

Making sense of health and illness²

A MAJOR NEW THREE-PART SERIES by Bob Leckridge MBChB FFHom



All photos by Jane Kelly

The homeopathic approach, the whole understanding of health, of illness and of human beings which has developed from Hahnemann's first principles into our present day level of understanding has great potential to teach us how to stay healthy and how best to deal with illness. This series considers some of the basic principles of homeopathy, focusing on making sense of health and of illness. These insights will enable the reader to take practical steps to be more able to experience better health, to understand that our solutions are in our own hands. We can actively enhance our self-healing.

This pull-out and keep series includes:

Observation and self-reflection

Understanding people and relationships

Causes and courses of disease

Understanding people and relationships

In the previous article we considered the issue of self-reflection and observation. If you carried out the exercise with the notebook, then you probably discovered a few things about yourself or about your illness (if you have one). Maybe you found out what circumstances ease your discomforts or symptoms. Maybe your preferred (but unconscious) choices became clearer to you. For example, you may now be aware of the effects of different environments on you. What are your preferences for temperature? What kinds of weather influence you? What time of day or night are you at your best and what times are you at your worst or weakest? How about eating and drinking? Have you become aware of certain types of food in your diet – foods which you crave, foods which you avoid, and the foods which specifically alter any of your symptoms? All such observations give you insights into your uniqueness.

Now consider not just your own subjective experiences in the world, but those of others. What does it mean that other people have entirely different responses to similar circumstances? For example, in any room, at any temperature, some people will feel extremely comfortable, some will be too

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hot and some may even be chilly. Here is something else you can begin to note as you look around you. The next time you are in an audience, at a concert, or are attending a seminar or meeting, have a look around the room after an hour has passed. You'll notice some people pulling coats or jackets tightly closed, others removing sweaters and so on. These noticeable differences are only small elements of the uniqueness of every individual in the room.

Is it better to be too hot or too cold? This seems a silly question when put so starkly. However, it highlights a phenomenon, which occurs for us subconsciously. We note how people are different from us, or how they are like us, by continually observing and classifying them. The example of temperature is a simple one. It is quite easy to spot who is too hot and who is too cold. But, notice what we do with our own perceptions. If someone is too hot in a room, they are more likely to say "It's too hot in here" than "I am too hot in here". Is there a difference? Absolutely! I attended a seminar last summer and the usual battle developed in the group of about 100 people in the audience. Some got up to open windows and some got up to close them. The speaker made a very helpful announcement. "Will those of you who are feeling too hot please sit at the back next to the doors which we can leave open, and those of you who are feeling too cold please sit next to the windows where the sun is streaming in? That way we can stop the battle of the windows and doors!" Obviously, the speaker was a homeopath. He understood that the room was neither too hot, nor too cold, but that some people would be uncomfortable because of their particular temperature sensitivities. He also understood that it was more helpful to recognise your own sensitivities and to choose your position in the room according to these rather than simply trying to make your immediate environment change according to your own needs but at the expense of the needs of others.

Replacing judgement with observation

Understanding the concept of uniqueness can begin to set the conditions for understanding others. We can begin to replace judgments with simple observations. This is a fundamental homeopathic concept. It is this concept that results in patients having the experience of being heard instead of being judged by their doctor. The homeopathic doctor not only finds every individual story fascinating but knows that to judge by classifying certain symptoms or reactions as good or bad only gets in the way of hearing the full, unique story which is being told.

This replacement of judgment and classification with simple observation is of value to all of us. Consider the effect it might have on your relationships. If instead of classifying your partner or your child's reactions or behaviours as good or bad, you simply noticed them, do you think it would change how you reacted towards them? Try it out and see what happens. Do it just for one day. Try for a full day to notice how others react or behave throughout the day. Just note down what you observe. Don't classify behaviours as good or bad. Just describe them. You can use the same notebook you used for the self-observation exercise.

Although this sounds like a simple exercise, it isn't really very simple. We are so used to judging and classifying that we find it extremely difficult just to observe. For example, emotions are not visible, yet we act as if they are. If you are going to capture your observations in your notebook you will probably find yourself describing others as angry, or happy, or upset, but none of these emotions can be observed. You might say that someone began to shout and wave their arms around, or that they were smiling or crying, but you cannot actually say what they are feeling. Certainly, you can write down what others say, so if someone says, "I am so happy today", you can record it. However, it

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would be better if you also recorded your observations of their behaviour as only this will show you how that person actually expresses the emotions they tell you they are experiencing.

This exercise is valuable in its own right as it helps you to become aware of how much you make assumptions about others and how much that inhibits clearer observation. So, the homeopathic stance of attempting detached observation to note the uniqueness of every human being can help us to see others in our lives in ways we have never previously noted.

Let's take this a stage further. A fundamental principle of homeopathy is that human beings are complex, highly developed life forms. We have acquired the abilities to defend ourselves and to adapt to a huge range of potential circumstances and situations. We will consider these abilities and what they mean for our health in the next article. However, let's consider what this insight means to us when we look at the behaviour of others. If we start by assuming that every individual is unique then we have to accept that there is never only one "right" way to behave in a particular circumstance.

