



Investigating the Effects of Zero Balancing® on the Physical, Mental, Emotional, and Spiritual Dimensions of Wellness: A Phenomenological Mixed Methods Pilot Study

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Graphic Design: Deanna Waggy; Top: Dr Smith giving a ZB. Photo Credit: Todd Williams



Abstract

Background:

Today the necessity for relieving undue stress on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels is obvious at this time of concomitant global crises from pandemic, societal inequity, and climatic challenges. Methods to restore and enhance human well-being are critically needed. The study of overall wellness has not yet included the role that skilled, conscious touch may play in supporting the dimensions of wellness, an awareness of which this study seeks to elevate by exploring the effects of receiving positive touch on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of wellness.

Methods:

The researchers chose to utilize a concurrent mixed-methods hermeneutic phenomenological research design. The quantitative aspect of this study included pre/post-session surveys assessed with a paired sample t-test along with descriptive statistics. Sixteen people were viewed as “cases” and interviewed for discovery on the essence of receiving Zero Balancing and the impact of ZB on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of health. Qualitative data was assessed for themes.

Results:

Analysis revealed that the essence of Zero Balancing was integration. The paired sample t-test showed a significant increase in the overall feeling of wellness after the fourth Zero Balancing session the at $p < .001$ level.



Neck Half Moon Vector. Photo: Sheryl Fitzgerald



Nestling the hands. Photo: Giovanni Pescetto



Background

How Touch Impacts Wellness

Today, the intertwined global challenges from the pandemic, climate changes, and inequities in resources have detrimentally impacted human health and wellbeing. Sustainable, available health promotion resources are greatly needed. One obvious, but underestimated, resource is right at hand. The use of skilled human touch is a low cost, simply administered, high impact resource. More is being learned on how and why safe, attuned touch plays an important role in restoring and maintaining health (van der Kolk, 2014). As a low cost, large impact intervention, touch, especially skilled, conscious touch, is a fertile field to research and explore. While many therapeutic body therapies exist today, from massage to energetic modalities, Zero Balancing is especially relevant as an example of how safe, transformative touch improves well-being (Hamwee, 1999).



A fulcrum to release jaw tension. Photo: Della Watters

The study of overall wellness has not yet included the role that skilled, conscious touch may play in supporting the dimensions of wellness, an awareness of which this study seeks to elevate by exploring the effects of receiving positive touch on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of wellness. The power of touch in promoting health and well-being has been known throughout history as a natural, innate human capacity and has been thoroughly documented with multidisciplinary scientific rigor (Linden, 2015). The positive, skilled touch method used in this study is Zero Balancing (ZB). Zero Balancing was designed to enhance health using the medium of conscious touch to balance the relationship of the body's structure with the body's energy circulating and animating the body (Hamwee, 1999; Smith, 1999).



What is Zero Balancing and How it Works

Zero Balancing (ZB) is a unique, non-diagnostic, mindbody manual therapy that uses gentle pressure or tractions into key bones and joints of the body. ZB clients receive the session fully clothed while lying supine on a massage table. Practitioners are trained to attend to the physiological, sensory, and energetic information observable within the client and to the inner awareness of what is arising in the moment within the practitioner. (Murphy, 2004). Zero Balancing is a mindbody therapy due to its ability to help the client clear and organize the flow of their own energy which can impact more than the physical body. The emotional, mental and spiritual levels are also engaged in the rebalancing that is possible (Murphy, 2019).



