

FOCUSING APPLIED TO BODY SYMPTOMS

Exploring the Subjective Side of Disease

by Stefan Beyer

I have transferred Gendlin's dreamwork method to working with bodily diseases. Later I found that my idea was not new in principle. Georg Groddeck had a similar one already in 1926, only he referred to the psychoanalytic dream approach (Groddeck, 1966).

The main part of my approach is a question list adapted to "symptom work". The aim is to make aspects of the experiencing of a disease topics for therapy or self-help focusing, and to derive new possibilities of living.

Some similarities between dreams and disease provide a theoretical framework for understanding the function of disease. In dreams we may find our typical ways of thinking and acting, and/or a symbolic representation of our life situation, and/or ways of living we normally don't use or even see.

First, a body symptom can also express that which is typical or habitual. Someone not open to anything new psychologically may, for instance, become physically deaf as an expression of that or maybe "in order to" support this attitude. Someone who is stiff-necked in attitude may have a stiff or tense neck as a part of his body also.

Second, symptoms can reflect a life situation. For instance, in a social situation, where I experience for a long time that whatever I say makes no difference and has no influence, my voice may become hoarse and weak by means of an appropriate illness.

Third, a disease can also express what a person usually doesn't live and what he or she maybe would need. In dreams we say that those things can come up while we sleep because our conscious control is diminished. Body symptoms may happen in parts of our body which we cannot control consciously. For instance I can control my arms and legs and vocal chords, but I cannot directly control the functioning of my stomach, my heart or my immune system. In these places, my normally suppressed or un-lived tendencies could possibly express themselves.

In the use of this approach with body symptoms we also use the bias control that we use with dreams, asking ourselves, or our clients, "In the qualities of the symptom, is there something, some aspect, which I don't live and may need in my life? Or does the aspect I found represent something which is already typical for me, where I rather need the opposite?" And if the answer to the last question is "Yes", is there maybe something of an opposite also hinted at in the symptoms?

With diseases, in many cases, an organic process may be happening in the service of psychological functions or a working together of both, as Freud assumed for dreams. Even with a purely organic disease, perhaps the result of a poison, the psychological factor may influence the kind of symptom, whether or not or how quickly it heals, how it is born and what meaning it has, even if "objectively" it doesn't have one.

It is worth trying to work psychologically with every disease. Working with an organic disease, using the psychological approach transferred from dream work, the suffering person can speculate about the meaning and thereby project issues which are psychologically important for him or her.

Again we meet the same three tendencies: We can project aspects into them which we already live, and/or we can refer to our living situation and look for connections, and/or we can “dream up” a “shadow” and project things which represent what we reject and don’t live. (With these projected tendencies we would of course also have to use the bias control in order to find out which is which.)

Working on organic diseases using this approach is similar to working on a real-life situation using the dream questions. But there is a danger: The illness might look like it is psychologically “caused”, and this might prevent the client from caring for and exploring medical treatment. If the disease is found to be in large part psychologically motivated, it may be seen as “purely psychosomatic”.

To avoid this danger, I tell a client, that an exploration of the subjective, psychological side of the disease does not replace an exploration of the material side and does not allow conclusions concerning the result of the latter.

THE PRACTICAL APPROACH

In order to recognize aspects of the experiencing of disease, I have, in analogy to dream work, devised a question list for body symptoms. These questions are a bit different and are adapted to working with symptoms. Most of the questions can be seen to be either connected to Gendlin’s dream questions or to general focusing questions.

QUESTION LIST FOR BODY SYMPTOMS

The questions can be divided into three parts

- I. Questions with associations to focusing dream work
- II. Questions with associations to general focusing questions
- III. Other Questions

QUESTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH FOCUSING DREAM WORK

1. What associations do you have in connection with your disease as a whole or to single symptoms? Do you have ideas about its meaning in the context of your life? (cp. dream question #1 associations)

2. How do I feel with this disease? What mood or life feeling is connected with it? How does it feel to be someone who suffers from this disease? (cp. dream question #2 feeling)

3. What happened shortly before or when the disease began? (Or just before it deteriorated?)

What was my life situation and what did I feel and think at that time? (cp. dream question #3 yesterday)

4. The symptom might express something vicariously for me. Therefore, I can ask: What does the symptom do? How does it act? Is there something good or life enhancing in acting like that, something I could take over and integrate into my life? (cp. d. q. #5 what is happening)

The dream questions concerning dream characters (6, 7 and 8) can be applied to three “characters” in connection with a disease: the symptom, the stricken organ and/or the (hypothetical) part of the person that might want or produce the illness. This can lead, for instance, to the following three questions:

5. A preparatory step to question 5 consists in getting an image of a “symptom figure”. Sometimes it is easy to get an image of it spontaneously, and sometimes it needs to be asked for details, like:

What kind of sensation do I perceive? Is it a pain, a pressure, a tension? If it is a pressure, is it from inside to outside or vice versa? Where is the sensation, does it have connections to other parts of the body? How big is it, where are its boundaries? What form does it have? What material could it be made of? Is it made from wood, air, steel, cotton or what else? What color do I attribute to it? How warm or cold is it there? What weight does it have? Now, if I put all these qualities together, what figure results from that?

What do I feel about this “symptom figure”? How does it feel to be in its body, to play, act or be it? Is there some energy or quality in it, which I can use in my life? What happens if I begin a dialogue with the figure by asking it “Why have you come?” and/or “What is your message?”

6. What comes from a dialogue with the stricken organ? How is it feeling? Does it enjoy its present life?

7. Can I produce or increase the symptom actively, for instance by using muscles of my body? Which impulse or emotional expression forms, if I do this?

