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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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Cover Page Footnote

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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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INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF ZERO BALANCING®

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.

Conclusions: 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.

Operational Definitions

The following words are defined to help you understand the researchers' lenses, how they defined certain terms, and provide technical definitions to enhance your reading experience.

Dimensions of Wellness: A model of wellness consisting of mutually interdependent dimensions which can include the physical, mental or intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial and environmental. Each dimension impacts all the other dimensions: strengthening or weakening any dimension can have a positive or negative cascading effect on overall wellness (Stoewen, 2017).

Emotional: "Emotional refers to reactions subjectively experienced as strong feelings accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body" (Murphy & Rhoads, 2020).

Expanded States of Consciousness: "Expanded or altered states of consciousness or awareness outside normal states of consciousness; states in which brain waves change to provide larger, less linear, concepts of ourselves; a state where healing and change are possible" (Smith, 2020, p.73).

Fulcrum: "a specific field of tension created through touch such as gentle lifting, bending, sliding, pushing, pulling, twisting or compressing; the working tool of Zero Balancing" (Smith, 2020, p.22).

Integration: "Integration is the linkage of differentiated parts within the human biological system. Integration is the process by which a complex system self-organizes for optimal functioning that is flexible and adaptive" (Murphy & Rhoads, 2020).

Interface Touch: "Interface is a method of skilled, conscious touch with a clear structural and energetic boundary between the client and practitioner" (Smith, 2020, p. 8).

Mental: "Mental refers to the dynamic processes of the mind such as thoughts, ideas, dreams, beliefs, perception, planning, meaning-making, and memory" (Murphy & Rhoads, 2020).

Physical: "Physical refers to processes of the body that regulate digestion, sleep, stamina, and bodily fitness" (Murphy & Rhoads, 2020).

Spiritual: "Spiritual refers to the sense of being connected to a source greater than the self" (Murphy & Rhoads, 2020).

Introduction

“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). On the other end of the spectrum, the opposite may happen as researchers have shown that improving even one of the dimensions of health has been found to protect cognition in aging (Strout & Howard, 2012). In order to better help clients lead a more balanced holistic life, practitioners should help them strive for a “personal harmony” that feels authentic to them (University of Maryland, 2017). The focus of this study is on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of wellness and how skilled, conscious touch impacts overall wellness.

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. More is being learned on how and why safe, attuned touch plays an important role in restoring and maintaining health (van der Kolk, 2014). Skillful touch may stimulate self-awareness and can restore a sense of balance and control to patients in end-of-life settings (Berger et al., 2013). As a low cost, large impact intervention, touch, especially skilled, conscious touch, is a fertile field to research and explore. While many therapeutic body

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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).

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).

Zero Balancing, considered a non-diagnostic, mind-body manual therapy, trains practitioners to create a field of tension with their hands, called a fulcrum, to engage key ligaments, bones, and joints of the body. Fulcrums, the working tool of ZB, provide an opportunity for the body of the recipient to rebalance and serve as a catalyst to promote change (Smith, 2020). 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),

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transformative touch therapies such as Zero Balancing address both the structure and energy of the body consciously and simultaneously (Smith, 2005). Although not yet widely researched, 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). Establishing a resource of evidence-based outcomes of ZB was initiated in a recent case study book to document the reliability of ZB as a modality with a goal of amplifying a person's experience of health and vitality on all levels (Quarry & King, 2016).

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).

Although it is a commonly reported experience of recipients of Zero Balancing to have expanded, or non-ordinary states of consciousness, while receiving a session (Smith, 2005),

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there needs to be an investigation into how experiencing an expanded state of consciousness impacts overall wellbeing and health. Expanded states of consciousness which fall outside the level of mundane, everyday awareness, are very difficult to study. Examples of expanded states of consciousness can include having an “AHA” moment, a transcendent or peak experience, mystical, and nondual experiences. Research informed by expanded states of consciousness “recognizes the importance of tacit knowing and other forms of personal knowledge of researchers and co-researchers. It calls attention to a class of significant experiences that generally have been ignored or devalued about which there are considerable misinformation and misapprehension” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p.263). These expanded states or exceptional human experiences have been expounded on through the religious lens, the transpersonal psychological lens (Grof, 1996), and even through the experiences of scientists and engineers (Wahbeh, 2018).

