Biodynamic Therapy was developed by the Norwegian Psychotherapist, Clinical Psychologist and Physiotherapist Gerda Boyesen (1922-2005), who lived and taught in London, where she died last December after an extraordinary rich and fulfilled life. It is a great joy for me to be part of the Biodynamic community, and I highly appreciate the opportunity to share some of my insights into one of the most important psychotherapeutic techniques today: a technique that uses the treasure of body’s wisdom, a technique that reaches far beyond words to find healing, where pure verbal therapy gets to its end.

The Beginnings

Wilhelm Reich, student of Sigmund Freud, was the first to understand and introduce the importance of body and touch into psychotherapy. He laid the foundation for modern body psychotherapy. Gerda Boyesen was one of the second generation’s pioneers. She was already studying psychology, when she started to work with Ola Raknes, one of Reich’s close students in Norway. To fully understand the body and its anatomy, she additionally trained as a physiotherapist, where she got in touch with a very effective neuro-muscular massage technique, which became the basis of Boyesen’s ‘Deep Draining’, and the foundation of ‘Biodynamic Massage’.

The term ‘Biodynamic’ refers to the concept of life energy flowing naturally in a healthy body. This flow of energy is either supported or disturbed by our personal life experiences. The more it becomes disturbed, the less healthy we’ll feel in our physical and psychological existence.

Our life story is inscribed in our bodies. The way we develop our posture, the tonus of our muscles, the curves of the spine, the form of a toe, the shape of a face are all connected with the happy and the less happy experiences in our lives.

The Primary Personality – True Expression of Self

Biodynamic Psychology believes that every human being has a whole and complete inner core remaining unaffected by life’s turbulences, called the Primary Personality. Its counterpart though, the Secondary Personality, feeds on all life’s experiences, which make us suppress or distort our primary impulses of true self-expression. Thus, over time, the way we present ourselves to the world is formed and crystallizes in a person’s character and body posture.

Here is a simple explanation of this process: Let’s assume something frightening happens to a child. Its primary reaction would be either to scream, cry or run away out of fear; to hit, kick or shout out of anger; or maybe at the end of the experience to reach out for its mother out of the need for comfort. The urge to express these feelings is not only psychological, but is a very physical, mostly instinctual reaction in the vegetative system. It can be described as a movement of fluid (or ‘life energy’) in the body. If the expression gets blocked, the fluid will not dissolve and cause waste in mind and body. Tension builds up in the muscles to hold back the physical expression. On the emotional level the child will feel frustrated, confused, unworthy, helpless... and in deep stress. This physical and emotional tension remains in and affects the vegetative system long after the original urge has subsided and been forgotten. If this process is repetitive, armouring happens. Armouring means

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that a certain muscle or a group of muscles become so stuck in their expressions that a chronic blockage arises. Reich was mainly talking about muscular armouring, meaning the skeletal muscles, whereas Boyesen found that the armouring is also happening on the even deeper level of the visceral, the muscles of the guts. The guts, she found out, are deeply involved in a person’s self-regulation of stress and conflict (see below ‘psychoperistalsis’).

We learn to suppress the urge to express ourselves from early age on, because in individual families and in society generally, the spontaneous expression of certain feelings is not welcomed. There may be prohibitions, disapproval, punishments or even more serious traumatic experiences, like physical violence and sexual abuse, to make us repress or restrict the instinctual responses.

Body Wisdom and the Biodynamic Healing Process

A certain amount of stress and conflict is quite natural to human life. And it is true that the human body and psyche has got an in-built self-healing and self-regulating ability, which can deal with this limited amount very well. Once the limit is stepped over, self-regulation stops working properly and a blockage starts to establish.

The good news is that the Primary Personality, even though it can be heavily covered by many layers, is never destroyed. With few exceptions, most people have healthy aspects with a good, flowing contact to the Primary. These aspects might be hidden away, but they are in a way just waiting to be rediscovered. So they will easily be accessible for a client and provide a positive force and source of strength.

Subtle impulses are incessantly sent out from the core to the brain and body, carrying healing wisdom in the form of what physical movement, what sound, or what other expression or action is necessary, in order to release and re-balance the stuck energy of that person in this moment. One of the aims of Biodynamic Body Psychotherapy is to help the client to regain awareness of these subtle impulses ‘impinging from within’, and learn to trust and follow their guidance towards the enfolding of the true self.

Biodynamic Body Psychotherapy disposes over a wide range of techniques to work through a person’s layers of armouring, in respect of the person’s pace and in a gentle, allowing way.

On this path the client will most certainly meet his/her resistance. It is one of the fundamental beliefs of Biodynamic Psychotherapy that resistance needs and deserves respect, and its attitude towards it is one of open, loving inquisitiveness and understanding: why is that resistance there? What is/was its job? What does it need to let go? Once valued for its aims and purposes, linked to the past, the resistance will soften and allow being seduced to give way to more appropriate behaviour for that person’s life now.

Because blockages manifest on the vegetative and, therefore, subconscious level, an essential part of the therapy works beyond words, in direct contact with life energy (hence its name ‘vegetotherapy’). We can be mentally very aware of an issue, but as long as it is not cleared out of the body’s system, it will most certainly continue to give us trouble. This process develops gently in the safe environment of the therapeutic setting before it integrates more and more into the person’s outer life.