Foot fulcrum. Photo: Della Watters

Zero Balancing is both a form of touch therapy and simultaneously a form of energy medicine; it facilitates an optimal energy flow in the body releasing and reorganizing somatic tension patterns, allowing the human system to restore itself to health and balance (Murphy, 2004). Resting on the idea that imbalances in the human energy field, or biofield, are the underlying cause of imbalances in the physical body, (Hunt, 1996), transformative touch therapies such as Zero Balancing address both the structure and energy of the body consciously and simultaneously (Smith, 2005). Zero Balancing has been shown to reduce work stress and improve mood and sleep (Duncan, Liechty, Miller, Chinoy & Ricciardi, 2011), offer options in trauma treatment (Edmunds & Gafner, 2003), and improve psycho/spiritual potential (Wang, 2000). Therapeutic bodywork therapies, such as ZB, can help the client release unresolved stress and dissipate dysfunctional patterns, gently allowing the natural fluidity of the body's systems to reorganize at a new level that restores health and facilitates consciousness of the whole (Denner, 2009).



Dimensions of Wellness

“Wellness is a holistic integration of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, fueling the body, engaging the mind, and nurturing the spirit” (Stoewen, 2017, para 1). Models of wellness may encompass eight dynamically interconnected dimensions: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental (University of Maryland, 2017). While the dimensions of wellness do not have to be equally balanced, attention needs to be given to all dimensions to prevent a domino effect bringing the structure (wellness/health) crashing down (University of Maryland, 2017). This study focused on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

Expanded States of Consciousness

The mechanism for how such reorganization towards health occurs has been explored extensively, especially in complementary and alternative modalities (CAM), over the last several decades (Eden & Feinstein, 2020). One intriguing theory is that healing happens most readily in an expanded state of consciousness, one in which mundane consciousness gives way to a more unitive state of consciousness and the individual has the experience of dropping deeply into themselves (Hamwee, 1999; Smith, 2005). Experiencing an expanded state of consciousness induced through therapeutic and safe touch techniques goes beyond mere stress relief and may play a critical role in what constitutes the best characteristic of self-organizing, emergent and dynamic human health (LaPierre, 2006).



Upper thoracic and rib fulcrums. Photo: Della Watters



Holistic Transpersonal Research

For this study the term holistic research is based on the definition of holistic science where one studies complex systems (ex. biological, social, and physical). The systems are best understood when the parts are viewed in context and relation to one another (Oshry, 2008). When assessing health the term “holistic” applies to social considerations and other intuitive judgements and not just physical issues (Hart, 2010). The term transpersonal can be viewed as experiences beyond (trans) the self to encompass wider aspects of humankind and life (Walsh & Vaughn, 1993). Transpersonal research methods are used to study extraordinary human experiences such as consciousness, expanded or altered states, bliss, wonder, and group synergy (Braud & Anderson, 1998). Research informed by expanded states of consciousness is both holistic and transpersonal because it “recognizes the importance of tacit knowing and other forms of personal knowledge. Such research calls attention to a class of significant experiences that generally have been ignored or devalued about which there is considerable misinformation and misapprehension” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p.263).

This mixed-methods phenomenological study is one of the first of its kind to examine how touch, ZB, impacts the dimensions of wellness. It is considered holistic research designed to study complex and interconnected systems of a person's physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of health and wellness. The data is reported from participant's lived experiences and their understanding of how they felt and interpreted their states of being.



Shoulder evaluation.



Methods

This study explores the following:

1. What is the essence of receiving a Zero Balancing session?
2. How are the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of wellness impacted by receiving Zero Balancing sessions?
3. How does the role of expanded states of consciousness impact wellness?

Design Overview

To better understand and convey the complexity and richness of receiving Zero Balancing along with how this modality affects the dimensions of wellness, the researchers chose to utilize a concurrent mixed methods phenomenological research design. A mixed methods research design combines qualitative and quantitative procedures for collecting and analyzing data to corroborate study outcomes in terms of both breadth and depth (Zhang & Watanabe-Galloway, 2014). The quantitative aspect of this study included pre/post-session surveys while the qualitative aspect was a multiple case study design with each participant being viewed as a 'case' to allow for multiple cases and examination of both individual and across case analysis of responses (Stake, 2005).

