

More Than Bad Body Image

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I'm presenting this story as an example of how MNRI® can work with a specific population of adults – those with eating disorders – and to suggest that MNRI® should be incorporated into existing treatment programs.

I am quite different than the typical person who seeks MNRI® and I expect that my story is also quite different. I began working with an MNRI® professional at the age of 27, halfway through a long stay in a residential treatment program for an eating disorder. The Art Therapist at the treatment program, someone with whom I had been working for many years prior to that time on an outpatient level, had a nagging sense that they were 'missing something' with me. By that time, my journey had included 12 years of eating disorder symptoms, deep depressions, paralyzing anxiety, countless intensive treatment programs including an out-of-state residential program, psychiatric and medical hospitalizations, behavioral and dietary interventions, medications, and a myriad of individual and group therapies.

As I see it now, the presenting symptoms were all the by-product of feeling like a 'freak' in my own skin and not knowing how to relate to the world around me in a consistent way. Because I never had any difficulties learning as a child and because getting the input I craved was fairly easy when I was young, no one noticed anything was wrong. However, I often drove my parents crazy (would put on twenty outfits a day because nothing felt right, insisted on somersaulting everywhere in my house for months on end, would cry at the drop of a hat, absorbed the thoughts and feelings of everyone around me, craved big bear hugs and physical touch, ran circles around the house while my sister read a book, bit my nails voraciously, and bounced my legs constantly, causing the furniture to shake).

I believe now that the eating disorder developed as a protective shield, both from the physical chaos raging in my body and the mental chaos raging in my mind. I was oversensitive to the world around me and, at the same time, was constantly craving physical touch and movement. This was an incredible incongruence, which only magnified as I grew older and the things I desperately needed were no longer socially acceptable as a teenager. I hated myself. I hated that my experience of normal life situations seemed so different, so exaggerated, so much more exhausting than it seemed to be for other people. I quickly came to believe that I was insatiable, oversensitive, dramatic, immature, selfish, bad, wrong, a liar, and never satisfied despite others' best efforts to accommodate me. I collected a wealth of evidence that I was vile. This is who I believed I was at the core. And this was the person I wanted to destroy.



Kim Masters with her niece

At right is a painting I did while in the residential treatment program, before starting MNRI®. This was an image I would go back to frequently as it portrayed how I felt when I would get 'stuck.' I attempted to describe it to therapists and dieticians but, like much of what I felt on a daily basis, there simply were not words to explain it. In this image, my body has merged with a large, almost chair-like, blob of flesh. I felt a very heavy weight all around me and could not move up from the flesh. I used the word 'stuck' quite often. When I would feel this way, my body image was an incredible challenge for me and it resulted in self-hatred and urges to self-destruct or disappear – both of which fed and were fed by the eating disorder.



Eating disorder symptoms served, at least in the short-term, to keep me in my brainstem where I was safe. Restricting my intake allowed me to disconnect from my body, keep my mind distracted by food and weight and isolate myself from the chaos happening within and around me. My anxiety spun out-of-control. As I lost more and more outlets for my sensory-seeking needs due to restrictions on exercise by therapists and dieticians and as I worked harder and harder to pass as a 'normal' teenager within the sedentary confines of junior high and high school, the more my body image plummeted and the more the eating disorder raged. The more severe the eating disorder got, the more afraid I became of everything. To the insanity of everyone around me, I could not sit still and could not stop working and yet I could not find the energy to get out of bed and could not concentrate on anything.

