

Effective, Short-Term Therapy: Utilizing Finger Labyrinths To Promote Brain Synchrony

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Abstract

For many centuries, universal labyrinths have promoted a greater sense of group cohesion, self-awareness and spiritual growth among its users. Today labyrinths are used at hospitals, schools, churches, prisons and private practices. It is believed that they serve a holistic function, namely to bring more balance to our lives. In the past few years, thanks in part to the development of the IntuiPath (a two-person finger labyrinth design), finger labyrinths are finding their way into therapeutic settings. Their influx into these settings is largely due to their effectiveness in facilitating relaxation and Brain Synchrony, which can result in a more rapid establishment of trust, greater creativity and learning capability. This can foster enhanced interpersonal and intra-personal communication, leading to swifter and more complete issue resolution.

Key Words

Finger labyrinth, intuition, trust, relaxation, therapeutic tool



A labyrinth is a path for assisting mental focus, group cohesion, and spiritual connection that has been used by many cultures and religions at different times throughout history. Labyrinths are considered by many to serve a holistic function, namely to further those who are on the path to a more balanced psychological, emotional, spiritual and physical well being (Torrez, 1994). Labyrinths have been, and continue to be used at hospitals, schools/universities, prisons, churches and parks.

Unlike a maze, which has many dead ends and wrong choices designed to trick the mind, a labyrinth is a design with a single, winding, unobstructed path from the outside of itself to the center. The labyrinth user makes no choices in direction. Therefore, the labyrinth path (because there are no choices in direction to be made) naturally fosters mental relaxation and introspection, and is frequently viewed by its users as a metaphor for our spiritual life journey. In other words, like life, labyrinths contain many twists and turns but no dead ends. There are always other options (Artress, 1995).

The process of organizing sensory information in the brain in order to make adaptive responses to life situations, is known as Sensory Integration. An adaptive response is defined as an "appropriate action in which the individual responds successfully to some environmental demand; it implies dealing with environmental stressors in creative and useful ways" (Ayres, 1979). This author believes that the above quote sums up the challenges and goals of

effective psychotherapy: to assist our clients to think and act in more adaptive ways to their personal obstacles. This author suggests that one way to shorten the time for clients to gain the confidence to delve into the deeper realms of their issues and bring them to resolution, is to promote relaxed brain wave activity in both the client and therapist. In this author's experience, a two-person, finger labyrinth can facilitate this brain wave shift to more relaxed states. Before getting into the therapeutic value of finger labyrinths, it is important to lay some groundwork in brain wave research to support this contention.

From biofeedback studies, we know that mental and physical relaxation occur when the brain is generating a wave of either 9-14 cycles per second (cps) known as Alpha (gentle relaxation), or a 5-8 cps wave known as Theta (a deeper form of relaxation and creative, non-linear thinking). However, unlike Alpha and Theta, Beta brain waves (15-40 cps) represent our normal, busy, linear-thinking state, that which is involved in everyday thought and physical activity.

As brain waves shift from Beta activity down to Alpha and Theta activity, there is a corresponding increase in the balance created between left and right hemispheres of the brain (Fehmi & Fritz, 1980). This balance is referred to as "Brain Synchrony." Brain synchrony, such as that seen in those who meditate regularly, has been shown to result in "deep tranquility, flashes of creative insight, euphoria, intensely focused attention, and enhanced learning abilities (Hutchison, 1994)." Brain synchrony, therefore, creates an opportunity for greater intuitive awareness (Fehmi & Fritz, 1980).

If the findings of Ayres (1979) on Sensory Integration and adaptive responses are applied to this discussion of brain synchrony, it is suggested that as clients become more relaxed in the presence of their therapists, they move towards achieving brain synchrony. In that state they are more likely to receive intuitive flashes that promote self-understanding, greater problem-solving ability and a more creative interaction with their environments. This often results in greater ease in making adaptive responses, reducing the time needed for continued therapeutic intervention.

Taking this a step further, in the experience of this author, when the therapist and the client are both working from a more integrated brain activity perspective, they can respond to one another with less guardedness and use a combination of intuition and logic to address an issue. A tool that promotes enhanced relaxation (therefore increasing the chances for brain synchrony) for both the client and therapist is a two-person, finger labyrinth design.

The two-person finger labyrinth design is a mirror-image labyrinth pattern. Although prior brain wave research has not been done on finger labyrinths per se, it is this author's premise that moving or gliding a finger through a single, continuous, inlaid path (referred to as fingerwalking) quiets the mind, relaxes the body, facilitating a single-minded focus, which in turn acts as a catalyst to the formation of both Alpha and Theta brain wave states. From the discussion on brain wave activity earlier in this paper, achieving these states facilitates brain synchrony. As a result of this enhanced relaxation and synchrony, it has been this author's experience that finger labyrinths seem to enhance both interpersonal and intra-personal forms of communication.

The fingerwalk takes an individual from the outside of the labyrinth design to its center. Getting to the center is not the object or goal of the experience, such as in a game; rather it is the communication that bubbles up from the depths of each person's awareness along the fingerwalk journey to and from the center which is most valuable as a therapeutic catalyst (West, 1999). Because these designs contain no blind alleys or dead ends, which promote active thought and decision making, the fingerwalk journey becomes one of



relaxation and introspection that can foster greater self-awareness (intra-personal communication).

This process can also facilitate more relaxed, interpersonal communication, especially since both parties are engaged in a physical task that helps each be less self-conscious or aware of the presence of the other. By tending to magnify or bring into fuller awareness, the thoughts, attitudes and emotions of both client and therapist, the finger labyrinth assists self-awareness. This, in turn, can foster more mutual, honest communication. This results in greater ease and mutual trust. The combination of movement with introspection is powerful and therapeutic.

