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The 'Aha' Experience with Somatics: Demonstrating Mind and Body Unity

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Abstract

An 'Aha' experience can change one's belief system, lead to increased awareness and a greater sense of control, and enhance confidence and competence. The 'aha' process usually includes getting 'stuck' before attaining mental relaxation, an accepting attitude and then, resolution or insight. Because it is felt instead of explained, the 'aha' experience is often evoked through Somatic activities, such as lemon imagery, airplane movement, threading a needle, arm lift by a partner, or Feldenkrais foot movement. Participants shift from belief to knowing when they feel/experience an expanded awareness of the mind-body interconnectedness.

The ‘Aha’ Experience with Somatics: Demonstrating Mind and Body Unity

Even though I knew that relaxation was important, I finally understood how not relaxing affected my health when I saw that I could reach further with my arm. What a world of difference—and I didn’t feel pain in my shoulder!

Evoking hope and seeing new options are often the result of an ‘aha’ experience: An experience that re-organizes one’s reality and reframes problems and solutions. An ‘aha’ experience provides a different perspective that is outside the initial frame of reference and leads to an expanded understanding of mind-body unity. Many educational, therapeutic and somatic approaches trigger ‘aha’ experiences to further growth. This article reviews some of the major research observations about the ‘aha’ experience and offers some somatic exercises to demonstrate and evoke an ‘aha’ of mind/body unity.

Understanding the ‘Aha’

Most practitioners, teachers, clinicians, or therapists have observed their participants, students, patients or clients gaining an ‘insight,’ ‘illumination’ or sudden understanding of knowledge or information. This is known as the ‘aha’ effect. What seems to be a simple ‘aha’ or “now I see or understand,” is actually a rather complicated process. Sudden insight or ‘aha’ has been studied for over a century with research and theories about its effects and its underlying psychophysiological processes. We propose that ‘aha’ experiences are natural ways to help individuals become aware of their internal processes and to understand how mind and body affect each other. Additionally, when people learn through insight or ‘aha’ the information is better remembered, most likely because it is self-generated and experienced (Auble, et al 1979). In short, *the ‘aha’ experience can change the person’s belief system, lead them to awareness and increase their sense of control, which then, can enhance confidence and competence.*

Some individuals believe that the ‘aha’ experience is something that just comes, without effort or intent, as if a gift of the gods where you suddenly receive divine illumination and the problem is solved or a new understanding is reached. Not true! Conti, et al (1996), indicated that there might be a personality predisposition that makes it easier for some to develop ‘aha;’ but more importantly, *that training, experience and task motivation can enhance creativity or ‘aha.’* The ‘aha’ is a part of the creative or problem solving process and has a process of its own.¹

The ‘aha’ experience is the third stage of the creative thought or problem solving process (Wallas, 1926). There is generally is an impasse in understanding or solving problems before insight or ‘aha’ occurs (Jones, 2003). Most likely, when people relax their self-imposed constraints it allows them to see the larger chunked items (smaller items chained together into one larger obstacle/belief) and to simplify them so that the information becomes ‘insightful.’ When a person cannot solve a problem or see what

1. Davidson, J. E. (2003). Insights about insightful problem solving. In J.E. Davidson & R. Sternberg (Eds). *The psychology of problem solving* (pp. 149-175). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

appears to be a simple relationship, it is believed to more related to inappropriate or misleading information, rather than incomplete information (Knoblich, et al, 2001). *This suggests that the practitioner should be prepared for participants to become 'stuck' before they are able to understand, re-integrate the information or perform the requested skill. Also, the instructor should refrain from providing new or more information but rather try to help the participant 'let go' and see the information in a new light.*

Using brain measurements Jausovec (1997) reported that ill-defined problems demanded more mental activity during the preparation phase but less mental activity during the solution phase. Hence, the practitioner should have participants do the thinking, the planning, and the interpreting of information at the beginning of new tasks/skills. *Then, after all the information has been presented and processed, the participants should relax so they can allow new connections or perceptions to occur without rational editing.*

Somatics and the 'Aha'

Somatics is a powerful approach that encourages and often includes the 'aha' experience—an experience that is felt rather than explained and that increases awareness of mind/body interconnectedness. This felt experience anchors a different perspective and often provides an alternative reality. The challenge is to use this 'aha' or felt experience as a new perspective from which to view one's self and the world. This new perspective of mind/body unity then forms the foundation for a participant's future actions. For example, I now see that imagery affects physiology; therefore, I choose not to watch the predominately violent news before going to sleep.

Following are some examples of somatic techniques that we have used to evoke the 'aha' effect as it pertains to body/mind unity.

