

## EXPLORING THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN DISEASES OF MUSCULAR CONTRACTION

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Six months ago a 39-year-old woman whose legs could not sustain her without the help of crutches came into my office for healing. Her body was numb, her pelvis frozen and contracted. She could not feel her movements. However, her body possessed a harmonious form. Her upper body felt warm and her face, with large dark eyes, a full mouth and determined jaw, seemed dynamic and alive. She did not know—or did not want to know—she was “warm.” She had lost her body, had recognized that loss, and wanted her feeling body back. I was struck by her beauty. Even on crutches her energy seemed to smoulder.

This woman, whom I shall call Michelle, had been diagnosed with dystonia of the legs at age 17 and with multiple sclerosis at age 25. Dystonia denotes an illness dominated by spasms or muscle contraction that induce “abnormal” movements and postures. Multiple sclerosis is a diseased condition marked by patches of hardened tissue in the brain or spinal cord and associated with partial or complete paralysis and jerking muscle tremor. The brain and the body become disconnected when antibodies, manufactured by the thymus gland, hook into the myelin, or sheath around the cells of the nervous system, and destroy its transmission function. With the destruction of the myelin, the communication of bodily sensations to the brain is severely inhibited. This disconnection is what creates the feeling of numbness.

The thymus gland is located in the upper anterior chest. This place in Michelle’s body is severely depressed. The thymus is being squeezed into the deep hollow of the emotional deprivation and brutality of her childhood.

Michelle’s medical doctors had never considered the role of emotions, and had ascribed her condition in part to genetics.

They had offered tranquilizing drugs, brain surgery, chemotherapy, and steroids as well as psychotherapy to help her accept the “fact ” of her illness and then see how to get around it rather than helping her deal with the pain. When her psychotherapist invited her to choose from a variety of crutches which was the most suitable, Michelle fled. She found a spiritual chiropractor, whom she later married, and then came to me for Core Energetic therapy.

In our very first session Michelle reached out for the Core Energetic key to the healing of her numbness and contraction. I told her of the unitive understanding of life as the integration of emotion, body, mind and spirit. The body is *directly* affected by feelings. Feelings affect the status of the thymus in the chest through direct impulses of the autonomic nervous system, and emotions have a direct impact on that system, which acts independently of volition. Tremendous opposing forces make the nervous system go askew, preventing the brain from receiving the body’s messages.

Childhood imagery is patterned in the tissues of the brain. In a person like Michelle, with ambivalence toward father and fear and hostility toward mother, she herself tends to become the authority and has to carry the burden. She attempts to keep the peace and alternates between personal satisfaction and work achievement. Anger and fear are locked into the body by guilt and anxiety. This anger and fear needs to be released.

Where in the body is the energy locked? It is locked in the muscular system, the repository of energy, which has the function of contraction and expansion. When this system tightens, the energy cannot move through but goes to the back.

By providing understanding of the muscular mechanisms by which emotions are controlled, Core Energetic therapy can transform the medical treatment of self-suppressive diseases, such as dystonia and multiple sclerosis, from a mechanical to a holistic release of human energy. This is based on the premise that our bodies contain our frozen histories. The movement of our energy is stopped by all of the repeated don’ts of childhood: Don’t cry; don’t touch yourself; don’t make noise; don’t lose control, etc. Spontaneous responses get suppressed and *the muscles do the suppressing*. As they continuously contract, the contractions be

come patterned in the musculature: Grin and bear it; pull yourself together; grit your teeth; hold your head high; boys don't cry; stay cool, etc.

Typically, the child rejects these parental injunctions with a spontaneous "No!", and oftentimes parents reject the child's "No!" with denials, humiliations, shaming, and/or other punishment. Muscular excitation is thus converted by guilt into anxiety. The unitive flow of the natural pulsatory movement of the organism's life energy, which consists of ongoing expansion and contraction, becomes *chronically* disturbed by the fear of expression. In the unequal power struggle between parent and child, the child becomes afraid of his/her *own* energy. The child's structure is asked to control more than it can naturally hold. The backbone weakens and, without backup, the spirit is crushed and the well-behaved personality emerges necessitating more muscular binding which, in turn, intensifies anxiety, etc.