The eating disorder and the sensory processing issues became a chicken and egg cycle. After so many years of living in a chaotic relationship with my body and with a very broken image of myself so well-established, it became difficult to distinguish myself (spirit, mind, soul) from my body. It makes sense now, looking back, how things played out and how the transition from 'normal' to living in a dysfunctional hell happened so quickly. My sensitivities to textures and fabrics translated quickly into an obsession with body image (nothing feeling right against my skin translated into, "I'm too fat"). Me bouncing my legs and wanting to move became an obsession with exercise and burning calories. On some level, I think I wanted to stay small because I felt safer as a child – if I was a child, running and playing and big hugs would still be ok. But I also realized that as I lost weight, my sensitivity to the world around me quieted a bit. When you're starving, basic functions (breathing, getting through the day) are the only things your body and mind are concerned with. I had no energy. I was depressed. I spun into the starvation mindset that fuels the most irrational of eating disordered thoughts. On several occasions, I seriously contemplated ending it all. Dying was not really what I wanted, but the other option – living – often felt unbearable. I couldn't live inside my own skin if I was 'fat' and I didn't have to live in my own skin if I was very, very thin. I lived out this paradox for years, teetering between life and death. I lived out a mess of anorexic/bulimic behaviors for a very long time. As I would begin eating and gaining weight, my mind began to feel clouded, my thoughts and emotions would 'spin' so fast I couldn't catch them and I was easily overwhelmed by everything. So I would relapse, return to eating disorder symptoms, and suddenly things would become simpler again. I tried so hard, so many times, to get better. Everyone in my life was understandably frustrated with me which only added to my self-hatred. Just like them, I didn't understand why I couldn't just stop . . . or, worse yet, why it seemed I didn't want to stop.

Despite having gained incredible life skills and being in a much better place because of all of the hard work I had done over the years



At right is a body tracing I did while in residential treatment, shortly after starting MNRI®. This is a graphic depiction of how it felt to be in my body at times, when it felt so uncomfortable to be inside my skin that I would say over and over, "It hurts; it hurts!" Because it came on so suddenly and so intensely, and because there was nothing I knew of that I or anyone else could do to make it feel better, I feared these episodes. I noticed later, after beginning MNRI®, that I did not include hands or feet in this painting! The footwork and Babkin had a profound impact!

REFLEXES OF THE BRAIN



At left is another body tracing I did prior to MNRI®. I had an image of water flowing through my entire body but I was very aware of the space where the water would not go. Long before I knew anything about the physiological components, I knew innately that I was disconnected from my core. MNRI® gave me the ability to hear this wisdom from my body and also to enable me to become a more integrated whole. The outer, faint blue lines are what I saw when I looked at my body, or in the mirror. My understanding of my physical boundaries, how I moved in space and the space I took up was largely skewed.

in my various treatment programs, it seemed that no matter how hard I would try, I just couldn't get past a certain point. It was just too hard and I knew on some level that I would only 'fail' once again. I hated the way life was with the eating disorder but, without the numbing effect of symptoms, life seemed much too loud and overwhelming. Better to fail at recovery than to fail at life, it seemed. Needless to say, I also battled deep depression and debilitating anxiety at times, never feeling like anyone understood me and like the things I desperately wanted to do were always out of my reach. As I had grown in my faith and come to understand the truth of who I was created to be, the incongruence only intensified but my resolve to find freedom intensified as well. I, like the Art Therapist, felt deep down that something was missing, that something unseen was blocking me.

Halfway through my time at the treatment program, the Art Therapist recommended I go for an occupational therapy evaluation. The entire team at the center agreed, supporting the idea that perhaps there was a missing link for me in my recovery. I went to a clinic that primarily worked with children; bright colors were on the walls, toys flooded the waiting room, swings and bubbles were everywhere. Thinking back on that first visit now, I think it funny that my reaction to the whole thing wasn't one of embarrassment or confusion but one of excitement – I wanted to climb into the swings, jump on the trampolines, and get messy with all the kids! I soon learned that I was a sensory-seeker. And my world began to make more sense. Luckily for me, the occupational therapist I was working with and the owner of the therapy clinic recommended that I see a Speech-Language Pathologist at the clinic who was doing some work with reflex integration. I began twice weekly sessions and continued at that pace for almost two years. Integrating my reflexes through work on my Core Tendon Guard, embracing squeezes, foot work, and the Archetype Movements have been incredible agents of freedom in my recovery. Once I began to feel safe in my body and more confident in my ability to self-regulate in novel environments, the reflexes allowed me the sense of safety, presence of mind, and the courage I needed to begin processing things that had seemingly been stuck as far down as the cellular level. As I was able to listen to my body, I finally heard what it had likely been trying to tell me for so many years. In its own healing and gentle way, my body gave me both what I needed to know and what I needed to do with that newfound knowledge in order to be free. The sudden and incredible pain I would experience before starting this work has dissipated greatly. The pain still comes at times but I am able to hear from my body why it is hurting so much and I now have the words and the courage to share it with others that are safe.