Example 1: Lemon Imagery²

What does it demonstrate? Our thoughts and feelings affect our body. Be careful what you think and imagine!

Gently close your eyes and imagine a lemon. Notice the deep yellow color, the two stubby ends, the sign "Sunkist" stamped on the side. Place the lemon on a cutting board and cut the lemon in half with your favorite kitchen knife. Notice the pressure of the knife in your hand as you cut the lemon. Feel the droplets of lemon juice sprinkling against your skin. After cutting it in half, put the knife down and take one of the half lemons in your hand. As you look at it, notice the droplets of lemon juice glistening in the light, the half cut seeds, the outer yellow rind, the pale yellow-white inner rind, and the pulpy membranes containing the lemon juice. Now get a glass and squeeze this half lemon so that the juice goes in the glass. As you squeeze, notice the tension in your hand and arm. Feel the droplets of lemon juice squirting against your skin. Hear the plopping of the seeds and pulp. Smell the pungent, sharp, tart odor. After having squeezed this half, take the other lemon half and squeeze the juice out of it into the glass. Then put that lemon half down, and take the glass in your hand. Feel the coolness of the glass. Bring the glass to your lips, tilt the glass and feel the

² Adapted from E. Peper, K. H. Gibney & C. Holt, *Make Health Happen* (2002). Dubuque: Kendall-Hunt.

pressure and coolness on the lower lip. Now tilt the glass more, feel the juice against your lips, then open your lips and sip the lemon juice. Then taste and swallow the lemon juice. Observe the pulp and seeds as you swallow.

As you listened to this, did you notice that you swallowed, that you experienced an increase in salivation? More than 95 % of people who listen and participate in the above instructions experience these changes.

Example 2: Airplane

What does it demonstrate? Flexibility and muscle control are influenced and improved by relaxation of muscles not specific to a movement and through playful imagery that reframes an activity.

- Stand erect in a relaxed, stable posture (one foot slightly forward and feet separated shoulder-width apart). Keep your feet in the same place throughout this exercise.
- Pretend that you are an airplane. Bring your wings (arms) up and rotate as far as you can (without moving your feet) to the left and to the right. Remember a spot on the wall to the left and to the right to show you how far you can comfortably rotate. Do this 2-3 times.
- Let your arms drop, relax and stand erect.
- Remain in the same foot position. Now, let go of your facial muscles, shoulder muscles and hands. Tighten each of these muscle groups and hold for 10 seconds. Then, let go for 15 seconds. Repeat two times.
- Breathe diaphragmatically allowing your stomach/abdomen to expand during inhalation and decrease in circumference during exhalation. Let your chest and shoulders stay relaxed. Breathe diaphragmatically for two minutes while gradually slowing your breathing to about 6-breaths per minute.
- Now, while staying totally relaxed and breathing diaphragmatically, bring your arms up so that they are wings again. While exhaling rotate as far as you can go to the left and to the right.
- Keep the same foot pattern. With your eyes closed, gently raise and lower the airplane wings a few inches. Then, as you raise and lower the airplane wings, rotate back and forth. Imagine that you are really a small airplane, flying freely through the air. Repeat a few times and relax letting your arms drop to your sides. Finally, open your eyes, raise your airplane wings and again, rotate as far as you can to the left and to the right. Observe how far you rotated in each direction.

In almost all cases, one can rotate more each time you did the measurement. The ‘aha’ of understanding that any tension in the body affects the whole, and that viewing an activity as playful rather than work, can greatly reduce felt tension. How can your client reframe work to be relaxing or more playful? (Gibney & Peper, 2003). If appropriate, ask participants if any of their problems are due to psychosclerosis—hardening of the attitudes?

Note: Sometimes it is easier for people to do this with eyes closed as they may be embarrassed or distracted by visual disruptions.

Example 3: Threading a Needle³

What does it demonstrate? People hold their breath when performing fine skills and they have no awareness of doing so.

Sit comfortably, now imagine that as you put on your shirt, the middle button fell off and that you quickly have to sew it on. Get a needle with a very small eye. Hold this in between the thumb and index finger of your left hand. Take a white thread with your right hand and hold the thread between your right thumb and index finger. Bring the tip of the thread to your lips. Wet the thread to make it into a point and pass the thread through the eye of the needle.

Now act out this threading of the needle. Hold your hands up as if you were really holding this imaginary needle in front of you, moisten the thread and bring the tip of the thread to the eye of the needle. Literally see yourself threading the needle.

As you are focused and involved in this task, observe what is happening to your shoulders, the blinking of your eyes, the location and frequency of your breath, the muscle tension in your back, legs, arms and fingers. Did you hold your breath? Tighten your shoulders? Tense your body?