This study is one of the first of its kind to examine how the intersection of the dimensions of wellness, and the impact of touch (ZB) including the benefit of expanded states of consciousness in human wellbeing can be illuminated through the lens of phenomenology. It helps to illuminate “How is our well-being influenced by receiving conscious and transformative touch?”

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?

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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).

As a methodology, the use of phenomenology reduces human experiences into descriptions of their 'essence' and gives voice to a lived experience in a meaningful way (Creswell, 2007; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Rich qualitative research description lies within the naturalistic approach which reveals an emergent understanding of a phenomenon through accessing the meanings participants ascribe to them (Parahoo, 2014). This type of inquiry also honors the role of compassion in scientific inquiry along with the importance of particularity of the researcher's voice and participant's voice, especially in communicating the unique and yet potentially universal nature of the experiences studied (Braud & Anderson, 1998). The pre/post-session surveys and immediate post-session in-depth interviews were utilized for triangulation and a deeper understanding of the data (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

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, a high school graduate, the ability to attend all four sessions, and to have had experienced at least two Zero Balancing sessions prior to the start of the study (see Appendix A).

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 of the four certified Zero Balancing practitioners worked with four participants once a week over four weeks. Demographics along with baseline data and post fourth session data was gathered via the Zero Balancing and the Dimensions of Wellness pre/post survey created for this study. The pre/post-session surveys had face and content validity and a reliability analysis was carried out on the Zero Balancing and Dimensions of Wellness scale comprising 34 items. Cronbach's alpha showed the questionnaire to reach $\alpha = 0.67$ reliability. Interview questions were also created for this study focusing on the essence of a Zero Balancing session and the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of wellness.

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 initial visit all consent forms, demographic information, and pre-session surveys were completed. Each session followed the Zero Balancing protocol, lasted 30-40 minutes, and all participants were clothed. Zero Balancing uses interface touch and requires presence and attention to enhance the client's external and internal experience. The attention held by the

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practitioners allows for an anchoring experience for participants who may enter an expanded state or be processing insights that are arising in the session. No sessions were videotaped. 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. All participants received the four Zero Balancing sessions at no cost and received a \$25.00 Amazon gift card. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Eastern Illinois University.

Analysis

The research team included a professor of public health, certified Zero Balancing practitioners, with various expertise in therapeutic touch and mind-body therapies, and two student research assistants. 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). Words help us understand and explore existential phenomena such as wellness, balance, and wholeness along with their essence, meanings, and characteristics (Dahlberg, 2006).

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 descriptions must be “rich” for the essence to be discovered (Dahlberg, 2006) which is why the researchers triangulated data through interviews,

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observations, and field and SOAP notes. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and a paired samples *t*-test (one tail) analysis to expand on the qualitative results. The qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately and then compared and contrasted for richer content. 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).

Results

The following themes describe how the participants related the effects of Zero Balancing on their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of wellness along with the essence of receiving ZB. Five themes emerged from the analysis across all 16 participants. These themes are labeled as follows: a). integration; b). dimensional impacts; c). embodiment; d) relational ease; and e.) expanded states of consciousness (ESC) (see Appendix B).

Themes**The Essence of a Zero Balancing Session is Integration**

As the relevant themes were coded, the theme of integration emerged which was a universal theme consistently mentioned across the range of the participants. "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 session one participant responded "*It just seems like everything has come together.*" Another stated "*Mentally and physically relaxed with an overall feeling of well-being.*" Other words and phrases included

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“balance, calmness, being pleasant, joyfulness, mentally uncluttered, introspective, and more self-awareness.” When asked how ZB impacted their overall wellbeing, integration emerged again in the following statements *“ [it’s] making me aware of my entire body and its relationship to the universe around me.”*, and *“going with the flow and being conscious of staying in that place.”* Participants used a diverse range of phrases such as *“feeling more balanced”, “being more aware of the whole body”, “being more present”, “centered”, “grounded”,* and *“peace and connection”* to describe the feelings and internal process of receiving Zero Balancing.