The next two questions have to do with fantasies about future developments, so I would associate them to dream question #9 (Can the dream go on?):

8. What would happen in the case of deterioration? What would be the worst and most extreme situation that I can think of? What would be the worst of it, the crux? Would this state with all its consequences also imply something I could enjoy? Would it also bring an opportunity or an advantage?

9. Is there a certain life style the disease forces me to live? If I would follow this way and would live very much according to the disease, maybe overdo it, where would that lead to? Would there be something positive in it?

The next two questions refer to symbolical meanings (cp. d.q. #10):

10. Is there an idiom or saying in my language, which uses the description of my body symptoms to express some attitude or psychological phenomenon, for instance: in German: gekraenkt sein, die Nase voll haben, jemandem etwas husten, Schiss haben, etwas geht an die Nieren, schlaegt auf den Magen etc; in English: it breaks my heart, that hit me in the pit of my stomach.

Does the expressed psychological phenomenon make sense for me and my life?

11. How can I generalize or condense, or say in other words, what happens in connection with the disease? For instance, constipation could be described as “not to give away what I have inside”. Vomiting could be, “to reject something that is not good for me”. Do the descriptions that come to my mind make any sense for me, for my life? One can also ask questions about organs in the same way: “How would I explain to someone, what a kidney is?” “What is that, a skin? What is it good for?” and then describe what is happening using the given definitions. (You could compare this also to d.q.#5)

12. Are there analogies between my dreams and what happens in my body? If the disease appears in a dream, what is the triggering situation there? (The first part of this question IS actually d.q. #11)

The following questions for a “karmic” meaning (or for the function of the disease in connection with a need for a feeling of continuity of identity) could be associated with the dream question for a spiritual meaning:

13. Has the experience of the symptoms or its consequences any positive aspects? Would I want to change places with another person, who doesn’t have my disease? If I hesitate to change, can I feel why, what is important for me in having this disease? Do I somehow feel “myself” connected with my having it?

This is a mild way of asking about an aspect that is also contained in the more radical question: How would it feel to yearn for having this disease? This last question is derived from a similar one by Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, which is also connected to his theory of karma and reincarnation (cp. Steiner, 1978). Is there in my reasons for wishing for the disease something life enhancing, something, I (not meaning my inner critic!!) can agree to?

GENERAL FOCUSING QUESTIONS APPLIED TO BODY SYMPTOMS

1. How would it feel, if it was all ok, if the disease were somehow removed or healed? How would it feel, if the stricken organ would be very strong instead of weak? How would I feel in my life then? Or: How would it feel to be someone else, who doesn’t have this disease? Or someone, who would have it, but wouldn’t mind? Or is there even something good in the life feeling connected with the disease? If so, what is good in it?

2. Can I feel the wish to become healthy? Can I feel the part of me that wants to become healthy? Does this wish for well-being feel good, am I glad about it?

3. What emotional or feeling quality is there in the symptom? Can I extend this quality to the whole body or get a reflection of it in the middle of the body (belly and chest) and feel it there?

Three questions for what the disease would need from others, which can be remembered in connection with the general Focusing question, “what does it need?”

4. How do other people usually react to my disease? How would I like them to react? How would I feel, if they would react in the way I would like most?

5. When I think of my symptom, where would I like touch, and what kind of touch? Where should the touching come from, a man or a woman (Should it be a motherly or fatherly touch?). What would this touch mean or signify, for what is it a gesture or an expression?

6. What would an ideal healer look like? What qualities should he or she have? Are there people (maybe good doctors, therapists, gurus, holy men or women) this healer would be similar to or whose qualities this ideal healer could be made of? How does it feel to play, act or “be” this healer, to live his qualities, also in relationship to my disease?

GENERAL QUESTIONS TO ASK PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

1. What would I do as the first or most important thing if I was without complaints? What do I feel regarding these actions? Is there maybe an ambivalent feeling, besides the wish, which is fear or reservation?

2. How would I react in regard to someone else who has exactly the same symptoms that I have? How would it be to meet someone exactly like me? What feelings would I have towards him or her? What would his or her symptoms be an expression of? Do I have similar feelings towards myself or what is different?

3. What can I do in my life to keep the positive aspects of my disease — if I have found any —when I become healthy, so that I don’t need the disease for it?

SAMPLE SESSION

The following example applies the above approach in the context of self help.

The disease was (probably) a cold, with a scratching and cold sensation in the throat together with a scratching sensation and urge to cough in the chest.

Question #21: If I knew someone else had these symptoms, what would I think it was an expression of?

Answer: . . . discontentment (dissatisfaction?), he is fighting against his environment, the lack of feeling safe. . .

Question #7: Can I produce the symptom deliberately? If so, how do I do this?

Answer: . . . I withdraw in frustration from the outside world to the inside or the back of the inside, that means to the back wall of the throat and the lungs. . . I draw away energy from the front side of the chest inside. This has been my basic feeling lately.

Question: What would be the opposite of that?

Answer: The opposite would mean bringing the energy back to the front of the chest. . . That brings a kind of love feeling, a wanting to love someone. . . (after a look outside the window) That makes the world look more beautiful. I would be more loving then, too. I would care first of all for love and fun, not for frustration and fighting for my life. . .

Question #5: What is the form of the symptom, what is it like?

Answer: . . . a scratched surface, like very rough yellow sand paper.

Question: What would this surface say?

Answer: . . . It says: I am very sensitive, don’t hurt me! . . . The picture is changing to a very soft Turkish towel, which I would like to stroke. . . It would be nice to be stroked, that would also bring a more reconciled, more loving, more thawed energy into the body. . .

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