

Herbalism in Context: Interpreting a Client Interview and Shaping an Outcome

Leslie Alexander, PhD, RH(AHG) & Leslie Williams, M.Ed, RH(AHG)
Leslie@RestorationHerbs.com & Herbalist.Williams@gmail.com

Abstract: In practice, we observe, listen, interact and assess a client. We ask questions and measure replies. We aim to collect a rounded profile of an individual which extends beyond their symptom profile and addresses not only their physical well-being but also their emotional and spiritual well-being. After an initial assessment, whether at home, at a county fair or in a clinic, we have the task of prioritizing information; grouping like with like, identifying places where we may well need additional information so that we can offer a holistic protocol. How do we effectively use the pieces of information that we collected? - the scalloped tongue; the health history; the list of daily pharmaceuticals; the social isolation? And how do these pieces fit with why a client asked for a consult in the first place? The process of sorting this information and shaping it into a realistic and holistic protocol for a client is the challenge. We will discuss this and work through big and small questions while using case study examples. Whether we work with a huge apothecary from several traditions or we work with a dozen herbs from our kitchen, or kitchen garden – the same principles and skills apply. How do we decide where to begin? What is more important and what sort of timeline do we use? Where do we focus our attention? Should herbs be a primary resource? And if not, why not? Join us as we address these questions and build a holistic protocol together.

A variety of intake forms and case history forms abound. Each has its own focus, biases, and reflects varying approaches to working with health and wellness. As students wishing to better ground our practices and skills in the belief systems associated with our work, we may forget that these forms are but *guidelines*; they are not maps. As we consider the multitude of available options, theories and ideas that surround *herbalism in context*, we realize that our individual paths can be enhanced by adjusting our own balance and shifting our focus.

We can create an intake form that meets our own needs. Or, we may decide to use ideas from many approaches to create a fluid approach to client assessments, without reliance on paper paths. Our challenge is therefore not only to set our herbalist skills in context, but also to see our clients in a context that is meaningful to them, which no doubt reflects our own preferred ways of practicing herbalism.

As practitioners, we make our own paths and of equal importance, we make our own paths with each client.

When we refer to an herbal protocol, we consider this to be more – far more - than an herbal intervention. Indeed, herbs may not even be part of an intervention, or they may be used in a staged or staggered approach. The foundation of a holistic herbal protocol might well be outlined, at least in its most basic sense, as illustrated in Figure 1.

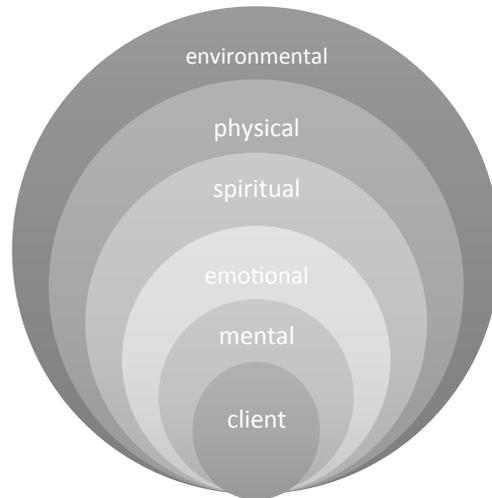


Figure I: Breadth of an Holistic Protocol

In Figure I, we set the client in the context of their experience. Note that it is *their* experience and this includes their physical expression of symptoms, health and well-being in the context of their individual life; that is – in the context of their environment, their spiritual practices as well as their emotional and physical well-being. As practitioners we begin from our own interpretations of these realms of being. Nonetheless, our lives are not to be confused with those of our clients.

Also, we must recognize that Figure I is an illustration and not the state of being in which we are likely to meet a client, or indeed expect to leave a client when our work together is complete. Figure I may appear at first glance to be a well-balanced state of being, but could well be a very imbalanced state, for many of us most of the time. Balance among these spheres is constantly changing.

When we meet a client they may be experiencing any of the possible permutations of Figure I, three of which are shown in Figure II.