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. Fifty-six percent of the participants strongly agreed to being aware of their body functioning as a whole after Zero Balancing compared to 13% feeling this way before treatments. Ninety-four percent reported higher self-worth, 100% stated they have a stronger sense of appreciating everyday life, wanting to learn more about themselves and feeling they can meet change with curiosity.

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”, “I’m sleeping better, more soundly”, “it feels like it [tension] just evaporates”, and the “aches and pains I normally have, I don’t have right now.”* Many noticed an increase in present moment body awareness *“I feel taller, I feel stronger”, “bones feel almost electrified to the point where they tingle, they felt elongated”, and “my core feels more engaged.”* 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”, “I think it is probably helping my overall well-being as well as my blood pressure which sometimes needs a little reducing”, and “I don’t manifest my emotions physically so much.”* The aligned physical comfort reported can be summarized as less pain, better movement and flow, and better sleep.

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. A majority (75%) strongly agreed/agreed to having increased energy and an increased feeling of rest after sleeping. Ninety-four percent felt increased freedom in movement and participants reported feeling more balanced, centered, and grounded.

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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”*, *“mental clarity really came, and I was so aware of it.”* Along with creativity, clarity, and connection came the ability to better process information and emotions, and problem solve: *“smoother processing”*, *“finding new and novel solutions”*, *“this level of relaxation has made me open to new ideas”*, and *“ability to process thoughts and emotions more easily.”*

When assessing the mental dimension 100% of participants strongly agreed/agreed to experiencing increased mental clarity after ZB. That is a 53% increase from those who reported not having mental clarity before the sessions. Eighty-one percent strongly agreed they had an ability for contemplation and imagination after the sessions compared to 12.5% feeling this way before sessions. When asked about focusing, understanding, and processing information 44% strongly agreed and 56% agreed that ZB sessions aided in these abilities. Before their sessions, 12.5% strongly agreed they were aware of thoughts and feelings as compared to 69% after their sessions.

Emotional

Noticing what one is feeling is key to fostering emotional regulation, and the participants in the study were clearly able to describe how the ZB sessions benefited them. The

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ability to regulate one's emotions, or internal emotional regulation, was a common and universal theme among the participants - *"feeling more level and put together; small waves don't rock the boat", "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 calm, more able to process emotion", "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 along with 50% strongly agreed they increased their ability to express appropriate ranges of emotions. There was a 50% increase in participants strongly agreeing to feeling safe. After the sessions, 63% strongly felt gratitude and 100% strongly agreed/agreed they were now experiencing periods of joy.

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*

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other kind of body treatment”, “I have been able to connect more with my higher self,with my purpose.”, and “feeling connected to the other world – it is immediate when that bone connection happens.”

Thirty-one percent of participants stated they strongly agreed they felt aligned with the universe after Zero Balancing compared to 13% strongly agreeing before the sessions. Sixty-nine percent agreed they felt aligned with the universe after their sessions. 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”, “feeling a hum or vibration through my entire body”, “I’ve been more connected to my body”, and “being more aware of me and myself, versus everything else going on around me.”* Interestingly, participants described nuances of what they were experiencing: *“feeling that sense of space..has brought a lot more awareness to my joints... and how much the joints have to do with the flow of chi, or vitality or whatever”, “allowing space for some of these things to just be, and then let them dissipate on their own”, “there is something specific about Zero Balancing that makes me aware of the*

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connection between the joints, the limbs, the center, and the spine”, and “the feeling of energy that happens in ZB is making me more aware of the fact that I have this energy flow and that I don’t focus on it very much and that maybe it would be helpful if I did focus on it more and see where that would lead.” 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: *“I am open to more possibilities in terms of relationships that I want to spend more time on and give more attention to”, “It’s helped me with better listening, better understanding, better able to hold space, and to be more tolerant”, “open to an awareness of taking our conversations a little bit deeper”, “I listen more, I am more open to opinions that are not how I feel about something”, and “I am more available to others, for more in-depth conversations and to listen and engage with others.”*

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 of the participants felt more tolerant and compassionate of others and 69% felt less controlled by external factors in their life.

