

# **An Application of Body Psychotherapy**

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## **Introduction**

I am going to focus on some selected basic principles of my work as a Body Psychotherapist which are humanistic. I work from a position which is generally client-centered with an openness towards the possibility of an authentic meeting of equals in the therapeutic relationship. I see the client for their potential, abilities and strengths, working towards love, consciousness, self-determination and self-actualization.

I have chosen to look at the power dynamics as they can manifest in the therapeutic relationship and to talk about the importance of being embodied as a psychotherapist and being clear about the intention in the contact. I illustrate how I work with breathing and how I integrate dreams in the context of working as a Body Psychotherapist.

## **Core Belief**

I do believe that each person is unique in their emotional, mental, psychological and spiritual make up. Just as no one has the same fingerprint no one has the same imprint of their innate nature. Each person needs to be seen, met and treated from this vantage point. This means I need to strive to find this particular uniqueness in each person and to be open and curious along the way. For me psychotherapy is an exploration towards and a detection of the original seed of one's being, one's unique essence. This personal essence is like everyone's holy grail and needs to be protected against the messages coming from the outside. The degree of protection varies and for many it manifests as a massive defensive armour i.e. Character Structure. I believe this personal essence bears all human potential including the capacity for self organisation and healing.

It is this view that attracted me to Body Psychotherapy 'that human beings operate from an inner core - the primary level - which is per se spontaneous, positive and life enhancing, having the capacity for self regulation.... The secondary level - the character armour - contains the distorted impulses....' (Eiden 2002:28)

## **Understanding Power**

One of the most significant influences in life is our experience of power. Children are exposed throughout their upbringing to the almighty power of parents, teachers and adults in general. In so many ways children are powerless in relation to grown-ups and the reality is that adults do really have power over children. Growing up within such a convention may constitute a basic belief saying: 'in order to have power, I have to have power over someone' and in reverse: 'I am powerless and weak as long as I can't change you. If I can change you, then I know I have power because I have power over you.' This belief underpins a power structure we find everywhere in society and its institutions. The only way to have and to maintain power over someone is to use force. This often evokes a counter force and can easily escalate endlessly. To use force is a misuse and often even an abuse of power.

I challenge this belief system whenever the opportunity arises by saying to the client 'you don't have the power e.g. to change your partner's behaviour, unless you use force, but if you want to change the situation you are in with your partner, you have only the power to change yourself. You have to take the responsibility for change.' Of course this is true also for the therapeutic

relationship. As psychotherapist I don't have the power to change my client although they might wish to hand over the power for a while to me. This will be part of the client's therapeutic process and I need to be aware of it and be sensitive in my responses, not to take advantage of this given position.

The following clinical example might illustrate the point I want to make: A young woman, at the time in her late twenties, came to see me in an emergency as she frequently suffered from severe panic attacks, which came without any warning signals. She lost her strength and the capacity to move. Several times she collapsed while she went out shopping. Her legs would not any longer carry her and she had to be brought home by an ambulance. At the time she was still living with her parents. For days she could not get herself out of bed. Although she was living just around the corner she had to come by taxi to see me. She was very scared of the condition being incurable and that she might end up being confined to a wheelchair. In one session it was appropriate to say to her, 'I believe that your body wants to tell you something by responding in such a radical way to you. There must be something in your life you are doing at present which is not right for you. Your body is stopping you by saying "I am not going any further". Any idea what it could be?' Gradually she realised that she could not say 'no' to her mother's constant demands. It happened one day when she came to see me, that I had to use the second floor therapy room while I saw her normally on the ground floor. She had to climb up the stairs and by the time she entered the therapy room she was out of breath and started to panic. She asked me to bring her a glass of water. I went downstairs to fetch a glass and thought it might be good to offer her also a few drops of Bachflower Rescue Remedy with the water. When I attempted to do this she screamed violently at me 'no, no, I don't want this, let me out of here.' Immediately I reassured her that she does not have to take the Rescue Remedy. She drank the water and when she calmed down after a short while, she felt guilty and was very apologetic towards me, having misbehaved so badly. I pointed out to her, that she has just shown to me how capable she was to take care of herself by saying clearly no to something she did not want. I praised her behaviour. At this moment her whole body let go of its tension and tears built up in her eyes. This was a turning point and the ice had broken. When she left that day she walked home for the first time and did not need a taxi any longer after that session. Further to these spontaneous changes the client had a felt sense of relaxing and expanding in her body as opposed to being in a state of hyper arousal and tension. I could use her experience as resource to help her with simple breathing techniques e.g. putting her hand on her belly and slowly in- and exhale, counting each time up to six. It did not take long before she was able to move out of her parents house into her own home.