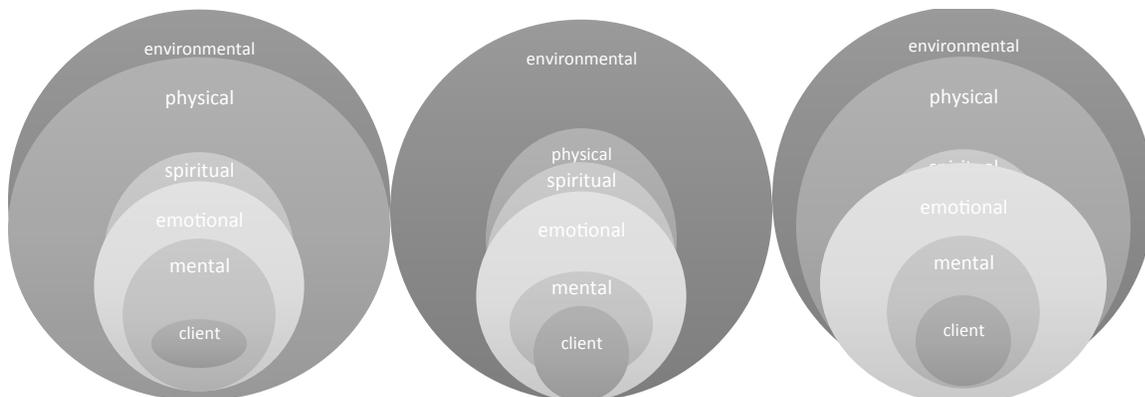


Figure II: Illustrative examples of balance and imbalance.

In Figure II we see possible states of balance and imbalance. While these relative states often shift— a single representation can reflect a natural state of balance for one individual and for another, imbalance. Imbalance can reach the point of chaos but often over time some states compensate for these shifts as we reach a new point of balance. As practitioners, we can see that a holistic protocol is likely to touch on these five spheres of well-being. We may meet a client who is experiencing an exacerbation of physical symptoms, as shown in Figure II (left) as compared to Figure I. This state encompasses not just their physical symptom profile, but may have a measurable effect on other aspects of being – for example, the spiritual and emotional realms of self. This is not a fixed state but a snapshot along a continuum.

Another client, or even the same client at another time in another circumstance, may well find their physical self overwhelmed by their experience of their environment. Life in a cold, noisy, highly polluted urban area may affect concentration, and emotions may be then duly affected (Figure II, center). Too, a spiritual self may be subsumed by emotion and symptom experience (Figure II, right). Figure II portrays *possible* states of being as examples of the infinite array of ever changing states. It is helpful therefore for us as practitioners to be able to identify imbalances where they may exist and not lose sight of the fact that these experiences are not static nor unrelated to one another. As practitioners we therefore need to meet our clients ‘where they are’ at each and every consultation.

An individual may well approach a first aid station at a gathering for help with a cut or a digestive concern. At this time, these concerns are primary and can be addressed within a safe context of, for example, assessing allergies, medications, herbal preparations, supplements and existing health conditions. In such a setting, other considerations that do not have a direct and immediate bearing on the purpose of the consult are likely to be set aside. This can be described as a less than holistic approach, but nonetheless appropriate, likely to be effective and helpful.

In another setting, the same individual presents with digestive concerns. Now, in the context of their daily life, digestive concerns may be seen as a manifestation of the stress of commuting, long days in work or inadequate dietary choices – indeed these same digestive concerns can have an organic origin that is exacerbated by our client’s day-to-day experiences.

As Bob Flaws has said, *If one only sees the disease, it is like failing to see the forest for the trees. The disease is merely a figure within the ground of the total gestalt or pattern that is the patient. (How to Write a TCM Herbal Formula, p7).*

Underlying issues are likely to be addressed slowly, as we build a sound foundation on which we can then shift balances. A strong foundation, following tonification for example, supports further, enduring change.

We must consider the parameters of any holistic protocol and its application in the context of a client in her/his daily life. Too, we cannot always paint with a broad brush or make assumptions. Environment, including a client’s economic situation, social and

cultural environment, daily day, resources and time commitments are each integral to the creation and refinement of our protocol which is, at the very least, designed to foster compliance and improvements in health issues. We need to know these limits in order to ask more useful questions. In disentangling information we move toward interventions, sometimes solutions, to specific concerns of the client. It is important to note that these concerns may not entirely reflect our own priorities with this client. Meaningful work and progress can arise from discussing these interpretive differences with clients, as appropriate.

Few of us are an open book. We need not hold on to our first impressions of our clients as we move forward. As we build trust, we create ease. As we create ease, there is more expansion and yes, more openness and trust. Our work includes creating ease and building openness, as it is here that we get to know more about our clients and can better tailor our interventions.

And what of herbs? We may be able to measure the effects of herbs within a variety of contexts. Too, we need to remember that assessing the effects of herbs is an ongoing task. Herbs are likely to have their greatest and most sustained effect(s) when we, as herbalists, do sufficient preparatory work and lay a sound foundation, and if we consider the many aspects of a client's life.

As educators, it is also important for us to insure that our clients understand the direction of our plan, our protocol; are in agreement and trusting of that direction; have an idea of duration, with clear short- and long-term goals and that we agree, as necessary, on the relevant tools appropriate to each client. In this way we create a contract together with a client. This is herbalism in context.