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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”, “a kind of level of relaxation that is below the normal resting state where you are not worried about anything”, “slowing sliding into this kind of altered state, getting various kinds of releases, a melting feeling”, and “the relaxation felt like I could stop breathing, like ‘I don’t need to breathe.”* Sensations included: *“not awake, not asleep”, “kind of floating”, “not aware of external stimuli”, “kind of an absence of time”* and *“more aware of my whole field and not just my physical body.”* Also of note was the level of awareness participants had that in this state more possibilities were effortlessly available: *“feeling resolution without having to work through anything”,* and *“letting go of things in my life I hadn’t thought of in a while; I kind of visibly see them leaving my 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. Change is hard, and yet being able to let go of what is holding us back, and consciously allowing the self to change opens infinite possibilities of more positive health and higher consciousness.

All, (100%), of the participants reported experiencing an expanded state of consciousness through their Zero Balancing sessions during this study. This was a 50% increase from those that reported having previously experienced an expanded state of consciousness. Although there are many components of an expanded state of consciousness, several very

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common experiences in these states beyond normal, mundane consciousness are feeling unbounded by time, feeling more unitive awareness beyond just self-awareness (non-dual awareness) and feeling the freedom from working hard to make things happen. All of the participants also agreed or strongly agreed they experienced a sense of selflessness, timelessness, and effortlessness during their sessions.

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.

Discussion

Examining the role of skilled, conscious touch in human wellbeing is a fertile area for expanding health care sustainability and evolutionary consciousness needed on the planet today. The data reveal some critical insights into how skilled touch impacts well-being. The participant experiences reported form a compelling, multi-dimensional picture of how touch might serve as a fundamental aspect of restoring a sense of wellness and overall integration to the structural and energetic systems of the body overloaded by stress, trauma, and imbalances on any dimension. Integration as the meta theme found in this study is a necessary basis for human health and flourishing. Overall, "Integration is a powerful, scientifically grounded

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conceptual framework for enabling us to understand a number of human experiences, from spirituality to health” (Siegel, 2018, p.92).

Integration promotes coherence and harmony; when integration is impaired, chaos or rigidity ensues (Siegel, 2012). The qualities of coherence include: “connection, openness, harmony, engagement, receptivity, emergence (things arising in new and spontaneous ways), noesis (a sense of nonconceptual knowing), compassion and empathy” (Siegel, 2012, p. A1-16). Receiving skilled touch supports an increase in interoception in the body, making touch a mediator between body and mind (Schleip & Hager, 2012). Interoception is the ability to sense connection to, and awareness of self through our connective tissue responses and, therefore, has impact on human consciousness. Interoception is the perception of shifts in the internal bodily states that influence affective arousal and is correlated with the capacity for empathy (Siegel, 2012, p. A1-42). Many of the participants noted how they became increasingly aware of their internal states of deep relaxation and commented on how this led to feeling more themselves and more comfortable with others. Self-awareness is integral to recovery and the ability to change (van der Kolk, 2014). In fact, Dr. van de Kolk, founder and director of the Trauma Center in Brookline, MA., encourages his patients to receive bodywork as “Touch is the most elementary tool we have to calm down” (van de Kolk, 2014, p. 216).