The two-person finger labyrinth design (henceforth referred to as a double labyrinth) can be used at any time in the therapy session to enhance the aforementioned forms of communication. The client sits face-to-face across from the therapist with his/her knees close together so that half the double labyrinth rests on the client's knees and half on the therapist's knees. They must be seated close enough to one another to allow for easy and total arms-length access of their portion of the board, without any strain (see photo).

With the two people seated together in this manner, the therapist briefly explains the process and purpose of using the double labyrinth. It is introduced as a relaxation device designed to enhance the communication process and explore further the counseling issue to be examined. The therapist and the client take several slow deep breaths and both begin the fingerwalk to the center, with eyes open or closed, at whatever pace each person feels comfortable. During the journey, the client is instructed to say out loud any thoughts that come to her or feelings she experiences without pre-judgement. The therapist may facilitate this dialogue by first asking the client open-ended questions that help the client delve deeper into a particular issue. The therapist may also allow the client to lead the session by responding to the client when appropriate but otherwise remaining quiet and calm.

As the fingerwalk continues, it has been this author's experience (as well as other psychotherapists who've reported using the double labyrinth design) that the communication between the client and therapist deepens, and notions of hierarchical roles begin to dissolve ("I'm ok, you're ok" rather than "I'm ok, you're getting there"). Each person feels more comfortable and intuitively tuned in or linked to one another (mentally and emotionally) as a result of the relaxation and single-minded focus. This linking process, or empathy, can lead to more effective issue resolution, resulting in shorter-term therapy than one might achieve without it.

In some therapeutic approaches, we are taught that self-awareness precedes conscious, productive change. Sometimes it may take several months or years before a client develops this. The establishment of trust and comfort with the therapist also takes time to build. This author suggests that this

process can be shortened with the use of a double labyrinth. Therapeutic models that avoid face-to-face interaction may diminish the sense of interpersonal connection, as neither party is positioned to observe the expressions and body language of the other. In the absence of this feedback, trust may take longer to establish.

By sitting across from one another and having their energies connected through fingerwalking the same piece of wood, people report a sense of tapping into fields of common thought and emotion. It is in these energy fields that combined self-awareness, personal insight and interpersonal flow are manifested. This author has witnessed this phenomenon during the relaxation/meditation classes he teaches. When two or more people are performing the same relaxation or meditation technique, the ability of each person to perform the technique seems to be significantly enhanced and the process becomes more enjoyable for all.

Case Study: Clara, 40, a tall, slender Scottish woman, came to the first session saying in a very meek-sounding voice, "I don't know what I expect from this, I have nothing to say." I proceeded to ask her basic questions about her life and family and found that I was getting one or two-word answers. I decided to try using a double labyrinth design made of wood with her. I took a few moments to explain that it was a relaxation device that might help her to communicate with me. She agreed, and we both took a few deep breaths and began to fingerwalk, each at our own pace. Clara began to talk about how her colleagues (schoolteachers) were very social with each other and how she felt like an outsider with them and found it hard to make friends. She smiled after several descriptive, paragraph-like responses ushered forth from her lips, and added, "I guess I do have something to say."

After a few sessions, we addressed her low self-esteem and the way her alcoholic father contributed to its formation by discounting everything she said as a child in public.

This subjugation to her father's will (and to a degree, her mother's as well) continued into adulthood on her yearly, one-month visits to Scotland. Using the double labyrinth (around the fourth session), she spontaneously verbalized the negative affirmation "I am a weak and uninteresting person." We fingerwalked a bit more after that, and I asked her to allow a positive affirmation to make itself present to her conscious mind. What presented itself was "I am competent in all social situations." I asked her to say this out loud and see how it sounded. She said it quietly, with a slight crack in her voice. I suspected (because of the difficulty she had in saying this statement with decisiveness and gusto) that we had hit upon some early negative affirmation that was replaying itself often in all of her social interactions, causing her to feel weak, uninteresting and therefore socially inept. I asked her to take several deep breaths and after each, say the positive version again loudly like she meant it. She did so, and her voice

became stronger after each utterance of it. Between sessions, as she was instructed to do, she used this positive affirmation throughout each day, and when she returned to session the following week, she reported great changes had taken place in her courage and competence in social situations. She even reported that her relationship with her father, during her yearly return home, shifted to a more satisfying and equal emotional footing.

In total, I saw Clara for 12 sessions, and her improvement in self-esteem was maintained as reported by her in a six-month, one-year and two-year follow up. Utilizing the power and grace of her own intuition and wisdom (elicited in part through the use of a finger labyrinth), Clara was able to marshal new strength and understanding, and as a result, rapidly change her adaptive responses to gain greater satisfaction and meaning. With her new found self-esteem and confidence, she was able to gain a sense of clarity and mastery over other issues as well.

In summation, this writer suggests that finger labyrinths combine the sensation of movement with introspection, which can lead to greater mental, emotional and physical relaxation. This, in turn, can facilitate left/right brain hemisphere integration or brain synchrony. Brain synchrony leads to heightened intuitive awareness and learning capabilities. When both the client and therapist are in this heightened state, both interpersonal and intra-personal communication is enhanced, leading to greater trust. Rapid establishment of trust can result in fewer therapeutic sessions. Only with those clients where relaxation might cause further emotional overload, would the use of finger labyrinths be contra-indicated.

For further information on labyrinths and double finger labyrinths, contact the author: neal@relax4life.com or visit www.relax4life.com.

About the Author:

Neal Harris is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and a Diplomate of APA. He is the managing director of Relax4Life, a holistic education center and has been a workshop leader in the holistic health and self-enrichment fields since 1985. Neal is the originator of the first permanent, public labyrinth in Illinois and is a pioneer in creating and utilizing finger labyrinths to enhance client/therapist communication and therapeutic outcomes.

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