

**References**


**Muscles of jaw, mouth and tongue:** Incorporation and expression of physical or emotional nourishment and response to the taste and ‘digestibility’ of it. Vocal expression.

**Throat Muscles:** Vocal expression — telling. Balancing head and body: thought and feeling.

**Pectoralis and serratus anterior:** Feelings of self-worth and power in intimate and superficial contact.

**Primary respiratory muscles:** Fullness of being — ‘breathing space’.

**Secondary respiratory muscles:** Control of heightening and lowering energy levels — as with emotional change or physical exertion.

**Superficial belly muscles:** Containment of feelings, visceral streaming sensations, and emotional and energetic digestion.

**Psoas:** Intimate bonding.

**Quadratus lumborum:** Balance between acting from own feelings and impulses or in response to others.

**Pelvic floor:** Sexual feelings, containment of deep visceral and somatosensory sensations.

**Eye and ear muscles:** Focus, orientation and short & long term planning.

**Face muscles generally:** Receiving impressions and social/emotional signifying: expressing feelings, social space, dominance, etc.

**Elbow flexors:** Pulling toward oneself, holding on.

**Forearm rotators:** Giving and receiving — closing and opening to exchange.

**Wrist flexors, extensions, radial and ulnar flexors:** Positioning: fine control of social and interpersonal actions, such as modifying behavior to suit present company.

**Finger flexors, ab- and adductors:** Touching, investigating, holding — gross and fine adjustment in perception and handling. Also ability to take in and to give out. Basis of cognitive grasp.

**Thumb and little finger opposers:** Relaxing focus and sensitivity to minute expressions. Formation of synesthesia, involved in reading and writing skills.

**Hip flexors:** Initiating forward movement and allowing intimate/sensual body contact.

**Tensor fascia latae, vastus lateralis and knee extensors:** Personal boundaries in distant and close relationships, also collecting oneself and controlling forward movement.

**Ankle and toe extensors:** Willingness to perceive and face reality.
**Psychological Muscle Function**

Neck muscles:
- Holding the head up — as in ‘keeping one’s head’.
- Orientation, willpower, pride.

Shoulder elevators:
- Carrying burdens, trying to keep one’s balance when unsure of footing.

Shoulder dorsal adductors and rotators:
- Connecting core self and action.
- Self-protection and ability to receive support from others.
- Creating personal space.

Extensors, flexors, ab- and adductors of the shoulder joint:
- Personal space and range in interpersonal activities; when reaching out, touching, pushing, holding on to, etc.
- Self-worth.

Spinal extensors:
- Holding oneself erect — ‘standing tall’.
- Ability to withstand emotional and physiological stressors.

Knee flexors:
- Choice of direction, control of forward movement.

Ankle (plantar) flexors:
- Standing on one’s own feet, self-assurance, ability to jump.
- Ability to take a fall.

Peroneal muscles:
- Personal balance in group interaction.

Midfoot and toe flexors:
- Ability to sense the ground and take its security, support and energy from that contact.

Some muscles respond specifically to trauma:
- Petroglids, splenius capitis, and cervicis, sartorius, gracilis, psoas, and pectoralis.
- Also muscles active in the issue and/or age level involved.

Elbow extensors:
- Pushing away, throwing, holding at a distance.

Finger extensors:
- Feeling go, making fine adjustments in boundaries, reaching out.

Hip abductors:
- Personal boundaries (breadth of stance), sexual identity, personal balance.

Hip rotators:
- Sexual/sensual self-awareness, boundaries, and social signaling.

Hip extensors:
- Strength to stand on one’s own, ability to forge ahead, move powerfully forwards and also stop forward movement.
- Performance capacity and durability.
- Ability to take a fall.

Hip adductors:
- Intimate, somatic/sensual contact and feelings.

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**Part Four**

**Trauma—the Bodynamic & Somatic Experiencing® Approaches**

**Developmental and Shock Trauma**

The four articles in Part Four deepen our understanding of developmental and shock trauma. The first, “Panic, Biology, Reason: Giving the Body Its Due,” by Dr. Peter Levine, is a foundational paper integrating, with numerous examples, the theory and practice of his approach to resolving traumatic experiences. Dr. Levine has created a therapeutic model for addressing trauma called Somatic Experiencing, which he currently teaches. He has developed a unique approach to Somatic Experiencing. I spent many years as client, student, and later co-teacher with Peter, admiring the brilliance of both his approach and his therapy. His exquisite attention to even the slightest shift in pulse, skin color, or eye dilation, puts him in a class by himself.

“IT Won’t Hurt Forever… Guiding your Child Through Trauma,” by Dr. Levine and Maggie Kline, M.S., M.T., is a very rich exploration of various types of childhood trauma and offers many interventions that parents and clinicians can use. Kline’s background as a family therapist and a school psychologist brings with it many years of exploring these issues with children and their parents.

“Using the Bodynamic Shock Trauma Model in the Everyday Practice of Physiotherapy,” by Barbara Picton BSR, M.Ed. (Onc. Psych.), R.C.C., is the