How does the ability to relax, feel connected to oneself and others happen? According to the Polyvagal theory of Stephen Porges, feeling safe and attended to are often the prerequisites in creating a strong therapeutic relationship that is commonly found to be necessary in order to release embodied trauma responses and restore resiliency to the bodymind (Geller & Porges, 2014). Porges describes 3 stages in the mammal behavioral

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strategies mediated by the Vagus nerve: 1) immobilization (freeze), 2) mobilization (fight or flight) and 3) social engagement (receptive, interactive behavior to connect with others). The social engagement network involved with the Ventral Vagal Complex (VVC) or “social nervous system” helps mammals co-regulate one another as in a parent calming a child or a friend’s attention quieting another’s agitation. Participants commented on the awareness of the attention and awareness of the practitioner, e.g., “*It’s like my body is talking to you.*” In a Zero Balancing session, the practitioner holds a respectful, focused attentional field of awareness on the recipient, supporting the recipient to feel both safely connected to the practitioner and connected to themselves which down-regulates the autonomic nervous system to more easily move into calmness.

According to Bessel van der Kolk, “Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health: safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 79). Siegel states, “If we are attuned to another, this creates an interpersonal resonance in which each person *feels felt* by the other” (Siegel, 2012, p. 23-1). Fifty percent of the participants strongly agreed to feeling safe; feeling safe is especially important for people who have a personal history in which feeling safe was not a given, which is not something screened for in many health care treatments. Safe touch, also called neuroaffective touch, is therapeutically and psychologically significant in that it supports a reorganization to a higher order of dynamic balance (LaPierre, 2006). This visceral sense of safety allows positive changes through releasing held tension in the bodymind and opening to new, meaningful possibilities for personal health and relationships. “In a very real sense, your body is your social and emotional sense organ. It is the lens through which you

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perceive your relational world, and it is the instrument by which you act in it” (Blake, 2018, p. 12).

Preliminary research to explore what happens physiologically in a ZB session has been conducted by the Zero Balancing Touch Foundation and the NeuroSynchrony Institute between 2015-2019. A small pilot in 2015 revealed a profound and detailed synchronicity or resonance between practitioner and recipient as measured physiologically through electrodermal activity (EDA) wrist sensors worn by both practitioners and recipients (Strickland & Reynolds, 2018). A larger pilot study with a 30-person sample, conducted in 2017, with both practitioner and recipients wearing the wrist (EDA) sensors provided the EDA data evidence of an average reduction of measured stress of 61% across the entire study. Beta tests of electroencephalogram (EEG) measurements on recipients receiving a ZB session indicated ZB fulcrums cause a significant change in brain wave patterns and remembering a session reproduces the same brainwave states (Strickland & Reynolds, 2018). This current study is the first formal research study designed to see if there was a statistically significant positive change in participant’s physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of wellness after receiving a series of ZB sessions incorporating a mixed method design to capture the essence of ZB session through the lived experience of the participants.

Why then is ZB so integrative? In the human body, many of the functions that govern integration involve the neural circuitry of the middle prefrontal cortex (MPFC) of the brain. The MPFC processes autobiographical consciousness, social information, the evaluation of meaning, the activation of arousal, bodily response and higher cognitive processing. Interestingly, Siegel makes the point that the nine functions of the middle prefrontal cortex (1. body regulation,

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2. attuned communication, 3. emotional balance, 4. fear modulation, 5. flexibility of response, 6. insight, 7. empathy, 8. morality, and 9. intuition) “are also the outcome of mindfulness meditation practice. Also, the first eight are outcomes of secure attachment relationships” (Siegel, 2012, p. A1-50-51). Interestingly, that is how one participant described ZB: “*it’s [ZB]almost like a mindfulness practice.*” Mindfulness and the ability to form secure attachments are both practices supported by the Zero Balancing training principles of holding attention (concentration of awareness through close and careful observation or listening) and holding highest personal regard (holding another person in high esteem without judgement or comparison) (Smith, 2020).

