

Healthpunk vol. 2

FICTION
+
HEALTHCARE
+
YOU

A NOTE FOR FUTURE BODYWORKERS

Eriko Fujii

A NOTE FOR FUTURE BODYWORKERS

By Eriko Fujii

Dear Readers,

I hope you are well- whoever, wherever you are.

This note, or letter is for bodyworkers in the future. I'm a bodyworker myself, an osteopath, to be specific. I like the term bodyworker as that's what we do, be it physiotherapist, chiropractor, massage therapist or any other form of somatic medicine. We work with bodies.

If you're reading this paper, you possibly know that I was assigned to write this piece by the International Association of Bodyworkers. Their aim is to build an archive of 'job descriptions' written in our own words, so that the future generations can understand how the profession has been shaped over the years.

Perhaps, I should start by saying a little more about myself and our time. I was born in 2030, the year by which the world was supposed to reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions drastically, yet failed to do so. It was the beginning of the transitional phase now known as the 'Great

Adaptation.' With no exaggeration, every person and industry are required to adapt, and, hopefully, reverse the effect of climate change. Well, you might think that this should have been the case many years prior, and I can't agree more. Regrettably, it took us a long time to come to this stage.

I turned 35 years old this year, and it's somewhat ironic to think that I wouldn't have existed without the climate crisis. My parents are both climate refugees, although they were not recognised as 'refugees' when they arrived in this country as teenagers in the late 2010s. They were forced to leave their home because of 'water' and conflicts associated with it- in my father's case, too little of it (droughts) and in my mother's case, too much of it (hurricanes and floods).

Anyway, let's look at the current state of our profession. MSK (musculoskeletal) problems remain to be a pillar of our work. Lower back pain, neuralgia, osteoarthritis and many other conditions you are probably familiar with.

The main pillar of bodywork today, however, is something of a more enigmatic nature.

Over the last forty years, our inner climate has become increasingly visible and palpable, particularly distress related to planetary destruction. In the past, the pain of the environmental crisis was felt emotionally in the form of ecological grief, climate anxiety and depression. The pain is now felt at the physiological level. For some, it manifests as joint pain, muscle weakness or soreness. In severe cases, it can cause systemic inflammation similar to rheumatoid arthritis and lupus.

It was only in the early 2050s that the condition was given a name: *oikosalgia* or *oikositis*, abbreviated as OS. The root word for the two terms is *oikos*, a Greek word which means house or household, and largely the environment we dwell in. *Oikos* or *eco* is also the root word for ecology and economy. As you well know, the suffix *-algia* and *-itis* signify pain and inflammation, respectively. So, *oikosalgia* and *oikositis* literally mean the pain or inflammation of the planet which manifests in our body.

The exact mechanism behind this illness is unknown. In fact, it's still a contentious issue whether to call it a 'disease.' In any case, what matters is that it's a very debilitating condition, and we bodyworkers have a role to play in resolving it.

A breakthrough in the treatment of OS was achieved when researchers asked a simple question: 'Who is

getting it?' It soon became clear that OS is predominantly affecting the population in the so-called 'Global North,' particularly among those who identify as 'white.' It's rare in the 'Global South' and almost non-existent among Indigenous communities. These findings, together with anecdotal evidence collected from patients, led to a hypothesis that OS is potentially caused by the fact that the patients, or their ancestral roots, are on the side of causing the climate crisis, and the enormous sense of guilt, whether conscious or unconscious, stemming from it.

Naturally, there has been a huge debate around this hypothesis- some criticised it as 'racist' and 'stigmatising' for patients. Yet, the high prevalence rate of OS among 'white' populations is undeniable, and treatment modalities based on this hypothesis have been reasonably successful.

As you might well know, the golden standard of OS treatment is simple enough: take actions to solve the climate crisis and injustice. For some, it's very clear what they need to do. With some guidance from a primary care physician, psychotherapist or experts in the field, patients identify the crisis they want to focus on, and make steps to be part of the solution. For others, however, their course of action is more difficult to find, and this is where bodyworkers come in.

The challenge of the 'difficult OS patients' (as they are commonly known) is often twofold- they are concerned about so many things and unable to find their focus, and/ or

they feel too helpless and guilt-ridden to take action. These patients are regularly referred to bodyworkers by other health professionals for more in-depth assessment and treatment.

What we do in these situations is first to identify the main location of disfunction and start to gently mobilise the region, using any appropriate techniques. As their body relaxes and releases, patients often have visions- images, sounds or sensations which are deeply imprinted on their body as signs of the climate crisis and injustice. It can be a glimpse of a rural village submerged under water, angry shouts and cries of people over scarce resources, or faces of children in these crises. This is how patients encounter the issue which is closest to their heart.

