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Fibromyalgia Hope: A New Treatment

by Shirley Jean Schmidt, MA, LPC

What if fibromyalgia is the body's reaction to chronic, intense, and seemingly unresolvable double binds? What if those double binds, originating in the distant past, had the power to create mind/body trauma everyday? What if the process of resolving such double binds could significantly reduce or even stop the symptoms of fibromyalgia?

Virtually unheard of twenty years ago, today fibromyalgia is the second most commonly diagnosed musculoskeletal disorder. Its symptoms are chronic and include widespread muscle pain, overwhelming fatigue, tender points in the body, and mood and sleep disturbances. Medical research has gone from showing no objective, physiologic findings (i.e. normal x-rays, blood tests, muscle biopsies) to showing indications of real physiological abnormalities in people with fibromyalgia. Abnormalities researchers have recently observed in some patients include: stage-4 sleep disturbance, dysregulation of normal body circadian rhythms, growth hormone deficiency, lower levels of serotonin, elevated level of substance P, lower blood levels of tryptophan, and less cortisol produced in response to stress.

Are these abnormalities due to something genetic, viral, bacterial, psychological, or some combination? No one knows for certain. It is known that a majority of those diagnosed with fibromyalgia have a history of childhood physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, and many have a family history of depression and alcoholism. I contend that addressing a person's childhood conflicts is very important when treating fibromyalgia, whether such conflicts are the sole cause of the disorder or not.

Mind/Body Neural Networks and Personality Parts As a young brain develops, important experiences are organized and recorded in specialized mind/body neural networks. In normal development neural networks overlap and interconnect so information can be shared. For example, a neural network containing strategies for play would be different from a neural network containing strategies for study. Yet they share information when study skills are needed to learn a new game or to keep score.

Neural networks also organize information about self and survival. It might be easier to think of these as personality parts, or parts of self. For example, the child who lives with an angry alcoholic father may, out of necessity, have a part of self with the fear-based belief, "to stay safe I must be quiet and conform." Yet she may learn at school a sense of freedom and safety which come from being her true self – a natural-born leader and non-conformist, resulting in a part of self that believes "safety comes from being my true self." Since these two personality parts have competing ideas about how to be safe, they will not easily overlap, integrate, or share information. In adulthood there will likely be internal conflict when choosing between becoming a leader or a conformist.

Over the course of a lifetime many specialized personality parts are formed – with varying degrees of interconnectedness and isolation, cooperation and conflict. Most people can describe their conflicts between parts of self. Examples include: "One part of me is excited about college, another part is sure I'll fail." "One part of me is outgoing and confident, while another part is insecure and shy." "One part of me believes I should date nice men, another part says I don't deserve nice men." "One part wants me to express my disgruntled feelings, another part says my feelings are not important and should be ignored." These types of conflicts between personality parts may lead to double binds.

The Double Bind A double bind is a lose-lose proposition. The person perceives that all available choices will result in suffering, and no acceptable options seem possible. For example, given the conflict: "One part of me wants me to address my emotional needs, another part believes that is selfish and only others' emotional demands are important," the double bind is: "If I continue to meet other's emotional demands at the expense of my own, I'll keep feeling awful. If I address my emotional needs there's a chance I'll feel better, but another part of me will feel scared and threatened – so I'll still feel awful!"

When a double bind is chronic, intense, and seemingly unresolvable, it can put extraordinary stress on the body as well as the mind. As one former fibromyalgia sufferer described it, "It's as though I couldn't move forward, backward, or to either side without creating a problem – so my body just froze in place. Fibromyalgia was my body's expression of being stuck, with no way out." I'm strongly inclined to believe that the chronic stress of paralyzing double binds creates a chain reaction of biochemical reactions in the body, which leads to the symptoms of fibromyalgia.

The Double Bind Resolution Each personality part believes their own strategy is correct and will bring about safety and survival – whether actually succeeding to or not. Psychotherapy aimed at resolving double binds takes into account what is true and what is false in each part's beliefs. In my role as therapist I facilitate a supportive dialogue between personality parts in conflict to increase mutual understanding of each part's honorable intentions. I encourage each to reevaluate their own strategies and consider integrating new information which may lead to a greater sense of safety and well being. In my experience, the more personality parts move from being in conflict to being in harmony, the more fibromyalgia symptoms diminish.

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