In understanding more about why Zero Balancing is such an integrative form of body-mind therapy it is significant to note that ZB focuses on bone and the skeletal system. Recent research on the importance of the skeletal tissue in metabolic function indicates that skeletal tissue plays a role in the stress response (Morris, as cited in Karsenty, 2019). It has been proposed that the bone derived hormone osteocalcin defines a bony-vertebrate-specific endocrine mediation of the acute stress response (Berger et al., 2019). Research also continues to highlight the many properties of bone (Bordoni & Lagana, 2019) now considered to be an integral part of the fascial system of the human body. “Bone tissue is fundamental for the general health of the individual, influencing different organs and systems, through the hormonal paracrine production of bone cells” (Bordoni & Laguna, 2019, p. 8). “Bone acts as the inner architectural framework of the body and an antenna that can receive and transmit vibration due to its piezoelectric nature” (Murphy, 2019). “Piezoelectric current produced through stretch, compression, and tension and conducted via the rapid energy

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communicational model of connective tissue is directed through the body, moving energy from bone to bone, indirectly affecting cartilage, ligaments and soft tissue” (Geggus, as cited in Denner, 2009, p. 328).

Bone-held tension created by traumatic events or postural strain often are below the radar of conscious awareness since they cannot be resolved through volitional action. ZB practitioners are trained to evaluate where imbalances or compensatory patterns are held in the bone and offer gentle touch that can allow the recipient’s unconscious awareness to become conscious, freeing up the body-mind to utilize the energy held in these patterns for greater ease and vitality (Murphy, 2019). It is a process through which the unknown (unconscious, compensatory, embedded patterns) can become known (Smith, 2005). In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the body’s energy is conceived of as moving at the deepest, densest layer through the bone (Lauterstein, 2017). Such bone energy or chi reflects the strongest currents of energy in the body. Stimulating the flow of chi at the bone level, done with gentle touch, traction or compression, accesses the body’s deepest vertical flows of energy and enhances the recipient’s felt sense of their vitality (Murphy, 2019). One participant stated, *“My bones feel electrified and my whole skeletal structure feels lengthened.”* Zero Balancing theorizes that when these flows of energy are moving easily and freely, the body sensation is one of ease and lightness, while simultaneously being grounded and connected to the earth (Smith, 1986). This was echoed in participants' comments such as *“I feel lighter physically, more stable”*.

Furthermore, the findings of mental clarity underscore how personal and interpersonal functioning is improved when the mind is clear. Relational ease was a commonly reported

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outcome after receiving the Zero Balancing sessions pointing to the role emotional regulation plays in fostering social and emotional intelligence. The theme of embodiment is crucial because having embodied awareness creates agency to allow change and fosters the resiliency to address held tension and trauma in a safe way. Collectively, these themes speak of the importance of the holistic approach in evaluating and treating the whole person. The overall essence of receiving the Zero Balancing sessions was that participants felt integrated, a significant finding due to its overarching impact on human wellness.

The philosophy behind the research determined that a mixed method approach was most precise to animate and convey the lived experience of receiving ZB, honoring the participants accounts of the experience and how it has benefited them. This phenomenological, mixed method approach affords the opportunity to study the whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. When studying the effects of ZB on wellness, we wish to highlight the body's wisdom as valid. Additionally, the researchers hold an expanded view of validity which recognizes that there may be limitations of purely intellectual approaches which do not take into account the somatic, intuitive, emotional and spiritual ways of knowing. These ways of knowing were readily apparent in the participants statements about themselves and the effect ZB had on their well-being. Feelings of wellness and wholeness may have a protective role in health maintenance (Steptoe, Deaton, & Stone, 2015). The potential of utilizing skilled touch methods such as ZB increases traditional health care options to reduce stress and enhance feelings of well-being.

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Conclusions

As stated earlier, this study is one of the first of its kind to examine how the intersection of the dimensions of wellness, and the impact of touch (ZB) can be illuminated through the lens of phenomenology. We were seeking insight on “How our wellbeing is influenced through conscious and transformative touch.” We propose the essence of Zero Balancing is integration on the internal as well as the interpersonal level. 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. 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) as evidenced by how participants shared experiences about enhanced interoceptive awareness, connection to self and others, improved mental processing and clarity, and an increase in personal motivation. We also conclude that Zero Balancing facilitates and supports expanded states of consciousness that allow for new ways of thinking, reorganization, and healing. Lastly, 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.

