

## Clinical holistic medicine in the recovery of working ability. A study using Antonovsky salutogenesis

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**Abstract:** 40 patients with low or very low self-assessed working ability were treated with psychodynamic short time therapy complemented with body-work. They received in average 20 sessions at a prize of 1600 EURO. The Body Work was inspired by Marion Rosen and helped the patients to confront old emotional pain from childhood trauma repressed to the body-mind. Results: 52.5% (95% CI: 36.1% - 68.5%) of patients recovered their self-assessed working ability (from 4.2 to 2.4 up the five point Likert scale ( $p < 0.01$ )). From this we have  $NNT = 1.46-2.77$ . We estimate the Number Needed to Harm to be  $NNH > 500$ . The responders improved their self-assessed physical health (from 3.3 to 2.6; 0.6 step up the five point Likert Scale,  $p = 0.01$ ), self-assessed mental health (from 3.8 to 2.5,  $p < 0.01$ ), self-esteem (from 3.4 to 2.5,  $p < 0.01$ ), self-assessed quality of life (QOL1) (from 3.7 to 2.4  $p < 0.01$ ), QOL measured by QOL5 (from 3.3 to 2.6  $p < 0.01$ ), the quality of relations (from 3.2 to 2.6  $p < 0.01$ ), general ability of functioning (from 3.5 to 2.5;  $p < 0.01$ ). Combining quality of life, health, and ability showed large improvements of the patient's whole life ( $p < 0.01$ ). The simultaneous improvement in all aspects of life can be explained as caused by existential healing (Antonovsky salutogenesis). The patients of this study have been strongly motivated, and willing to endure the strong emotional pain provoked by the therapy.

**Keywords:** Quality of Life, QOL, quality of working life, QWL, human development, public health

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### INTRODUCTION

The experience of having lost the ability to work is to many people a destiny worse than death; quite surprisingly we have found that this condition is often easily curable with psychodynamic short time therapy (1-6) complemented with bodywork. The key to recovery of working ability seems to be rehabilitation of the patients character (7) and purpose of life (8), as already Hippocrates knew (9). The basic idea of the therapy is that what limits our performance is not knowing our own talents and not understanding the joy of using these gifts to create value for others.

Modern psychodynamic theory states that the lack of personal power primarily is caused by a lack of insight in self, which originally was caused by the patient's childhood traumas ("gestalts") (10-12). These traumas carry both painful emotions and negative life-denying, decisions, which materialize a negative

philosophy of life, which again limits the patient's self-confidants, self-esteem, sense of coherence, and willingness to accept life's challenges. This becomes a major hindrance to the personal development, and shuts the patient's life down.

### METHODS

In this study we included the 40 patients that entered our Research Clinic for Holistic Medicine 2004 and 2005, and before starting therapy rated their own ability to work as bad or very bad. In average these patients (from 20 to 60 years, both gender) had about 20 sessions of clinical holistic therapy (10-12) for 1600 EURO. Most patients paid for their own treatment, indicating a strong motivation to receive the treatment. The clinic was build with financial support from the "IMK Almene" Foundation, which is a non-for profit organisation supporting research in complementary medicine. The

Table 1. *Characteristics of sample*

	Before treatment	After treatment
“Low” or “very low” self-assessed working ability	40	7
Self-assessed working ability	0	21; 21/40 = 52.5% (95%CI: 36.1% - 68.5%) [15] Fully recovered (“good” or “very good”): 12 Improved (“neither good nor bad”): 9
Non-responders or dropouts	–	12
“Low” or “very low” self-assessed working ability, non-responder or dropout	40	19

Table 2. *The 21 patient who improved working ability also improved QOL, relations, and ability in general (p<0.01). They also improved the whole life (QOL10, which is an average of QOL, self-assessed health, and self-assessed ability)***Paired T-Test**

	Paired					t	df	Significance (2- tailed)
	Mean	Std.	Std. mean	95% interval of difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Relations before/after	.634	.8938	.1950	.228	1.041	3.25	20	.00
Ability before/after	.940	.8547	.1865	.551	1.329	5.04	20	.00
QOL5 before/after	.783	.7236	.1618	.444	1.122	4.84	19	.00
QOL10 before/after	.850	.6680	.1493	.537	1.162	5.69	19	.00

patients approached the clinic themselves, mostly because of recommendation from former patients. The mission of the clinic is to improve psychodynamic short term therapy to make it more efficient and useful for patients with physical, mental, existential, sexual, and working-ability issues. The Body Work was inspired by Marion Rosen and helped the patients to confront old emotional pain from childhood trauma repressed to the body-mind[13], thus accelerating therapy, and making it less painful (11). See Ventegodt et al 2006 (14) for more details on the study.

