

The Trager Approach - A new way of moving

This article is based on extracts drawn from Jack Liskin's book, "Moving Medicine: The Life and Work of Milton Trager, MD", copyright Jack Liskin, 1996.

When Australian engineer, Fred Savage was stricken with osteoarthritis at the age of 69, he was determined to find a treatment plan that worked.

After reading extensively and consulting with various physicians, he put himself on a life plan based on diet, special exercises, suitable furniture and supplements.

At the heart of Savage's plan is the *Trager*® Approach, a kind of physiotherapy in which limbs are moved by the practitioner to relax muscles and joints and increase flexibility. Savage also does *Mentastics*®, a series of yoga influenced exercises developed by founder, Dr Milton Trager.

In a twice released book describing his experience, Savage says this good health programme has helped him to get back to driving a car, something that was too painful a few years ago.

How does the *Trager* Approach work? "It is the manner in which practitioners touch their clients," says founder Milton Trager, "not the technique, which is important."

Individual practitioners tap into a life-giving, life-enhancing, vibratory force or energy which surrounds us all. The *Trager* practitioner, or any other person, can tap into this energy by adopting a meditative state that Milton refers to as "hook-up."

The practitioner, in an altered yet connected state, feels the receiver's body in motion and at rest and engages in a self-enquiry. What are the qualities of softness, lightness, ease, freedom of movement, and vibrancy? How could the body feel? How could it move? How could it be?

The answers are relayed through the practitioner's mind as feelings to the mind of the receiver, and the body changes accordingly, to the extent that the connection between the two is realised.

Although the hands of the practitioner touch the receiver's body, it is the mind of the practitioner and that of the receiver feeling the information flow which allows the receiver's body to change.



Tragering the neck

Learning harmful patterns

An individual may develop problematic response patterns due to abnormalities or damage in his physical, psychological/emotional, or spiritual domains.

For example, people with an injured knee may alter their walk protectively in such a way that they develop hip or back pain. Emotions such as anxiety, fear, depression, or anger likewise produce characteristic response patterns. People in such states can be easily recognised by their body language and expressions. When these emotions become fixed or chronic in an individual, harmful psychological and physical patterns may result.

Excess muscle tension may, for example, produce constricted arteries, pain, discomfort, imbalance, loss of body movements or dysfunctional body movements. Insufficient tension may also produce imbalance, loss of body movements or dysfunctional body movements.

HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

Breaking patterns

"Nothing can change until old response patterns are broken," says Trager. However, working "hard" creates and sustains tension. Where there is insufficient tension, great effort overpowers the diminished capacity of the body to perceive a stimulus and respond to it.

What the practitioner helps the receiver to do is develop a minimal response to the smallest of external and internal sensations. Once a minimal response is elicited, the old pattern is broken and a new pattern can be built.

Feeling something better

The receiver must first feel something different and better in order to establish and develop a different and better pattern. If I am always anxious, I cannot change fundamentally until I have felt calm and peacefulness. If I am uncomfortable, I cannot change until I experience comfort.

All of us can sense the presence of a person who is internally comfortable and at peace. In the *Trager* Approach, the contagiousness of such a state is used purposefully, and therapeutically, by the practitioner for the benefit of the receiver. Through touch and other sensations this state is transmitted to the mind of the receiver where it is felt and produces corresponding changes in the body.

When a positive response is felt in the receiver's body, he is asked how he feels. This helps him recollect the entire experience and the desirable behaviours and movements associated with it.

Each time the feeling is recalled, the body reproduces the improvements it learned when that feeling was initiated.

Technique

While standardised movements are taught and commonly practised, they are never routinised. Each person brings a different body and a different history to the practitioner.

However, techniques and movements have been developed because they help the receivers to pick up feelings and changes in body tissue and movement.

While practitioners learn anatomy and use their knowledge of it, their goal is not to realign or reposition the body.

They want the receiver to be able to perform any and all movements comfortably, painlessly, and pleasurably. They constantly observe and feel what is moving and what is not, how it moves or does not move. They seek an easy balance rather than a so-called "right" posture which often produces unnecessary muscular tension.