Limitations

This was a pilot study with a small homogenous sample size of 16 cases not reflecting the general population thus making our findings not generalizable. Well-being research generally has yet to include both researchers and participants of more diversity.

Future Research Recommendations

One of our aspirations is that this study stimulate interest in further research into transformative touch therapies, such as ZB, as powerful interventions to improve well-being, reduce suffering, and provide a safe catalyst for personal and communal health. We are at the beginning of a new impetus to view conscious touch therapies as being integral to a systemic renaissance of health care focused on a whole-person approach to wellness, human flourishing, and higher evolutionary consciousness. Suggested future research: 1). Replication of this study in more locations, allowing for greater diversity, and developing a larger sample of participants, 2). Conduct further EEG studies with a qualitative component, 3). Explore more deeply the role of therapeutic resonance between the therapist and client in health outcomes in touch modalities, 4). Further research in ZB and other touch modalities as a trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed forms of bodywork, and 5). Explore how individual and societal contexts play out in the study of well-being.

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INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF ZERO BALANCING®

About the Authors and Lead Researchers



Misty Rhoads, Ph.D., CZB, Reiki Master has been involved in the health and education field for over 18 years. She is co-owner of the Humble Rhoads to Wellness Center and is a Full Professor focusing on public health at Eastern Illinois University. Misty currently teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in research and statistics, integrative medicine, women's health, human sexuality, and body, health and society issues. Her research is focused on wellness; balancing the body, mind, spirit; transformative touch; LGBTQ+ health, and trauma release.



Mary H. Murphy, M.Ed, LMT, CZB, has been involved in therapeutic bodywork since 1981 as a practitioner and advanced bodywork educator. A Zero Balancing Health Association faculty member for 17 years she is the owner of the Zero Balancing Wellness Center in the Chicago area where she practices and teaches. She is a graduate of Georgetown University, the Chicago School of Massage Therapy and Naropa University with a MA in Contemplative Education. Her research is focused on skilled touch, somatic awareness, energy medicine and contemplative education and practices.

About the Co-Researchers



Michele Doucette BS, DC, CZB started her scientific career, after receiving her degree in biochemistry, working at Ciba Corning Diagnostics Laboratory. Looking into a test tube one day she realized her curiosity about the nature of life would never be fulfilled from a reductionist perspective. She became interested in the innate healing ability of nature, received her doctorate of chiropractic in 1989 and was certified in Zero Balancing in 1999. Dr. Doucette became a Zero Balancing teacher in 2004. She presently practices chiropractic and ZB in Wilmington VT and teaches nationally. ZB service includes current chair of the ZBHA Ethics Committee, past chair of the Faculty Committee, current member of the Zero Balancing Touch Foundation Research Committee.



Tom Gentile, M. Ac., was introduced to Zero Balancing by Fritz Smith in 1994 while studying at The Traditional Acupuncture Institute in Maryland where he enjoyed training in ZB as it paralleled his education in 5-Element acupuncture. Tom also trained to become a Rolfer, was a faculty member at TAI, and was clinical director at the Academy for Five Element Acupuncture in Florida. He became a teacher of ZB in 2005 and is very involved in the research projects being developed around ZB. Tom has since added oxygen chambers to his work with clients and practices at **Gentile Hyperbaric** in Brattleboro, VT. He became interested in microcirculation and hyperbaric oxygen therapy while participating in a ZB neurological research project in Austin, TX. And became further interested in its uses for Lyme's Disease treatment when his wonderful terrific perfect son contracted Lyme's twice. His main emphasis and joy in his practice, however, is Zero Balancing.

