



Hakomi Mindfulness-Centered Somatic Psychotherapy: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice

Edited by Halko Weiss PhD, Greg Johanson, PhD
and Lorena Monda, MS, DOM, LPCC

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn, PhD

Editor's Note: I offer, for transparency's sake, that I know two of the three editors. I interviewed Halko for a previous article in Somatic Psychotherapy Today, (SPT) and have attended his workshops at professional conferences. I met Greg through our mutual affiliation with the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy—we both participated on the board at one point and he has been supportive of SPT since its inception.

The trouble with textbooks is that they are required. No matter what the reason or educational pursuit (undergrad, graduate, professional training, CEUS, a review), the book is mandatory. It is assigned with the expectation that the reader will demonstrate an acceptable level of proficiency regarding the subject matter.

To make matters worse, many text books are written with a heady, dense tone. The materials are offered with extensive footnotes and endnotes, with references and citations clogging the page to an uncomfortable degree. And then there's the language—glossaries are required to understand the content and are returned to again and again during the reading assignment.

But, what if the experience was different?

When I first flipped through *Hakomi Mindfulness-Centered Somatic Psychotherapy: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice*, edited by Halko Weiss, PhD, Greg Johanson, PhD and Lorena Monda, MS, DOM, LPCC, I noticed that the editors, who are also contributors, clearly had a view of where they wanted to begin—the characteristics and essence of Hakomi—and end—appendices, references, contributors and the requisite index. The middle—the body of the book—discussed theory, methodology and therapeutic strategy, and technique and intervention. Having experienced Hakomi first hand in trainings and workshops, as well as personally with Ron Kurtz, the originator of Hakomi therapy, I had a preconceived notion of what the book would be about. I like how Hakomi works, and still, that undercurrent of dread flowed: it's a textbook, it is summer after all, and I have to read a textbook and perform.

But something magical happened.

Perhaps it's because the contributors and editors are all Hakomi specialists, perhaps it's because they are not just practitioners of this methodology but have sincerely immersed themselves in Hakomi's foundational precepts personally and professionally: mindfulness, presence, loving kindness, and nonviolence.

I felt as if the material was written according to the core essence of Hakomi—"assisted self-study done in a state of

mindfulness" (p. 49). From the forward, written by Richard C. Schwartz—a therapist who developed a model of psychotherapy that he called internal family systems, and his personal connection with Greg Johanson and Ron Kurtz—to the end with Uta Gunther's chapter on the strengths and limitations of the Hakomi method, I felt a connection with the person behind the words, the presence and spirit within the content. I was not reading a typical textbook. I was in fact participating relationally with the contributors, having an in-depth conversation as I explored what each had to offer, experimented with the ideas offered to see how they felt inside of me, to see what responses were triggered, and what stayed with me.

And to make matters even better, each chapter is relatively short! I fell into the writing without worry of getting lost in a quagmire of data. The writing was clean and crisp, case studies and links to current research kept things moving between information and description with just enough relevant, up-to-date citations, and then immersion into the present moment with clients and reflections. Truly a mind body experience.

A Closer Look Inside

Hakomi practitioners integrated mindfulness practices into the therapeutic relationship long before the current mindfulness explosion fueled by Jon Cabot Zin, Jack Kornfield, Jaak Panksepp, Dan Siegel and more.

In Hakomi, mindfulness is considered "the most effective tool to study the organization of the human experience and begin to relate to it in healing ways" (p. 48). It is the core principle, method, and practice because cultivating mindfulness in order to witness what our mind has created is said to enable clients to move beyond the limitations of their ordinary consciousness, which are based on habitual reactions, to observe their implicit memory at work in the present-moment organization of experience (p.48).

In Hakomi, mindfulness is used in two central ways: (1) the therapist enters mindfulness and loving awareness before the session and approaches the work from this state; (2) clients are invited into a state of mindful self-reflection where they do the

work each session. Mindfulness thus supports 'awareness of unity' as the therapist remains conscious of her own bodily states and thoughts while also tracking those of her client. Being mindful, the therapist and client can notice clues about the mind from the body's posture, position, tension, movement and habits. The client learns how to connect with her internal observer and from there learns the art of nonjudgmental self-observation with curiosity.

Mindfulness then is the basis for loving presence, which is considered the state that carries the fundamental qualities a Hakomi therapist brings to the therapeutic relationship. Within the relationship is the foundational belief of nonviolence or a sense of 'nondoing'. Clients must feel safe in the relationship to enter into a mindful state, to explore their experience and participate in the experiments that lead to conscious awareness of the unconscious patterns and behaviors impacting their lives—those core organizing beliefs known as "the fundamental beliefs that structure a person's experience of himself in relation to the world and vice versa" (p. 66).

"When nonviolence, mindfulness, and compassion meet to create a healing space, a certain economy of therapy arises" (p.51).

The function of mindfulness in Hakomi is to cultivate the ability to stay with the present experience and notice what is actually happening in the moment. Four foundations of mindfulness are discussed: (1) simple intimacy with the body itself; (2) awareness of the flux of sensations in the body; (3) observing thoughts and feelings as they arise together and come to know their interdependent nature; (4) turning the mind back on itself to witness how the entire spectrum of consciousness, sensation, reaction, emotion, and thought all arise and interact with each other (p.63).

