

*Editorial*

## Mind-Body Medicine – A Journey Beyond the Helplessness Barrier

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.61936/themind/202406041>

When I agreed to write an editorial about Mind-Body Medicine for “The Mind”, I knew it would have to be a personal story, my story. There is plenty of excellent research in the field and there cannot be serious doubt that this holistic approach to health and disease has fundamental benefits for chronically ill patients. So, what could be my contribution to the Bulletin of Mind-Body Research? Possibly the best I have to offer is my story.

While writing these lines, it is mid-May and snowing! I see the snowflakes dancing and the mountain tops are white, however, every once in a while, the sun peeks out of the clouds and reveals an ocean as blue as ever. The view out of my window is stunning – across the Tromsø sound, towards the mountains of Kvaløya, the Whale-Island.

I live in Tromsø, ca. 250 km north of the polar circle, and hold a professorship for Healthcare Research – Alternative Treatment, at the world's northernmost university, UiT, the Arctic University of Norway. Moreover, I am also a chronically ill patient, diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in my mid-thirties. I have a strong walking disability, which more or less confines me to a wheelchair.

Having multiple sclerosis and not being able to walk is not a bed of roses. I know everything that comes with that challenge, with the progressive loss of function, the worry, how fast will it go, and where do I end up? Depression and anxiety were my closest friends and worst

enemies. “My” multiple sclerosis was very progredient in the beginning.

I was lucky, I had enormous support, my family, my dear husband, dedicated friends, supportive colleagues, and leaders. Yet still, the disease is real, the handicap also. What made the difference?

At some point, I decided to fight. Not against the disease, that is impossible even though conventional treatment has made progress and has a lot to offer. I decided to fight to get my life back, to get in control, to live a good life, even though I could not walk.

After entering the field of complementary and alternative medicine in Germany in 2006, I was for the first time exposed to a Mind-Body Medicine program. As a psychologist, I was familiar with techniques to overcome depression and anxieties, nonetheless, I found this resource-oriented approach most useful. However, the greatest personal change came with an assignment from the Norwegian Ministry of Health to develop a rehabilitation program for patients with continuing health complaints after amalgam removal. I decided that this program should be grounded in Mind-Body Medicine, and we developed this program with a most competent group of German and Norwegian researchers and clinicians (von Scheidt et al., 2015). The Principal Investigator for the Mind-Body program (von Scheidt et al., 2015) insisted that everybody involved in this study needed to participate in the program

themselves, in order to understand the mechanisms of action and the impact of the approach. How right she was!

The other strength that helped me on my way is my love for nature. To be out there and to feel connected to the powerful, almost unreal beauty that surrounds me is a spiritual experience. Up here in the North, nature is everywhere, you cannot escape its power, for good and bad. Yes, it may snow in May, and you regret shifting to summer tires too early. However, when the sun breaks through and the snowy mountains mirror themselves in the still waters of the deep blue ocean, the sight is breathtaking, the beauty of the view almost painful.

There is room for spirituality in Mind-Body Medicine. When people choose that this is an important element in their life, Mind-Body Medicine can help to foster this perspective to life and make it a powerful tool for living a good life. Yet, what is the active ingredient in Mind-Body Medicine approaches? For me it is the focus on resources, the perspective away from malfunctioning and deficits. Becoming chronically ill and handicapped is very much an experience of helplessness. Nothing helps, whatever you do, you lose.... function, achievements, activities you loved, perspectives. The feeling of helplessness spreads, from things that are lost forever to things, that might still be possible, but you don't do them anymore. And all of a sudden, there is this wall of "I can't", "it will not work", "have

tried, but I failed", "I cannot do this anymore" etc.; the great helplessness barrier. It is high, no way to see behind it, no way to figure out, what could lie beyond it.

Mind-Body Medicine approaches can provide a change of perspective, from "I cannot" to "I can". These methods will not make the disease go away, but they can support patients to find a path over, through, or passing by the helplessness barrier and thus provide them with tools to live a meaningful life, a good life.

As for me, something changed, the disease stopped. I am still more or less bound to a wheelchair. Nonetheless, I have started to ride again. Somehow, "my" disease has given me the greatest gift I could ask for, namely finding my way back to riding. My four-legged friends carry me wherever we want to go.

Words fail me to describe some of the things we have seen together. Watching the midnight sun from a mountain top, touching the sea, and rising again is simply spectacular! I have waded through the low tide with my beloved horse Frår, the "Lightfoot", almost blinded by the sun while the eagles were circling above us. We have seen orcas hunting under the northern lights, listening to the sound of their deep breaths. I have galloped over an untouched field of snow, feeling the endless joy of running wild of my four-legged companion under me. I still cannot walk, but I have grown wings!

## **References**

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