The Four Dimensions of Experience

From the field of existential psychotherapy derives the notion of the four dimensions which constitute human experience. These dimensions can be used to assess where we are at in our lives and what needs attention and nurturing. One of the strengths of using a schema like the one presented here, is that we lessen our tendency to pathologize everything. Instead we look at the four dimensions of experience as things which might be well aligned and rich or contain imbalances and are out of step with our life goals.

The four dimensions are:

- **Physical** – How we relate to our bodies and how our bodies relate to us.
- **Personal** – The inner psychology of the person. I sometimes call this the inner world.
- **Social** – how the person interacts with the world. This includes work. I call this the outer world at times.
- **Spiritual** – How we relate to God/Universe/Buddha etc. and how is this reflected in our day to day lives.

While the four dimensions of experience seem to be very separate domains they are interrelated and affect one another. For example, if our bodies are in a high state of decay and death seems around the corner it can often affect our relationship to the spiritual. Similarly, the spiritual can affect the body via prayer and reflection. Creating a healing space for our bodies can involve some profound spiritual practices.

We might have an anxiety disorder which included some distorted and unrealistic thinking patterns, but it also can affect our physiological makeup. Shallow breathing, heart palpitations etc. The same anxiety disorder rooted in the personal also can affect the social sphere. It might make our work duties harder to manage, or it may affect our relationships with our loved ones. In turn, we might start to ask God for assistance. Or we might practice mindfulness or a deep acceptance.

When we look at ourselves with these four dimensions of experience in mind, we often obtain a fuller and richer picture of where we are at in life. Each dimension could be viewed as a continuum which overlaps with other dimensions. If someone is functioning at one extreme in a dimension, then that may indicate some difficulty achieving their life goals. For instance, if someone is overly focussed on the physical then a person may be overly dependent upon hedonistic pleasures. Our society is particularly prone to working on extremes in this dimension. Being overweight with high incidents of obesity are prominent. As is the increase in diabetes 2. Society even defends unhealthy behaviour by using safe spaces and fat shaming. Our materialism is a culture built on more and more,
Where very few people are content or know how to relax. Comfort eating, problem drinking, compulsive shopping, over medicating are things our society is becoming all too familiar with.

But it is a continuum where we might fall on the other extreme. We might become physically inert, or not paying enough attention to our bodies which can lead to sickness and disease. A person also might take excessive physical risks which endangers their lives.

A key then is to attempt to get as much balance as we can in each dimension. Someone who is a spiritual ascetic and is overly focussed on the spiritual neglects the physical. So much so that they often must rely on others to survive.

We know from an abundance of research that our social spheres are key indicators of happiness. Our connection to and investment in others are areas which also should be balanced. For instance, if we are overly focussed on a romantic relationship we might lose ourselves. On the other hand, if we are withdrawn and do not take risks, we might never form the romantic relationship we crave. A person can be overly sensitive to the criticism of others. Or they may project things they unconsciously do not like onto others. If we are overly focussed on work, we might neglect our loved ones.

The personal dimension runs the risk of narcissistic behaviour. We might become too self-centred on one extreme. On the other extreme we might not have a solid sense of being which fills us with daily anxiety and leaves us aimless in life. We could become too head centred where we are constantly analysing the world and those in it. On the other hand, we might become too sensitive to our emotions and then become overwhelmed by them. Both modes can lead to a type of paralysis where effectively we are just treading water rather than living life.

Extremism rears its head in the spiritual as well. Fanaticism in my religions is not uncommon. This type of fanaticism often dismisses alternate points of view. Intolerance, oppression, excessive preaching, specialism often seen in the spiritual dimension. Equally, is a kind of woo approach to life with a person’s head far too much in the clouds. A person can live a fantasy life based on superstitions, half-truths and misconceptions.

One of the strengths of this approach is that each dimension can offer a different perspective on the same phenomena. For instance, if someone has migraines, we might ask the following:

How does the migraine affect me as a physical being?
How does the migraine affect me as a social being?
How does the migraine affect me as a psychological being?
How does the migraine affect me as a spiritual being?

Answering the questions as fully as possible may bring an increased awareness around the issue. It can provide us with a different way of looking at things while at the same time providing possible clues as to how to best approach the problem.

We can use the same set of questions for anything about self we wish to explore in greater detail. They are a way into our being by looking at facets we might otherwise ignore.