Thus, the psyche and the soma function in a *cycle of mutuality*. Feelings are converted into the physical and the physical into feelings. *The bridge between the two is the musculature which functions to hold the flow of life energy*. In this way, psychic conflict is embodied. Psychic conflict and somatic disorder are [can become] *one*.

Energetic theory explains how the conversion occurs. The contractive process takes hold of those muscle groups which function to suppress feelings, affects and organ sensations, and fragment the unitive flow. Emotional anatomy follows:

\*The musculature of the neck contracts to block the excitation wave from the chest to the brain. The result is the stiff-necked, obstinate, proud character.

\*The area between the shoulder blades becomes chronically contracted when anger is unconsciously and continuously suppressed. The result is the character who controls the self to the point of holding back.

\*The masseters of the jaw contract to restrain anger and tears in a chronic expression of criticalness and spite.

\*The pelvis is retracted by those muscles whose function is the control of genital sensation.

\*The buttocks hold back anal sensations associated with punishment and invasion.

\*The deep and superficial abductors of the upper thighs have the function of suppressing genital excitation, thereby gaining the name “morality muscles.”

\*The large anterior chest muscles function to curtail exhalation and create a “false front” that conceals chronic anxiety and the deep longing of the core. The result of the inspiratory thoracic attitude is a blown-up chest.

The pattern of contraction, its focus and function, corresponds to the developmental stage of its inception. Each developmental stage generates such bio-emotional issues as trust in the period of infancy, autonomy between ages two and four, sexuality at puberty and adolescence, and grieving in mid-life. When the baby’s longing for holding is denied, when the “No!” of the two year old is not supported, when the sexual feelings of the adolescent are shamed—when, in sum, the natural needs of the life cycle are withheld and insulted, the structure breaks down.

Chronic muscular tension is often not enough to master bioenergetic excitation. When this is the case, adult dystonia can develop as well as such other diseases as multiple sclerosis, rheumatism, cancer, cardiovascular hypertension, emphysema, chronic constipation, asthma, and tics. The body expresses the “No!” which the person cannot. Such authority figures as the taxi driver, the waitress, the supermarket cashier serve as substitute targets for the release of the early childhood pain and rage which the disabled structure resurrects.

In the words of Wilhelm Reich, “The spasm of the musculature is the somatic side of the process of repression, and the basis of its continued preservation. It is never individual muscles which become spastic, but rather muscle groups that belong to a function unity, in the vegetative sense. (*Function of the Orgasm*, 1974, p. 271).

From this place of unitive understanding the Core Energetic therapist seeks to *release* contractions both emotionally and physiologically. A *safe, supportive environment* is essential to work through the psychophysical blocks and *support the new energy* that has been released. As the blocks (holding) are loosened, the old feelings surface: love, hatred, desire, hurt, sexuality—because it is in the muscular spasm that they reside. As the interrupted organic pulsations emerge, the person’s frozen past breaks out and be

comes grounded in expanded breathing and the vibratory flow of life energy. As a psychophysical connection is made to the natural self-regulatory rhythm, the spirit glows and calls forth the tonicity of the muscles. The structure learns to open and accept, rather than fight, the life force. This unitive understanding can transform the treatment of diseases by using energetic processes to support life and maintain health.

The work of healing is the work of transformation. It depends upon the intertwining of the psyche and the soma. Work on the musculature and on the emotions proceed simultaneously, and sometimes alternately. But ultimately the emotional function of the muscles takes over the healing. The struggle between impulse and contraction exists in the relevant muscle groups. Core Energetics helps the sufferer to accept this struggle and experience its embodiment.

I am telling Michelle's story because it manifests the *mechanism* by which a child's hurts become chronically retained in the musculature, excluding whole muscle groups from the unity of the organic process, disconnecting self-perception, innervating confidence, and turning pleasure into pain.

Core Energetic treatment encompasses unblocking excitation, generating a positive connection to the feeling body, reconnecting legs, and enabling the person to stand up for him/herself.

Michelle bore enormous guilt and anxiety for her great gifts of beauty, creativity (as a poet and ballet dancer) and scientific understanding. Both her father and mother had made her feel afraid of her energy. Her childhood had been filled with external trauma and internal conflict. Her father was shockingly inconsistent, at times loving and exciting, then alcoholic and violent. He inspired terror and passion. He would have both Michelle and her older sister sleep on either side of him at night, and demands this of them to this day. On the other hand, he threatened to scald his daughters' fingers and shoot them in the head. He never carried out his threats, and ridiculed them for their fear. His favorite form of punishment was forcing his daughters to kneel on raw rice and water.