Pain

The *Trager* approach is painless. The receiver is instructed to notify the practitioner of any pain which is produced or increased during a session. Practitioners exclude pain from the work so as not to reinforce the harmful patterns that receivers often bring with them. After a session, the practitioner also cautions the receiver not to look for the pain. Often when there is pain relief as a result of the work, the receiver immediately wants to see how far he

or she can move a previously painful part before the pain returns. This reinforces the harmful pattern and undoes some of the just-completed work.

Tablework

The two major components of the *Trager* approach are tablework and movement education, which Milton calls *Mentastics* (mental gymnastics).

Trager movements, in the tablework and during *Mentastics*, are characteristically curving and wavelike, without clear edges and boundaries. They are smooth and they are smoothing when they touch the receiver's body. They elongate and they expand and open out, away from the midline. They rock, they roll, they shimmer the tissue and make the muscles bounce lightly. They open the joints through gentle traction and by allowing body weights to be acted on by gravity.



In the tablework portion, the receiver lies on a padded table wearing loose clothing. The practitioner typically works first with the head and neck, moving to the lower limbs, followed by work on the belly, chest, and arms. The receiver then turns over, and the practitioner works the back of the lower limbs, then the shoulders, back and pelvis. The receiver turns over once more, and the practitioner finishes by returning briefly to the head and neck.



Teaching MENTASTICS - How does it feel

Mentastics

Before or after the tablework session, or both, the practitioner demonstrates and has the receiver learn and practice some extremely simple movements designed to recreate the feeling of the tablework movements. These can be used at any future time to help with specific

problems or to evoke the relaxed and freely moving state felt during the session.

Some practitioners offer regular *Mentastics* classes to small groups, without the tablework component. *Mentastics* movements are not exercises in the traditional sense. There is no specific number of repetitions, no specific length of time to practise them. As with the tablework, once the response is felt, the job is done. The movements can be used easily during the day. They require no special clothing or equipment; they are generally small and subtle and do not attract attention. Their purpose is to evoke the positive sensations that allow the body to move comfortably and easily.

Feeling the weight

The improvement of the receiver also depends on the development of his or her capacity to feel body weights, especially during the *Mentastics* work. The practitioner lifts an arm or a leg and feels the weight of it. If the receiver unconsciously uses muscular activity to prevent gravity from letting

its full weight rest in the practitioner's hand, then the practitioner has more work to do.

This is one of the most difficult lessons to learn for those who are convinced they must use effort to accomplish anything important. Letting the lower limb drop out of the pelvis, letting an arm simply fall to the side, may be profound and novel experiences for many.

While continuously feeling the weights of the body, the practitioner begins to set them in motion during the tablework. The head is rolled from side to side, or the leg is rolled, or the arm is swung, always in the directions of natural body movement, and only within the range of motion where the movement is free and easy.

Such internally generated and effortless motion allows more and greater releases by the receiver, and greater motion, until the body is moving with complete freedom.

Finding the body's rhythm

Big bodies move differently from

little bodies; big body parts move in a different tempo than small parts. Practitioners feel for the most natural frequency of the part being rhythmically moved, and they move in sync with that frequency, forming a resonant system with the receiver that allows optimal energy transfer. The rhythm lulls the receiver into a calm and peaceful state, so that the conscious mind does not interfere with the letting go of the tissues.

Years of tight holding patterns often fall away as the rhythm works externally and internally, until the body comes to rest, calm yet alive and vibrant.

These are just some of the key movements central to The Trager Approach.

For further information on The Trager Approach, go to www.trager.com (Trager International Home website) and www.trager-us.org United States Trager Association home website).



Trager Practitioner, Dhyani Berger in South Africa

Dhyani Berger is a long-time Trager Practitioner with a practice in Windhoek, Namibia. She works with individual clients and conducts workshops for the public and for health and movement professionals such as massage therapists and students, physiotherapists, nurses, Pilates trainers and sports coaches.

She will be in Cape Town during February to consult privately and do introductory talks/demos. The first level of professional Trager training in South Africa will take place in May 2008. Contact her on dhyani@iafrica.com.na, Tel: 265-61-225680 (in Windhoek). In February, she can be reached through Renée at the Cape Institute for Allied Health Studies, Tel: (021) 712-2455. If there is sufficient interest, she will also conduct workshops in Johannesburg and Durban.