Self-care Practice: Relaxation and Self-massage

The idea of wellbeing and self-care practice can be looked at with a wide angle.

What is wellbeing? What is self-care?

For the Workers Wellbeing Webinar, I led a self-care practice, to give an experience and example of a practice that you can do alone, or with colleagues, even for ten minutes. Someone can lead the practice or everyone can mentally follow in silence, listening to the body sensing in the presence of the others, doing a body scan and perceiving their own breath. This worksheet outlines the components of the webinar self-practice, together with some further information about the evidence and theories behind the benefits of such practice to one's wellbeing.

Self-massage, breath work and meditation in the session are practices that historically belong in the context of the cultural, religious and medical history of Asia, but we can also consider them as part of an investigation into the human longing for self-knowledge, self awareness, self care etc. And in western countries we have developed many somatic practices and meditation techniques that are of interest.

During the practice we did:

- a progressive relaxation (which in fact is the first part of any meditation technique).
- a self-massage (which has the aim to revive the senses and wake up in a calm state).
- a standing breathing stretch (which can help if we are sitting at a desk for many hours).

There are many scientific findings about the effects of meditation, relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, and guided imagery. Findings concern the state of the brain, in terms of wavelets, functional modifications and, in the long term, structural modifications that take place. Results indicate that meditation leads to activation in brain areas involved in processing self-relevant information, self-regulation, focused problem-solving, adaptive behaviour and interoception (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, 2008[1]).

Meditation is a complex process aimed at self-regulating the body and mind and is often associated with psychological and neurophysiological modifications. It expands the attention focus to all incoming sensations, emotions, and thoughts from moment to moment. All meditation techniques share a central process that supports their common goal, that is, inducing relaxation, regulating attention, and developing an attitude of detachment from one's own thoughts. Meditation can be seen to involve four fundamental stages:
1) relaxation;
2) concentration;

[1] Lutz, A.,, Brefczynski-Lewis, J., Johnstone, T. (2008). *Regulation of the neural circuitry of emotion by compassion meditation: effects of meditation expertise.* Available at: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0001897

3) meditation;
4) Levitation (we call it this in the absence of a better word).

The first thing we need to do before concentrating is to do the opposite, that is relax. Because concentration is a form of tension, it can be focusing on breathing, on colour or on sound which are all forms of meditation in concentration. Relaxation involves first relaxing the body and then eventually the mind. Once relaxed, body and mind, we can focus, if required, on some parts of the body and also on some aspects of the mind. If we can stay focused without being distracted, then we enter the third stage, which is that of meditation. Actually the goal of meditation is not to achieve something, but rather to let go of something. Because meditation implies transformation and transformation requires letting go of something to let something else enter, meditating not to achieve something, rather meditating to leave something. The feeling of security is very important for the practice of meditation, so if we elect a certain place and time to meditate, it is important to choose one in which we feel safe (Yuen, 2015[2]).

Feeling safe corresponds to the wavelets of the brain called Alpha, which we experience when we are at home, at our own place, relaxed, on the sofa etc. Inducing, through relaxation techniques, the body-mind to feel at home means relieving some of the accumulated daily stress.

What is the structure that we followed in the practice?

First we closed the eyes, to get rid of a feeling of performing, and to isolate the main sense, sight, to allow the mind to see inward. Then we tried to place the body in a state of relaxation through a body scan. In the webinar, I chose to check how we were sitting, letting the weight drop on the chair, and focusing on the hands, that are rich with nerves, so that we could feel our hands more than other parts of our body. It is useful to anchor one's attention to the body, to listen to the breath, to focus on a sensation. We can also listen to the movement of the chest, the feeling of fresh air in the nose, the raising and dropping of the shoulders, the belly expanding. This often helps to connect our own physicality and maintain the attention.

That might be enough if we have 10 minutes for the practice. However in the webinar, once relaxed, we moved on to a brief self-massage that could be extended to a full body self-massage. 'Washing' the face and the head and brushing the hands activate the senses, and the brain. In Traditional Chinese Medicine there are many acupoints of relevance for activating the Yang energy on the surface of the head, helping activate optimal mental and metabolic functions.

Next, we activated the movement of the heart and lungs through the muscles of the chest and spine and moving the arms. All these areas are often holding emotional energy. Through these or similar exercises we can allow the thoracic muscles and diaphragm to unlock and regulate themselves in the function of breathing. Functions such as breathing,

[2] Yuen, J.C. (2015). *Seminar on Taoist Meditation*, Italy. For more information: http://jadepurityfoundation.org/master.html

circulation, nutrition, digestion etc. are controlled by the autonomic nervous system, which regulates the activation/braking systems that help us respond, for instance, in a crisis, and enable us to rest when we relax.

Whilst these systems are designed to work effectively without conscious effort, emotional stress can alter the diaphragm contraction, as well as all the other functions of breathing and heart rate. This is why people can find their activation system (e.g. flight or fight responses) overly-stimulated as a result of a traumatic experience and which is then activated at times that might trigger those memories and responses, at an unconscious level, even if these responses are not necessary at a conscious level. The standing exercise that ended the self-care practice in the webinar, was another form of self-scanning, this time through our hands, feeling the shape of our body, and tracing our skin response and our boundaries.

These kinds of practices share the principles of mindfulness, described as a specific kind of paying attention characterized by a non-judgmental, purposeful and continuing awareness of mental and physical or bodily states and processes. That is we experience that our lives are not instantaneously threatened in the real present, right here and now, and consequently we can rather experience curiosity, connectivity and openness (Esch, 2014[3]).

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Further reading:

Boccia, M., Piccardi, L., Guariglia, P. (2014). *The meditative mind: A comprehensive meta-analysis of MRI studies.* Biomed Research International. Available at: https://iris.uniroma1.it/retrieve/handle/11573/949304/398972/Boccia_meditative-mind_2015.pdf

[3] Esch, T., (2014). *The neurobiology of meditation and mindfulness.* In S. Schmidt & H. Walack (Eds.), Meditation – Neuroscientific approaches and philosophical implications. (pp.153-173), Springer International. Chapter available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259263009_The_Neurobiology_of_Meditation_and_Mindfulness