Let me make it clear that I am not discussing moral choices here. I'm not saying that whatever someone

does is okay. I am focusing on the particular behaviours an individual might exhibit in a given situation. For example, at a funeral, some people might weep, and others might not weep. Some might become very quiet and avoid conversation with others whilst another person might become exceptionally talkative. None of the responses are any "better" than the others. They are just different ways of responding. Our homeopathic thinking has enabled us to accept that these differences are not only acceptable but that they are the consequence of the uniqueness of individuality. Add to this understanding the concept that human beings react and act unconsciously in their best interests, that behaviours can be understood as a manifestation of human defences and adaptation.

Understanding behaviour patterns

Now when we try to make sense of someone's behaviour, we can, initially, try to understand what benefits this behaviour might bring. Let me give you an example I see frequently in children. Some children have behavioural problems of rigidity. They will only eat a limited range of foodstuffs. They will only wear certain clothes. They need to have routines and get very upset if these routines are disrupted (especially if they are disrupted without warning). For example, they might usually have a bath before bedtime and if the bath is missed and given in the morning instead they might be "out of sorts" all day. They might be in the habit of a particular parent reading them a bedtime story or they might need to have a particular soft toy with them at bedtime.

There are countless variations on this theme. Indeed to some extent all children exhibit this tendency. In some, however, it is excessive and makes it very difficult for the rest of the family to cope. It is not unusual in such circumstances to find that the child in question had a traumatic birth (say, a forceps delivery, or an emergency Caesarean section). Imagine if that is your first experience of life. Those first traumatic moments may well leave a deeply hidden scar – a scar that is an unconscious memory of the unpredictability of life. In other children, there may be a history of disruption in their families caused by divorce, or death of a parent, or of other family disruption. Again, this can leave a conscious, or unconscious memory of the unpredictability of life.

How might you respond to such a deep memory? Well, one way to cope would be to make life as predictable as possible and a good way to do that is to create and impose patterns and routines into your life. If a child is acting in very rigid ways in order to increase their sense of safety (although, of course, they are not able to tell you this), then if you want to try to modify these behaviour patterns, you need to help the child to feel safe first. Just trying to remove the behaviour by

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...deeper understanding can change the way you act as a friend

suppressing it or punishing it will not help. It will just increase their feelings of insecurity and drive them to greater degrees of rigidity.

Another common problem I see is children with aggressive behaviour. If we want to modify aggressive behaviour using our homeopathic understanding, we must first of all try to understand what advantages such behaviour brings the child. Does it bring attention? Does it get them noticed? Or does it make them feel strong? Anger is quite an empowering emotion. When we feel anger we get a surge of adrenaline through our bodies and we feel ready to fight. It makes us feel strong. Tears, on the other hand, don't make us feel strong, and, in fact, tend to have the opposite effect and make us feel weak. It's often when we feel our weakest that we develop our most urgent need for strength. So, can we find examples in the child's life of situations which may have left them feeling very weak, or insignificant? Again, this might be a birth experience or a family disruption at some point. If we want to modify this aggressive behaviour then we need to address the underlying need to nurture the child's strength. This is the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness. If we can enable them to become assertive, then it is likely that they will become less aggressive.

Insights through remedy profiles

It isn't only the basic principles of homeopathy, which enable us to acquire such insights. The descriptions of the remedies in the *materia medicae* books can also help us to build our understandings of peoples' behaviour.

Think of a remedy like *Pulsatilla*. We read that the essence of the "Pulsatilla state" is "forsaken feeling". At the core of this state is a feeling of aloneness, of having been abandoned or having lost love. If this is the core, then doesn't it make sense that a person in this state might seek company, might want consolation and comfort? Doesn't it make sense that such a person might be unstable, weeping helplessly one minute and laughing the next? Doesn't it make sense that so much of their behaviour stirs our feelings of empathy and care so that we want to try to help them, to love them, to make things better for them?

Alternatively, think of a remedy like *Staphysagria*. We read that this state is one of "suppressed anger with indignation". It's the classic "why me?" state – "I didn't deserve that treatment". In such a circumstance isn't it likely that the behaviour of this person will be of holding in their feelings only to find that they have fierce outbursts of anger or rage, only to be quickly followed again by feelings of helplessness and a need to withdraw from company? Isn't it likely that they will be oversensitive and touchy? Isn't it likely that they will struggle with issues of self-control?

There's an incredible wisdom in the descriptions of the remedies. Here's my next tip then. As you read about remedies (think of David Lilley's series on the polychrests for example) don't just read them to see whether or not you think you need a particular remedy (or even if someone you know needs a particular remedy) but read them as insights into human behaviour. As you come to understand these varieties of behaviour, of how they might develop, of their positive advantages to people, then you will find yourself developing a deeper understanding of why people act the way they do. This deeper understanding can change the way you act as a parent, as a spouse, as a friend or a neighbour.

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This way of thinking leads us into a consideration of the origins of things. Why do people become sick? How can we protect ourselves from diseases and how can we give ourselves the best chance of recovery. These questions are the basis of the next article.