Participants

A convenience sample of sixteen individuals, who were invited by the practitioners, participated in this study. Inclusion requirements required the participants to be 18 years of age, high school graduates, able to attend all four sessions, and to have experienced at least two Zero Balancing sessions prior to the start of the study.



Nestling the toes. Photo: Giovanni Pescetto





Neck and upper back balancing. Photo: Giovanni Pescetto

Data Collection

A research protocol developed by the lead researcher included a training session for all practitioners focusing on the session, interviewing, and survey protocols. Each participant received one Zero Balancing session a week for four weeks at the practitioners' clinics. Every participant had the same practitioner throughout the entire study. At the end of the final session, an in-depth semi-structured interview lasting 15-30 minutes was video recorded, and participants filled out the post-session survey. Data was also collected through practitioner SOAP and field notes. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Eastern Illinois University.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the research team worked together to derive themes representing the essence of a Zero Balancing session. Essences are not something researchers add to the study but are already in the intentional relationship between the phenomena and the experiencer. The essence is not the outcome of interpretation, but "belong to the in-between world, that 'single fabric' that connects us with everything else in the world" (Dahlberg, 2006 p. 12). The qualitative analysis focused on the hermeneutic, phenomenological approach of Van Manen who valued the human experience and sought to ensure an individual was reflected back in context (Bates, Terry, & Popple, 2016).

Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and a paired samples t-test (one tail) analysis to expand on the qualitative results. While statistical significance is important this research study focuses on clinical significance reflecting the extent of change or real difference made in a participant's life (Ranganathan, Pramesh, & Buyse, 2015).



Key Findings

Five themes emerged from the participants: a). integration, b). dimensional impacts, c). embodiment, d) relational ease, and e.) expanded states of consciousness (ESC).

Integration

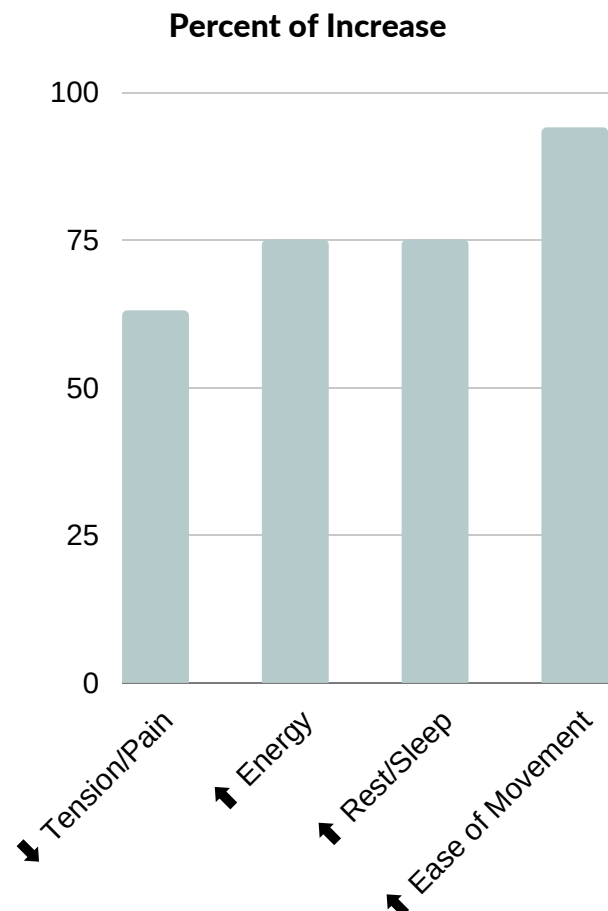
“Health comes from integration” is a premise made in the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology developed by Daniel Siegel (Siegel, 2018, p.10). Considered as the basis of health (Siegel, 2012), integration is defined quite simply as “the linkage of differentiated parts.” Participants described the feeling of being integrated in a variety of ways. After finishing the fourth ZB session one participant responded, “It just seems like everything has come together.” Offering support to the theme of integration, 94% of the participants stated they felt in control of their lives and well-balanced as a person in comparison with 75% feeling in control prior to their ZB sessions.