How to understand this? A fixed belief pattern with its predicted negative outcome got utterly shaken and completely electrified by a positive response which the client had never experienced on an organismic level before. I see this as an example where change occurred as a "spontaneous creation which arose by amplifying events in given channels of the client therapist interaction". (Mindell 1989: 8)

### **Embodiment and Intentionality**

It is essential to me as Body Psychotherapist to be in touch with my own body, to be able to use my body and its senses in relation to myself and my client. Being anchored in my own body I create space for myself which allows space between me and the client. This spaciousness enables the client to get in touch with their own inner space.

It is extremely important for me while I am relating to a client to be clear in my intention. My intention, my inner attitude, has an impact on the client, and the client will have a response, different sensations and feelings which stem from the relationship the client has had to their primary love object, the mothering person and how they have internalised this joint venture by introjection, identification and ego identity. (Kernberg 1979:33) They can be sometimes extremely subtle or even unconscious. In being aware of my intention and the response of the client I gain an

understanding of the client's make up and am able to explore it further.

I use a simple exercise in training courses to illustrate the power of an inner attitude. Clients are asked to lie on the mattress with closed eyes, while therapists sit beside clients. For five minutes therapists will adopt an inner attitude of being quite anxious, concerned and overprotective and for another five minutes therapists will sit beside clients being unfocused, wandering off, having their thoughts somewhere else. In both cases therapists remain sitting on the same spot, not altering their body position at all. The clients have been instructed beforehand that it is not important to guess the two attitudes but to be aware of what responses and sensations they have in their body while experiencing them.

Clients report back having had various bodily sensations e.g. wanting to stop breathing, getting cold shivers, wanting to turn away; or having warm tingling sensations throughout their body, feeling held and safe; or having different emotions like feeling abandonment, fear, despair, anger, emptiness, sadness; or love, desire, pleasure and joy. Clients and therapists alike are bewildered by the profound effect of a simple change of intention.

This touches on the effective use of somatic counter transference as the energetic connection and non verbal communication is a two way process. As a Body Psychotherapist my body becomes an essential tool in understanding how the client's process creates energetic, sensory and emotional changes within me which give me insights into the client's feelings, defenses and projections.

Knowing that the psychotherapist's inner attitude has such a strong effect, physical touch transmits the intention even more. Touching a client's body with respect and an intention of inviting 'what is' - 'whatever wants to happen, let it happen' and having no investment in the outcome, creates a space in which client and therapist can enter a therapeutic dialogue which can be entirely physical and non-verbal for quite a length of time. The dialogue as defined by Socrates is a conversation between two (or more) people in which the questioner guides the other person step by step towards realisation.

Here is a typical example of a short dialogue between my hand and a client's belly if they would be able to use words: Hand: I can feel quite a strong knot there. Belly: yes, since you mention it I feel it too and it hurts . H: can you bear the pain? B: just about. H: I want to adopt a bit more pressure. B: I am scared it will hurt even more. H: it probably will and I will lessen the pressure after a very short time. B: well go ahead and give it a go. H: how was this? B: not as strong as I thought. H: Is it o.k. to play with that for a while and see what happens when I apply each time a bit more pressure? B: yes, I am quite curious myself. H: I want to stay much longer on the knot and I am sure it will be quite painful, see if you can bear it. B: I'll give it a try - I can hardly bear it - its on the edge - what a relief, the knot dispersed - the pain has gone - I feel warm all over. H: well done, now you can enjoy the comfort.

It is sometimes important to be immersed in the rich world of non verbal relating. New and deeper dimensions can be missed when meeting the client only in the world of language. It is also crucial not to interpret or put words to the client's experience and let the client's body tell the story.

### **Working with Breathing**

Breathing plays a fundamental part in my work as Body Psychotherapist. Breathing is the bridge between the voluntary and involuntary system of the organism. We can voluntarily stop breathing or force our self to in- and exhale very fast, and we involuntarily breathe when living our daily routine or when asleep.

A breathing cycle has four different stages: inspiration followed by a still point followed by expiration followed by a still point. In inspiration we take in what the world has to offer, at the still point we transform what we took in from the world so it becomes a part of our self, in expiration we give to the world what we have to offer, at the still point we remain connected to our self.

The breathing rhythm resembles the rhythm of the sea. Inspiration is the building up of the wave with its peak at the still point. Expiration is the falling of the wave with its bottom at the still point. Each inspiration is like being born. People with an over-emphasis on the inspiratory tendency are afraid of letting go, of dying. They need to be supported for more release. Expiration is like letting go. People with a similarly over-emphasised expiratory tendency are afraid of growing up, to be born. They need to be supported for more containment. The polarity of release and containment in the breathing represents the polarity of holding-in or letting-go of feelings.

People who stay in the head have a pattern of resistance against their out breath. They might present a schizoid tendency. They are helped to breathe out by encouraging an uncontrolled flow of movement. People who lose their heads and are overwhelmed by their feelings have a pattern of restricting their inbreath. They might present a hysterical tendency. They are helped by means of encouraging more containment.

The Pulsation Exercise I describe below has all the potential to expose one's habitual breathing patterns. I use this exercise also for gathering diagnostic information about the underlying psychological defenses.