Michelle's mother was detached and punitive. She had wanted her second child, if she had one, to be a son, not a daughter. Thus Michelle was intermittently abandoned by her mother, who gave

her over to her irrational father, or was beaten on every part of her body with a strap her mother wore around her neck.

At age 14 Michelle was raped by her uncle. This confusing “relationship” continued for approximately five years. Having been raised as a Catholic and educated in parochial schools, Michelle felt a strong sense of guilt about her sexuality and also about her anger toward her parents. Both stimulated and undernourished, economically as well as emotionally, Michelle lived on the margin of existence. Overcontrolled and underbanded, she wet her bed until age 13, for which she was humiliated and beaten by her mother.

How did Michelle survive? For the first six years of her life, her maternal grandfather provided mercy and protection against her father’s boundless behavior. When he left, without explanation, she was shocked. She suppressed her cries by not exhaling. She interrupted her breathing by choking her throat and tensing her masseters. She locked her knees to suppress the pain of kneeling in the raw rice and water. She squeezed her upper thigh muscles together and pulled her pelvic muscles to avoid the sexual sensations of pleasure that accompanied the rapes. She gave up dancing when the plie movement opened her genital sensations. When even these muscular contractions were insufficient to suppress the conflicting painful and pleasurable feelings, she learned to depersonalize and disconnect.

By contracting her neck, she blocked the wave of excitation from her body to her brain. By defocusing her eyes, she hid her excitation. Thus, Michelle *pretended* to comply while she was disconnecting her consciousness (brain) from both her thoughts and feelings. Because of the muscular spasms in her structure, pleasure became intolerable. The feelings of guilt and the fear of punishment also became anchored in her muscles. When her energy became too much for her muscles to suppress, she learned to split off from the pain and excitation, giving that part of herself a name different from her own. Her masochistic defense of holding in her feelings, combined with her psychopathy, touched off her guilty self-suppression and produced splitting.

My work with Michelle includes helping her to build a loving connection to her energetic flow. She is coming to learn a new word, “No.” I encourage her to put it *out* rather than into herself.

As her “no” is expressed in the release of her muscular spasms, her integrity is being restored, and her “yes” to herself follows. As her eyes become alive, her tears flow. By pressing her masseters, the indifference around her mouth is replaced by expressions of rage and pain. However, her cries and screams are accompanied by severe inhibition of her genital sensations. Her anxiety squeezes the “morality” muscles in her thighs and cuts off the use of her legs. As she lies on the mattress, I invite her to push me away. As she puts her feet on my shoulders and feels the pressure of my weight, her first impulse is to withdraw, but I encourage her to meet pressure with pressure. As I increase my pressure, she puts her energy into her feet and manages to push me off. The excitement and thrill of her effectiveness—“Did I do that!”—inspires her confidence, and we repeat the maneuver again and again until the natural energetic impulse takes over.

Her legs begin to vibrate and these vibrations frighten her. I point out that this is the energy of which she is afraid. I bring her to her feet. She wobbles and falls. She comes to her feet again, using me to help her up. She hangs on me and leans against my desk. I suggest that she bend her legs and use the desk, ground and myself to support and sustain her vibrations, her life force. As she does this, the waves of energy move through her whole body. She looks scared, her mouth and jaw critical and angry. When I point out her grimaces (her Catholic morality), she breaks into a smile. Her guarded head glows and her eyes sparkle. I invite her to stamp, even as she leans against the desk. She moves her consciousness to the ground, puts her energy into her legs and stamps, bending her stiff knees and unlocking her contracted pelvis. She expresses her need to use the bathroom and I watch her stamp her way there. She emerges walking like a baby, step by step. Her compartmentalized body is relinquishing. I support her head and neck, a support that has been missing. Fragmentation has been her survival, disconnection her security. Supporting her neck allows her vibrations to tattoo their message into her brain and restore her wholeness.