Above is a painting I did shortly before leaving the residential treatment program. I titled it: "When I came..." Sadness, anger, pain; Hurt, emptiness, shame. Seeking to fill my heart basket with polluted, unsatisfying water, Stuffing and emptying my physical basket, futility in the desperation. Empty eyes, tainted by my own shame and on guard for any threat of danger. Layers of sadness, fear, filth unhidden beneath the surface of what I saw. Mind spinning, disconnect from the flesh that seemed to threaten eternal infinite hatred. I was exhausted. All that was good and beautiful smeared with all the confusion.

In contrast to what I now know things can feel like, I lived for years completely outside of reality—outside the reality of my body and outside the reality of the present moment. Reality had become too scary. Over the years, several things happened that exacerbated both the physical and emotional issues playing into my experience of the world and my strategies for coping. When I began MNRI® work, I was a mess. I was anxious, depressed, out-of-control, spinning, and feeling as if I was crawling out of my skin. This experience of life remained even after countless intensive therapeutic interventions to address the eating disorder and related symptoms. At that last residential treatment center, I had done fairly well following the program, taking some big steps toward healing some past hurts, and was in a much better place than when I started. The staff there listened to me and though they did not necessarily understand it, they did their best to respect my voice as I learned to use it again. However, after starting MNRI®, I was able to hear my body, to notice my environment and how it was impacting me and, most importantly, to identify what I needed in that moment in order to stay present and function despite being uncomfortable. Beginning MNRI® at that time allowed me to finish the recommended treatment course and to gradually enter the world with new understanding, new tools, and new hope for real and lasting recovery.

The MNRI® professionals that have worked with me have been absolutely incredible and a huge part of my healing process. Though they had never worked with anyone with an eating disorder – rarely even working with adults at that time – they sought to listen to and learn from me and my body, which allowed me to do the same. There is incredible wisdom in my body; I am fearfully and wonderfully made! I am grateful that my body protected me the best it could with the tools it had at the time, grateful that I have been forgiven for all the abuse I have caused my body, and grateful that my body is now strong and healthy and able to embrace everything that comes my way.

I'm also grateful to have found MNRI® and the clinicians who have walked with me on this journey. In fact, I have taken my first MNRI® course and brought my precious niece who was born with Down syndrome and a serious congenital heart defect to see Dr. Svetlana Masgutova, having experienced the power in the work that the folks at MNRI® are doing first hand. I will be forever indebted to this work and all those that have encouraged me along the way!



Above is a painting I did after a year or so of MNRI®. It was a slow process, but I had lots of layers of things to deal with. This is what I wrote about it:

"Being little should be pink, full of hearts and energy and joy. This is how it should look. I think it looked that way for me, at least in part. But I don't remember.

The black boxes are how I feel – or felt – when things go blank, when I land after spinning or when things are just too much. It's cold and empty and untouchable. It's not 'dangerous.' But it's unapproachable. It begs to be left alone. But the healing is here. I know it. The cement that weighed on top is gone. I want it back sometimes; the safety of it. But it won't seal again, I know. I have tried.

My body is contained. Held. And generally 'mine.' And the heart - MY heart - It feels in pieces still sometimes but the pieces are together.

The water is a healing image and it is there as a reminder. There's a path and movement and life. I am still broken. But someday it will be different. I've already decided."



Kim, thank you for sharing your story. It is so detailed and comprehensive – a great example of the growth and discovery of internal tools for survival and action. Your experience is unique and, for sure, will be helpful to SO many people. – The MNRI® Specialists