Oftentimes, the initial reaction of patients is aversion, to look away. Their body tenses up again, and some shake with a sob. At this stage, we focus on communicating the complete acceptance of a patient's whole being through our touch, including their guilt and aversion. Session by session, the resistance becomes weaker and most patients become able to stay with their disturbing vision.

Once a patient reaches this point, while still working with their body, we encourage them to actively 'repaint' their distressing vision by imagining what they can possibly do to change the situation- a thriving, farming village, people sitting in a circle enjoying their meal and the

smiles of children- how would it be possible? Patients find that they can think more hopefully and creatively when their body is relaxed and held. Although there are some variabilities, most patients are ready to take action by the end of several sessions.

This new strand of our profession is generally termed as 'Action-centred Bodywork' as all we do is to prepare the conditions for patients to be engaged with the world. The true healing is in the actions patients take after a treatment. As bodyworkers, we simply walk together taking their hand, assisting them to look deeply into their pain.

This ability to stay with pain is even more important for another group of patients who are frequently, if not most frequently, referred to bodyworkers. That is those who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) like myself, and (former) climate refugees like my parents. Invariably, they are residents of the 'North.'

Well, you might find it puzzling that I keep mentioning the colour of our skin and ancestral roots. In the future, probably it will be less relevant, or even unite us. In our time, however, it's still something to divide us.

As I mentioned, OS is most common among 'white' populations. However, BIPOC and refugee populations in the 'North' can also be affected and they react very differently, and often strongly, to the condition.

My mother, for example, started to suffer from idiopathic neck pain and migraines in her mid-forties. She was soon diagnosed with OS, due to the close correlation between her symptoms and real-time indexes of the climate crisis. Her primary reaction was fierce anger. In her mind, OS was a condition of the 'privileged.' Born in a region in the 'South' that was most disproportionately affected by the crisis, her life was all about rising above adversity and serving the greater good. As a humanitarian lawyer, she was dedicated to implementing legal protections for climate refugees.

In cases like hers, 'Action-centred Bodywork' alone might not be enough. For, she needed much stronger support than what a single bodyworker can provide in order to accept and stay with her pain.

In this situation, what is most helpful is to join a patient group. Yes, this might sound trivial, but this is one of the most powerful treatment modalities we have, and it's our important role to identify and connect patients who need communal support.

A patient group is a place where people share their experiences-symptoms, how their lives are affected, visions from individual bodywork sessions, etc.. Sometimes, patients practice meditation and mindful movements under the guidance of bodyworkers. What's at its core is an understanding that healing, and any action, takes a community.

When my mother joined a patient group (after much resistance), she had the opportunity to listen deeply to people who were outside of her social and professional circles. What she discovered was the suffering of 'white' OS patients- their own struggles and losses in this changing world. This opened her heart to fellow citizens she previously saw as 'privileged,' and eventually led my mother to accept her OS. After one of the meetings, she told me how she used to fight against the majority of this country, but from then on, she would fight with people.

I know this sounds controversial, but sometimes it occurs to me that maybe OS is more of a blessing than a curse for humanity. It inevitably moves us to connect with others, nature and ourselves. I became more convinced of this idea by witnessing my father's journey through OS. My father, a water engineer, is the most reserved person I have ever known. When he started to experience a strange pain in his shoulders and hips, his immediate reaction was fear. The pain brought him memories of his particularly traumatic exile from his home country, which pushed him deep down to depression and even close to a suicide attempt.



When he eventually joined a patient group, however, his condition took a dramatic turn. Through the group, he met former refugees who had similar backgrounds to him. Some of them were in their late seventies and eighties and knew the different way of living in his home country before the climate crisis intensified. They shared good memories from the old days, and in a sense, became the parental figures he never had.

Now, he is not only on much better terms with his body, but also preparing to travel to his home country, for the first time since his teenage years. What prompted him was an old photograph he was given in one of the patient meetings. It shows a 14th century water wheel that used to bring water from a river to his home village right up until the droughts. The ancient wooden wheel and the symbiotic landscape around it captivated his heart as a water engineer. He is determined to

recreate the flow of life, with his people over there. 'So unlike you,' my mother said smiling, when she heard his determination. Yes, it's incredible to think that it all started from his devastating experience with OS.

I'm also happy to share with you that I'm traveling with my father, as his child and a bodyworker.

It'll be my first visit to the 'South.' Through the journey, I'm hoping to give thoughts to a few big questions: what is OS telling us, really?; what else can we bodyworkers do for people and the planet?: will our work ever be powerful enough to make a difference?

These are rather troubling, but thrilling questions. Are they not?

Anyway, it's a story for another time. For now, this is my job description of bodywork as of 2065.

Eriko Fujii

European School of Osteopathy (2nd year student), Maidstone, UK

Contact:

f.eriko@hotmail.co.jp