The client kneels on the edge of a mattress with toes touching the floor, facing a pile of pillows. The therapist gives the following instructions: "be aware of your in-breath and out-breath and find your own rhythm. Take your time. When you feel you are in your rhythm imagine in your mind that your upper body moves slightly backwards with your in-breath and slightly forward with your out-breath. When you have a clear image in your mind only then let the image guide your body gradually into a physical rocking movement." The aim of this exercise is to deepen the breathing capacity by increasing gradually the rocking movement and trying to keep the in- and out-breath balanced. Continuing this movement synchronised with breathing mobilises the energy flow throughout the body. Gradually the movements become more involuntarily and the body's defensive patterns are emerging often accompanied by intense feelings, as the underlying imprinted template is surfacing. The therapist's skillful physical intervention at this moment can guide and direct the charged energy flow through a holding pattern, setting free even more energy.

When using this exercise in a training group, a student got in touch with her long held deep fear. By not giving up and staying with it, being supported by the regular pulsational movement, she reached the point when she habitually would give in and collapse, but this time could tap into deeper energy resources within herself, enabling her to let out a very deep rooted life giving scream. The sound was awesome for all members in the group and sent shivers up our spines. The release was followed by a tremendous energy surge throughout her body, culminating in an immense sense of joy and feeling reborn. The student reported later: 'I just can't believe what has happened, I recognise now that my fear always had controlled me and now I know I can control my fear.'

### **Integrating Dreams**

I am regularly working with groups of psychotherapists who want to add a bodily perspective to their existing way of working and who have committed themselves to ongoing body work. They agree to work on themselves either with me in front of the group or with each other within the group. In doing so they experience body work first hand. The right brain receives information from the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) about the state of the body. We take plenty of time in sharing the body sensations and feelings, as well as contributing theoretical and practical knowledge they have from their previous training while I comment on methods and techniques I applied and substantiate with theory and concepts of Body Psychotherapy. Talking and thinking through verbal language activates the left brain - so that putting into words what is felt/perceived in the body integrates the two hemispheres. The process of learning becomes more wholesome and profound by having added the organic component as all aspects must be engaged in order for change to be deep, meaningful and long lasting.

It is essential for participants to feel safe and contained in the group and with me. This is often established relatively swiftly and the group gradually progresses into a 'body' in its own right thus becoming a container for the individual working in the group. Every day we start with an opening round and participants are encouraged to share their dreams. I experience again and again that working directly with the body stimulates the dream factory and as the body releases blocked energies, dreams often occur more intensely. In sharing the dream images and motifs the client gains more consciousness and the process of digestion and integration can unfold.

Here is an example: A male member had done an intense piece of therapeutic body work the day before he had the dream. In his session he went through an extreme state of fear, his body being curled up in a frozen position and gradually being able to move out of it, culminating in an outburst of total rage, when his body expanded, being hot and sweaty and almost out of control. He shared the following dream the next morning: He was at a party in a room with a fireplace. The fire itself was not burning in but outside the fireplace and was in the process of dying out. He tried to balance the fire very carefully towards the fireplace with a brush and a poker feeling afraid that the brush would catch fire. He had to juggle the fire around all these people and was afraid that they would all leave the party. There was one man in particular standing out and he knew, that if this man leaves the party, everyone else would leave too.

We looked at his dream by drawing the attention to his energetic composition of his body as he experienced it and I perceived it in his session. We came to the following understanding of his dream: the fire - his own fire, his compassion and love was not in the place -fireplace- where it actually belongs in order to get adequately nourished to burn -to live- to its full potential and at the same time to be contained enough to be safe and not to be dangerous to himself and/or others. The brush and the poker represent his feminine and masculine energy, but also women and men in his life. When he is in touch with his fire, he is afraid to cause pain to others in particular to women. He is in a double bind. On the one hand, his fire will die if not handled and he will end up in a frozen position. On the other hand he fears the fire gets out of control and becomes destructive. In both ways people will leave him. The 'one man, who stood out', the client identified as his father, who was a powerful and dominating person and a constant threat to him, to 'his fire'. As a child he was not supported to own his fire, he had to keep it out of its place, he had to repress it. Only now and then he got in touch with it and he became overwhelmed with fear, not able to find a balance.

I became the container first for his fear and then for his rage in the body work we did before. Having experienced this impact of direct physical containment, he developed a need and desire for containment.

## **Conclusion**

I have explored with selected examples how my work as a Body Psychotherapist represents a humanistic and holistic approach to psychotherapy. As a humanistic psychotherapist I have a holistic view of the human being and address how body and mind are intrinsically related. Most of us need help in contacting and learning to trust the knowledge of our body. I see my role as Body Psychotherapist as facilitating a process in discovering the innate wisdom of the body and its potential for well-being, creativity and choice. Psychotherapy often focusses more on verbal and mental processes and communication while Body Psychotherapy brings an awareness to the subtle body processes, sensations and feelings, present, but sometimes hidden in the language of the body.

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