Mindfulness is showcased in several chapters covering the more general and philosophical use in the psychodynamic context, specific Hakomi interventions embedded in mindfulness, the special benefits of working with mindfulness as means for transformation, and using mindfulness with trauma states.

Mindfulness plays an important part in Hakomi and is prominent in this book because the intention is to study a client's behavior for sources of what Ron termed, "experiments" designed to trigger reactions that bring the unconscious, adaptive processes driving behavior into the client's awareness, not to look for symptoms of disease. These experiments are said to reveal connections between beliefs, memories and habitual behaviors that keep the client stuck.



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Breaking the Book into Sections

The book is comprised of 25 chapters and three appendices: the Glossary of Hakomi Terms; Praxis: Annotated Case illustrations; and Hakomi in Context: The Large Picture in History and Research. The book can be read in sequence as well as in any order. The content is consistent enough and repetitive enough to allow readers to jump in and out and maintain and/or gain understanding. I found myself accessing the material more readily while deepening into my relationship with the techniques used during a Hakomi session. These include, along with mindfulness: an experimental attitude; following and leading; tracking and contact; working through core beliefs; transformation; and character informed interventions.

Before reading the book, I didn't know that Hakomi's original character map evolved from the theories of Wilhelm Reich, Alexander Lowen, David Shapiro, and John Pierrakos. I learned that while some processes use character structure as a set guideline for client patterning (bodily and cognitively), Hakomi sees character as "a creative attempt to assert one's organicity"—to find personal empowerment in untenable situations (pg. 77). The chapter on Hakomi Character Theory is one for me to reread along with the chapter on Hakomi Character-Informed Interventions. There is much to assimilate.

Methodology and Therapeutic Strategy

The chapters in this section move deeper into the Hakomi process. While the first two sections offer readers a basic understanding of Hakomi's foundational precepts, section three delves into Hakomi in action. There's discussion about the therapeutic relationship with attunement, resonance and the use of insight that are necessary to attune with the client. Along with the techniques of contact and tracking, Hakomi therapists also focus on "creating the bubble". "The bubble is a metaphor for a palpable connection between client and

therapist that is infused with warmth, presence, awareness and attention" (p. 101). Because the therapeutic relationship directly impacts the 'cooperation of the unconscious', "Kurtz used this term to describe the goal and primary outcome of a well-working therapeutic relationship" (pg. 105). Loving presence, empathy and understanding, listening and safety are highlighted within this primary relationship.

Mindfulness is revisited as a tool in use followed by the ways to employ the experimental attitude—curiosity in action. Following and leading is followed by ethical considerations in terms of the right use of power: "Right use of power and influence is understood as the heart of ethics" (pg. 139).

Technique and Intervention

This section includes a discussion on resistance and defense and how to approach these attitudes in client sessions. Early on, Ron had renamed habitual defense patterns as barriers. When working with Ron, I experienced his direct approach to what he interpreted as my barriers. He used verbal statements to confront what he saw as my resistance to his offer to help and with further interaction he employed a technique he called "jumping out of the system" (JOOTS). The process is designed to allow the client to gain distance from the system while staying with it and appreciating it, studying it a bit to understand how it has functioned in the past and what it has been good for (pg. 244). The chapters here bring Hakomi into the therapeutic context via a more hands on sense—the ideas can be taken from book to client, from reading to experimenting during client sessions.

In Conclusion

As with any review, there comes a point when you have to say, "If you are fascinated by and/or interested in learning more about Hakomi therapy, read this book."

I found myself rereading several chapters and sensing how to integrate it with my work. I also found myself challenged at times to experience relationships anew. For instance, I was fascinated by the statements that: (a) it is erroneous to think we are separate from one another and, (b) that it was detrimental to think we are all one and the same—a belief I have held for some time considering the interweave of cellular and energetic histories. Yet, from the Hakomi vantage, we, human beings, are viewed as an “interconnected diversity”. In this place I sense a connection while validating of our uniqueness.

To bring my thoughts to a sense of closure, I offer Jon Eisman’s opening paragraph (pg. 76), which I think offers the best summary of the Hakomi approach:

“ . . . Hakomi focuses on the way somatic, emotional, and cognitive experiences form from deeply held beliefs, which in turn generate habituated behavior and perceptual patterns. These behaviors and perceptions may then be processed utilizing mindfulness and the careful study of the present experience to uncover the underlying formative ‘core material’. These operational precepts of the body—mindfulness, present experience and neurologically held belief patterns-form the cornerstones of the Hakomi method.”

An Overview from Norton Publishing:

“Hakomi is an integrative method that combines Western psychology and body-centered techniques with mindfulness principles from Eastern psychology. This book, written and edited by members of the Hakomi Institute—the world’s leading professional training program for Hakomi practitioners—and by practitioners and teachers from across the globe, introduces all the processes and practices that therapists need in order to begin to use this method with clients. The authors detail Hakomi’s unique integration of body psychotherapy, mindfulness, and the Eastern philosophical principle of non-violence, grounding leading-edge therapeutic technique in an attentiveness to the whole person and their capacity for transformation.”