Dimensional Impacts

As integration emerged as the overall essence of ZB, participants also described particular changes in each dimension of wellness. Significantly, researchers noted that participants often conflated the dimensions when asked about the impact of receiving ZB on one dimension, further enforcing the understanding the body is an interconnected system. For example: When asked if there was an impact on the emotional level they would often respond with an effect on their mental or spiritual level.

Physical

“Physical ease” increased as a result of the ZB sessions. Statements concerning increased relaxation, lower stress levels, improved sleep, and pain reduction were all reported. “I don’t think I have ever been as relaxed” and “I’m sleeping better, more soundly”. A distinct down-regulating of the neurological system was also described through various statements about sleep quality, emotional regulation, and decreased physical manifestations such as “the hand tremors I have had actually disappeared”, “feels like the numbness in my extremities is moving out”. When asked to assess their physical dimension of wellness, all of the participants reported an increase in body relaxation and the majority (63%) had decreased sensations of tension and pain in the body. Ninety-four percent felt increased freedom in movement and participants reported feeling more balanced, centered, and grounded.

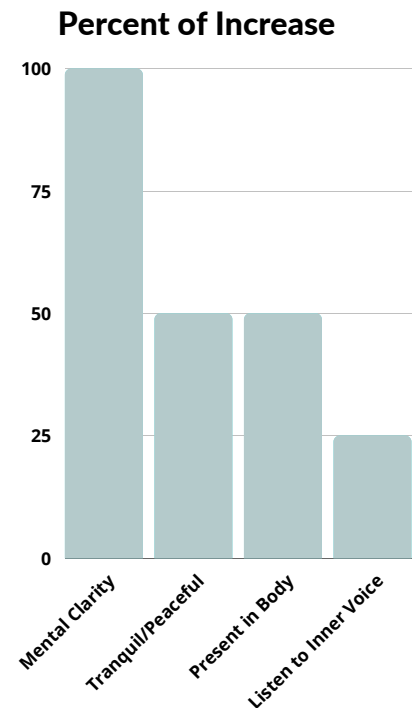


Mental

An increased sense of mental clarity was overwhelmingly reported by all participants along with an improved sense of connection and creativity. Being aware of mental activities such as thoughts, emotions, memories, beliefs will often lead to a sense of openness and calm, in which any of these mental activities can arise, be noticed, and then pass away (Siegel, 2018). Researchers frequently heard “feel a better connection between [my] mental and physical”, “able to be more creative and more confident in my creativity”, “I’m able to think more clearly”. When assessing the mental dimension 100% of participants strongly agreed/agreed to experiencing increased mental clarity after ZB.

Emotional

The ability to regulate one’s emotions, or internal emotional regulation, was a common and universal theme among the participants - “I am in more control of my emotions”, and “helped me balance and control my emotions.” According to Daniel Goleman, emotional self-regulation is “learning how to recognize, manage and harness” (Goleman, 1995, p. 191) feelings, which is one of the basics of emotional intelligence. Feelings of peace, calmness, decreased anxiety and anger, and increased self-confidence were also reported: “more capable about handling stress”, “less anxiety about running out of time”, “helped me deal with anger issues”, “when I feel negative emotions arising, I can choose my responses.” The ability to emotionally regulate rests on the awareness of being able to notice what is going on inside and to use that awareness to make appropriate choices which reflect the observations of the participants. There was a 50% increase in participants stating they strongly agreed they felt tranquil and peaceful after their session.



Spiritual

An awareness of something greater than oneself and to which one is intrinsically connected defines spiritual experiences, however, each spiritual experience is unique. Participants reported the following: “there is this whole spiritual side to it that takes it a step beyond physical healing”, “something feels spiritual about ZB...I’ve never felt with any other kind of body treatment”, “I have been able to connect more with my higher self,with my purpose.” All the participants stated having an awareness of being part of something bigger than themselves after their sessions.