**RESULTS**

After the treatment, we found that 21 patients (52.5%, 95%CI: 36.1% - 68.5% [15]) rated their working ability as “very good” (1 patients), “good”(11 patients), or “neither good nor bad” (9 patients); 7 completed the treatment but did not improve, and 12 patients dropped out of the study. Table 1 shows the results. We found that the 21 patients who improved their working ability

(from 4.2 to 2.4; a radical improvement 1.8 step up the five point Likert scale (p<0.01)) also statistically and clinically significantly improved their self-assessed physical health (from 3.3 to 2.6; 0.6 step up the five point Likert Scale (p=0.01)), self-assessed mental health (from 3.8 to 2.5; 1.3 step up the five point Likert Scale (p<0.01)), self-esteem (from 3.4 to 2.5; 0.9 step up the five point Likert scale (p<0.01)), and their self-assessed quality of life (measured by QOL1[16]) (from 3.7 to 2.4; 1.3 step on the five point Likert Scale p<0.01)). We also found large improvements of QOL (measured by QOL5[16]) (from 3.3 to 2.6; 0.8 step on the five point Likert Scale (p<0.01)), the quality of relations (mean of relation to self, friends, and partner) (from 3.2 to 2.6; 0.7 step on the five point Likert Scale (p<0.01)), general ability of functioning (mean of ability to love, sexual ability, social ability and working ability) (from 3.5 to 2.5; 0.9 step on the five point Likert Scale p<0.01)). Combining quality of life, health, and ability in a measure called QOL10 showed large improvements of

the patients whole life (from 3.4 to 2.6; 0.9 step on the five point Likert Scale  $p < .01$ ) (see table 2). This overall improvement is the indication of the phenomena of holistic healing that Antonovsky predicted and called *salutogenesis*—the inverse process of pathogenesis. A one-year follow up indicated the therapeutic benefits to be lasting [14].

## DISCUSSION

We have seen 21 patients of 40 recover self-assessed working ability through clinical holistic medicine. Quality of life, health and ability were regained at the same time. We suggest that this happened because the therapy healed the patient's existence as a whole. Antonovsky (17-18) predicted that this dramatic event of total recovery could happen, when sense of coherence was recovered, which is what we are noticing occurring; he called this process of healing the patients total life for *salutogenesis*. We find that the present study strongly indicates that Antonovsky's concept of salutogenesis might be a key to solve one of the most important problems of our time: how to help people recover their working ability when this is lost to poor health, low self-confidence and self-esteem, and poor quality of life. The secret seems to be to find the patients inner resources and help him set these free.

We were told that several patients actually got full-time work after the treatment, but unfortunately this "objective" side of the improvement was not well documented in the study, which primarily had an existential focus. Further research is needed to document that improved self-assessed working ability is also actually making the patient regain his job.

## CONCLUSIONS

Antonovsky predicted that man could heal his whole existence and called this salutogenesis. Clinical holistic medicine seems to be efficient in inducing salutogenesis, and lost working ability seems to be regained in 52.5% (36.1% to 68.5% of the patients,  $p = .05$ ). The patients are motivated for human development and engage in existential therapy in spite of this being highly emotionally painful at times where old trauma are confronted and integrated. The study was a non-controlled, non-blinded prospective intervention study. We found that the 21 patients who improved their working ability (from 4.2 to 2.4; a radical improvement 1.8 step up the five point Likert scale ( $p < .01$ )) also statistically and clinically significantly improved their self-assessed physical health—from 3.3 to 2.6; 0.6 step up the five point Likert Scale ( $p = .01$ ), self-assessed

mental health—from 3.8 to 2.5; 1.3 step up the five point Likert Scale ( $p < .01$ ), self-esteem—from 3.4 to 2.5; 0.9 step up the five point Likert scale ( $p < .01$ ), and their self-assessed quality of life (measured by QOL1)—from 3.7 to 2.4; 1.3 step on the five point Likert Scale  $p < .01$ ). We also found large improvements of QOL (measured by QOL5) (from 3.3 to 2.6; 0.8 step on the five point Likert Scale ( $p < .01$ )), the quality of relations (mean of relation to self, friends, and partner) (from 3.2 to 2.6; 0.7 step on the five point Likert Scale ( $p < .01$ )), general ability of functioning (mean of ability to love, sexual ability, social ability and working ability)—from 3.5 to 2.5; 0.9 step on the five point Likert Scale  $p < .01$ .

Combining quality of life, health, and ability in a measure called QOL10 showed large improvements of the patient's whole life—from 3.4 to 2.6; 0.9 step on the five point Likert Scale  $p < .01$ ). This overall improvement is an indication of the phenomena of holistic healing that Antonovsky (17-18) predicted and called *salutogenesis*—the inverse process of pathogenesis.

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