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Appendix A

Table 1*Demographic Information of the Participants*

Number	Age Range	Race	Gender	Education Level	# Previous ZB Sessions	Spiritual Practice
1	65-74	Caucasian	Male	Bachelor's	2	Yes
2	55-64	Caucasian	Female	Some College	30+	No
3	35-44	Caucasian	Female	Bachelor's	4	Yes
4	25-34	Caucasian	Male	Bachelor's	6	Yes
5	55-64	Caucasian	Female	Associate's	10	Yes
6	75+	Caucasian	Female	Some College	40+	No
7	65-74	Caucasian	Male	Bachelor's	6	Yes
8	55-64	Caucasian	Female	Bachelor's	40+	No
9	25-34	Caucasian	Female	Doctorate	4	Yes
10	65-74	Caucasian	Female	Master's	20+	Yes
11	45-54	Caucasian	Male	Master's	4	Yes
12	18-24	Caucasian	Male	High School	5	Yes
13	55-64	Caucasian	Female	Bachelor's	2	No
14	55-64	Caucasian	Male	Bachelor's	10	Yes
15	55-64	Caucasian	Female	Bachelor's	25+	Yes
16	55-64	Caucasian	Female	Associate's	100+	Yes

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Appendix B

Table 2.

Examples of Participants' Responses per Theme

Themes	Quote Examples
Integration	"overall feeling of wellbeing", "an overall feeling of inner peace is a good way to explain it", "it literally makes my body work more in concert with my brain, my spirit and my soul", "I feel an ease of consciousness", "it is holistic thing, I feel lighter physically, more stable, by addition my soul feels lighter", "more connected- my body, my energy, my spirit; everything is interconnected"
Physical	"I've don't think I have ever been as relaxed", "my whole skeletal system seemed elongated", "it feels like it [tension] just evaporates", "good effect on my sleeping habits", "feels like the numbness in my extremities is moving out", "aware of pain I didn't know I had until it released" "the hand tremors I have had actually disappeared", "my low back pain has melted away", "it's been very helpful for my hips"
Mental	"able to be more creative and more confident in my creativity", "more clarity, more confidence", "more motivated", "smoother processing", "finding new and novel solutions", "processing events from a more controlled, objective basis", "I'm able to think more clearly", "focusing better at work, in handling complex things; it didn't overwhelm me as it would have in the past"
Emotional	"I am in more control of my emotions", "I can stay calm and understand everyone processes things differently", "I am not easily frustrated", "helped me deal with anger issues", "helped me balance and control my emotions", "it takes the fear away from facing things I avoid", "I feel more happy, more at peace", "more capable about handling stress", "when I feel negative emotions arising, I can choose my responses"
Spiritual	"I have been able to connect more with my higher self, ...with my purpose.", "there is this whole spiritual side to it that takes it a step beyond physical healing", "more aware of things and signs happening around me", "feeling a very strong connection with a higher power", "something feels spiritual about ZB...I've never felt with any other kind of body treatment"
Embodiment	"an inner sense of stability", "I can feel the energy moving through my body", "I've been more connected to my body", "more grounded, more engaged with my body", "more conscious of my body, "paying more attention to my body, to my body language", "I've been aware to break patterns, old patterns", "I feel more in touch with my body, and my mind. ", "being more aware of me and myself versus everything else going around me", "
Relational Ease	"it creates an open, stable, loving atmosphere", "I think it has made me more pleasant", "easier to relate", "improved sense of communication", "open to an awareness of taking our conversations a little bit deeper", "it's helped me again with better listening", better able to hold space and to be more tolerant.", "it kept communication open", "I think it's how well I listen; just better clarity and communication", "I'm feeling more connected to my husband; it feels like we are much more working together as a team"
Expanded States of Consciousness	"you find yourself going to different places", "I feel my body yet I wasn't in my body", "I'm very aware and in touch with the treatment itself, but not aware of anything else around", "not awake, not asleep", "kind of an absence of time" "slowly sliding into this kind of altered state, getting various kinds of releases, a melting feeling", "the relaxation felt like I could stop breathing" "like 'I don't need to breathe", "I've had some visions during ZB sessions", "I see imagery and colors", "I'm not all inside my skin, like I am bigger than my physical body, "I'm just more aware of my whole field rather than just my physical body"