In almost all cases, people notice that during precise accurate work (imaginary threading of the needle) they do just this-freeze and become tensely immobile. This demonstration leads to an 'aha': in everyday activities, such as working at the keyboard or mousing, similar habits are employed.

Example 4: Arm lift by partner

What does it demonstrate? Self-consciousness, social judgment and memories stiffen the muscles. Freedom of movement is freedom of thoughts and feelings.

This exercise is done with 2 people, one active and one passive.

With the passive partner sitting or standing, the active partner gently takes hold of the passive partner's right hand and lifts the arm. The active partner moves this hand and arm in an unpredictable pattern without the passive partner helping or hindering the movement, allowing the arm to feel like a heavy weight. As the arm is being moved, ask the passive partner to think of a past or present memory of conflict or fear.

Generally, the moment the passive partner remembers or thinks of conflict or fear, or even becoming self-conscious of someone moving his arm, the arm stiffens and the movement becomes impeded. This exercise encourages an 'aha' in understanding the effect of negative emotions on tension in our body. For example, if someone fears her supervisor, there is a high probability that she'll develop arm discomfort when working at the computer.

³ Adapted from: Peper, E. & Weijman, A.C.M. (2003). *Healthy Computing: Evolutie en preventie van RSI*. Rijswijk, The Netherlands: Elmar Publishers. ISBN 90-389-1404-0.

Example 5: Feldenkrais Foot movement⁴

What does it demonstrate? Changing a coordination pattern associated with a reflex in one part of the body may change the muscle coordination pattern in another part of the body. The hipbone is connected to the thighbone.....

Throughout this exercise be sure to continue breathing diaphragmatically: relax your eyes, jaw, neck and shoulders while doing the movements. After each movement, rest for a few moments.

- Push away from the keyboard and sit at the edge of your chair with your knees bent at right angles and your feet shoulder-width apart and flat on the floor (remove high heel shoes).
- Gently arch your head backward by looking up and back to the farthest spot behind you on the ceiling. Remember that spot. Bring your head forward and upright. Relax and rest for a few seconds.
- Gently slide your left foot six inches forward and then, while keeping the heel of your foot on the floor, lift the ball of your foot up (flexing the ankle) while at the same time curling your toes under. Hold for one second. Then uncurl your toes, bring the ball of your foot down and relax.
- Gently slide your left foot six inches backward and then, while keeping the ball of your foot on the ground, lift your heel up (extending the ankle) and, at the same time, curl your toes upward. Then relax your toes, bring your heel down and relax your foot completely.
- Continue the movements by sliding your left foot forward and lifting the ball of your foot while curling your toes under. Then let it go and relax and slide your foot backwards while lifting your heel and curling your toes upward.
- Repeat this practice 5 or more times until the movement feels comfortable and smooth.
- Practice the same sequence five or more times with your right foot until the movement feels smooth and comfortable.
- Repeat doing the movement with both feet at the same time, except that as the right foot goes forward while lifting the ball of the foot and curling toes under, the left foot goes back while the heel goes up and the toes curl up. Continue for 10 to 20 times.
- After you are done with both feet, let them rest on the floor with your knees bent at right angles and feet shoulder-width apart. Then, gently arch your head backward by looking up and back to the farthest spot behind you on the ceiling. Observe how much further you could look back. Return your head to an erect position and notice the looseness and freedom in the movement of your neck and head.

In almost all cases, one can look significantly further back after this exercise. This is a very basic somatic 'aha': our stiffness may be the result of chained, fixed repetitive movements rather than aging. Encourage your clients to explore how to get out of a chair differently, to brush teeth differently, to eat differently.

⁴ Adapted from a demonstration by Dr. Brad Bennett.

Discussion

Somatic practices often include covert strategies to evoke 'aha' experiences that can change people's perspectives. Instead of using words to explain the phenomena, the somatic experience is felt. In each of the examples, the somatic experience confirms the mind/body unity. The concepts cannot be negated; they are experienced and real. To deny them is to deny your own existence.

There are many other practices and strategies that can be used to facilitate and evoke an 'aha' experience. Success is generally ensured when the following factors to enhance awareness are also incorporated in the practices:

1. Eliminate competition: Only compare the person with her/himself not others.
2. Maintain a positive mood state.
3. Approach the task as play and exploration and not as therapy or teaching. It is often difficult to reduce striving when being taught or during therapy as there is a goal to achieve.
4. Use a listening accepting communication style: Allow the person to express ideas/fears while the teacher/therapist/coach maintains a non-judgmental attitude.

In summary, the more the instructor or practitioner creates an accepting environment, the more likely the person will experience an 'aha,' in which mind and body are truly united. The experience will move one from belief and knowledge to a felt and experienced understanding.

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