Embodiment

Embodiment, or the awakened intelligence of the body, can be described as “ the moment-to-moment process by which human beings may allow their awareness to enhance the flow of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and energies through their bodily selves” (Aposhyan, 2004, p. 266). The experience of enhanced body awareness was shown by a 50% increase in participants strongly agreeing to feeling more present in their body along with a 25% increase in participants strongly agreeing to listening to their inner voice. Participants made the following observations: “I can feel energy moving through my body” and “I’ve been more connected to my body”. Being aware of how we really feel in the body, in the present moment, is a critical component in the ability to self-regulate (Caldwell, 2018).



Relational Ease

Many participants noticed an improvement in relational ease, i.e., their ability to relate to others. Participants noted feeling more available to themselves and others. The neural circuitry that allows us to assess if we feel safe, and, consequently able to bond well with others is called the social engagement network (Porges, 2003). Comments illuminated how the sessions impacted smooth communication: “It’s helped me with better listening, better understanding, better able to hold space, and to be more tolerant”, and “open to an awareness of taking our conversations a little bit deeper”.

Sixty-nine percent of participants stated they strongly agreed to feeling interested in work, relationships, and activities as compared to only 31% feeling this strongly before their Zero Balancing sessions. All the participants felt more tolerant and compassionate of others and 69% felt less controlled by external factors in their life.

Expanded States of Consciousness

One of the most intriguing themes that emerged was that of experiencing an expanded state of consciousness within the ZB session, a state outside mundane daily consciousness and characterized by a less linear, more spacious felt sense of themselves. Participants uniformly mentioned this phenomenon, reporting: “I’m not all inside my skin, like I am bigger than my physical body” and “a kind of level of relaxation that is below the normal resting state where you are not worried about anything”. “Sensations included: “not awake, not asleep”, “not aware of external stimuli”, “kind of an absence of time” and “more aware of my whole field and not just my physical body.” These expressions of insight and creativity appear to be a natural effect of the experience of having an expanded state of consciousness. Expanded states of consciousness strengthen the ability to embrace change that can be transformative. All, (100%), of the participants reported experiencing an expanded state of consciousness through their Zero Balancing sessions during this study.

Paired Sample t-test Results

A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare participants’ overall feeling of wellness in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions after receiving Zero Balancing. There was a significant difference in the scores from the Baseline Survey ($M=2.96$, $SD=0.2921$) and the Follow-Up Survey ($M=3.25$, $SD=0.3802$) conditions; $t(33)=3.7848$, $p<.001$. The results show a significant increase in the overall feeling of wellness after the fourth Zero Balancing session.



Upper trapezius fulcrums. Photo: Della Watters





SI evaluation. Photo: Della Watters

Conclusions

- The essence of Zero Balancing is integration on the internal as well as the interpersonal level. Zero Balancing is an integrative, low cost, simply administered, holistic therapy with multiple benefits.
- Zero Balancing, with its focus on skilled, conscious touch, does facilitate wellness in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions of wellness.
- Zero Balancing supports people in the four dimensions of human thriving that are trainable through mindfulness training: awareness, connection, insight, and purpose (Dahl et al., 2020).
- Zero Balancing facilitates and supports expanded states of consciousness that allow for new ways of thinking, reorganization, and healing.
- Zero Balancing is a transformative touch modality that supports sustainable improvements in well-being and reveals the vital role skilled touch has in the scientific understanding of wellness.

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The International Journal of Zero Balancing and Transformative Touch <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/ijzbtt/vol1/iss1/11/>

Based on the results of this study we conclude that Zero Balancing is an integrative, low cost, simply administered, holistic therapy with multiple benefits. We also suggest this body therapy, with its focus on skilled, conscious touch, does facilitate wellness in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions of wellness.





Upper thoracic evaluation and balancing.

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Arm fulcrum. Photo: Giovanni Pescetto