At every session (twice a week) Michelle asks herself whether she truly wants to get well, and at each session recommits to facing her pain. She is learning to take responsibility for her negative intentionality, and to receive the message of her body and ener

gize her “no.” As she builds a supportive connection to her right to say “no,” her body fights back. The hollow between her breasts grows so deep I could put my hand inside. Her stillness seems to increase. Then suddenly her tears break through. I hear her baby’s pain and rage filling this place of her emptiness. Gradually her breathing softens into the rhythm of ongoing waves. She puts her hand into the wound.

“I feel filled for the first time,” she whispers. “I tried to kill myself at least four times. No wonder my antibodies are eating me up.”

Her feelings beat their rhythm into the depths of her brain. I hold her near the basal ganglia, and can feel the pulsation of her heart there. She wonders aloud why these contractions are not felt until I give this holding. As I hold her head, she no longer has to hold herself. The key is in her body. I encourage her to go there, inside of herself, to find the answer to her question.

You get used to it. You go into spasms very young.  
*You grow up being in spasms. This is what life is. Life is suffering.*  
My fourth grade teacher told my mother, ‘Your daughter is always crying/ and my mother did nothing. In high school I was a zombie. My teacher told me that I was petrified into space. I just stared. When I was 16, I wrote a poem about losing excitement about life.

My batteries were dead. When I wanted to kick, I cut off my legs. When I wanted to hit, I cut off my arms. When I wanted sex, I cut off my pelvis. When I wanted to scream, I cut my throat. When I did not want to see,  
I blurred my eyes. I had no more energy. I prayed to God.

There was no one else. Michelle’s spastic muscle systems had taken over both the pathway from her chest to her head and the pathway to her genitals through her abdomen and into her legs. Pleasure had been turned into pain. By disconnecting from the pulsatory functions of her autonomic nervous system, she had depersonalized her feelings. She wrote in 1986:

Keep it gray.  
Back! Back!  
Go to sleep.  
Fifty lashes if you come out again.

No more red, purple, or blue—  
Especially blue!  
I told you to keep it gray,  
Just gray!

Through our Core Energetic work together, Michelle is recovering her vital force. She has regained sensations in her lower body and reclaimed her sexual energy. She can use her legs for increasingly extended periods of walking, stamping, and kicking. She is building a supportive connection to her capacity to discharge in a unifying, ongoing way. As the vibrations of her life force open up, the *self-regulatory* rhythm emerges and becomes her strength. She is *recognizing* her vulnerability as her strength, and her fear is turning to joy. She writes:

With perfect sensation throughout my whole body,  
No more numbness.  
I let that go!  
With perfect vision,  
I let that go!  
With a perfect body,  
I will take this life,  
This gift,  
And dance through it with wings.  
It's going to be beautiful now.  
I forgive you, Mickey,  
You are forgiven.  
Thank you, God.  
Mike, it's okay.  
Fly!!!!!!  
Now it's okay.

I pray with her:

Let go. Let God—the connection to the forces of  
nature, of life energy, greater than ourselves—restore  
me.

The spirit that moves the flesh from such forces makes the body tremble with an excitement that transforms the mechanical intellect into a feeling, thinking, moving wholeness: in other words, into life. Such an inspired will—the will of the heart— can generate the body. Michelle writes:

Stay close to me, God.  
I need the light.

I am ready now, God.  
I am going to fly through.  
I will move, walk, chance, and run—  
I will dance again.

Thus, as mind and body are reunited, spirit emerges as the vital force in the biochemistry of nature. Core Energetics has enabled Michelle to get inside the spiritual process—the how as well as the why of creative life—the integration of feelings, will, intellect, and soul. As she says, “This is everything.”

“Why don’t the doctors ask people about their life traumas, their emotions, go beyond the charts”? Every fellow multiple sclerosis sufferer in her network has been sexually abused in an incestuous situation and has never explored the experience with a professional helper.

Michelle writes:

Hear me calling.  
I am screaming and no one hears me.  
I am suffering and no one cries.  
I am dying and no one knows.  
I am petrified and no one sees.  
I am alone and no one is there.  
I am lonely and no one hears me calling.  
Please! Please!  
Hear me!

Not only do I hear Michelle, she is coming to hear her own yearning for connection and freedom. Michelle’s inner child has retained her integrity, protected by the outer armor and primal negativities. Her core remains pulsatory in its capacity to assert and receive. Her core qualities of courage, intelligence and love have been magnetized by recognition. She visits her heart every day and talks with the God within. Core Energetics has become her second nature.

Today she can walk without a crutch.

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