Ultimately, the person’s self-regulation will be restored and fully functional again, so that he/she will be able to deal
with the minor disturbances of everyday life on his/her own. Harmony, health and a deeper feeling of pleasure in being alive usually emerge out of this process.

The Spiritual Embrace of Biodynamic Body Psychotherapy

Biodynamic Body Psychotherapy acknowledges the spiritual dimension of our existence. I feel the wish to emphasize how I personally work on this premise. I see Body Psychotherapy (among many other methods and ways) as a very powerful tool to learn as much as we can about the path and intention of our soul here on earth, and to nourish that sparkling star in our heart, which radiates love and a 'yes' for life. I see every blockage as a blessed obstacle with the potential to wake us up and guide us to merge with our Primary Personality, which is directly linked with the higher self.

Wonderful moments full of awe happen, when a client experiences this contact: deep healing is taking place. There is no need for words; peace, harmony and love radiate naturally from that person and pervade every cell of his or her body as well as the direct environment. It is like witnessing a miracle in all its simple beauty.

The limits of my work, and any kind of Psychotherapy, lie for my understanding within the boundaries of the spiritual blueprint of a person's life at this moment in time, and I see my work in service of this greater perspective.

What to Expect in a Biodynamic Therapy Session

Biodynamic therapy works in depth with the link between mind, body and spirit. The attitude of the therapist is one of cooperation with the client. Together they set out on the journey to explore and understand where the symptoms or issues the client brought to the sessions originate, and what the person needs to regain his or her balance. The therapist takes sides with the healthy core and supports the client in his or her ability to connect with that core and listen to its messages.

Non-verbal language is used as a means of communicating between the conscious and subconscious, for example in exploring a spontaneous gesture or movement, expression of the eyes or the sound of the voice. Non-verbal therapeutic interventions are for example, specially devised massages, breath work, body awareness, regression therapy, vegetotherapy and emotional expression.

Touch is part of biodynamic psychotherapy, but will only be used with the understanding and agreement of the client.

Verbal psychotherapy is to a certain extent always part of the setting. At the beginning and the end of a session, the verbal part functions like a bridge between the day-to-day life and the therapy session, and often it is important for the client to verbalize her/his experiences from the session in order to integrate it fully in his/her life. There might be sessions when verbal psychotherapy is what the client needs in this moment of his/her process. But the Biodynamic therapist will be aware of the non-verbal language and thus read between the spoken words.

Biodynamic Massage

Biodynamic Massage works within the above outlined holistic perspective of body, mind and spirit. It can be part of the therapeutic journey, or it can be used as a treatment in its own right.

How does it differ from other holistic/therapeutic forms of massage?
Biodynamic Psychology knows and uses the techniques and effects of classical massage, as well as those of the more spiritually oriented new-age massage types, and very similar results can be expected: general improvement of the metabolism, balance of the respiratory system, reduction of stress and stress-related symptoms (headaches, insomnia), calming of the nervous system, easing of muscular tensions and related physical pains and aches (back, neck, shoulders), release of toxins and aura balance, to name just a few.

But some essential aspects surpass the areas of common ground hugely and give biodynamic massage its unique character: the Biodynamic Therapist is trained to communicate through touch with the vegetative system in order to bring the stuck energy and tensions to a release. Boyesen discovered that the peristaltic sounds gave her a feedback about how the body, (always understood as in unity with the whole person), and mainly its vegetative system, responds to the touch of the therapist. This reaction can be different for every few inches of the body. The peristaltic sounds are part of the self-healing or self-regulating ability of the body and they indicate the digestion of emotional stress. This function of our intestines Boyesen called the 'psychoperistalsis'. The biodynamic therapist may use an electrical stethoscope to keep track of the sounds during the treatment.

Biodynamic massage knows about the effect of touch: 'When we touch a body, we touch the whole person'. Every massage is, in a way, an intimate meeting. Even the simplest body contact touches at issues around closeness and distance, and massage tends to associate with the regressive moments and corresponding emotions in a person’s life. A biodynamic therapist knows about this dynamic. She or he is also aware of the effects of transference and counter transference any situation of physical closeness may cause, and is able to deal with it professionally. Sometimes this process will not show on a conscious level of interaction or it will be very natural and easy, and sometimes it may induce the step from massage to psychotherapy.

Deep Draining: Knowing about the delicate balance of traumatic and life affirmative tendencies of a person, Boyesen developed a series of massage sequences, especially designed to trick the guardians of the unconscious (resistance) in order to finally convince them of the safeness of pleasurable alternatives. The ‘deep draining’ is a very powerful technique, where the subtle communication between the therapist and the vegetative system of the client must be used with high expertise. It needs a minimum of eight to ten sessions with intervals of body psychotherapy to integrate the changes on all levels. Vegetative reactions such as diarrhoea, sweating, headaches, deep tiredness and so on, can occur and indicate the release of toxins on the physical level.

For a biodynamic massage treatment the therapist may use a massage table or work on a mattress on the floor. For success of the treatment it is not necessary to work on bare skin; it is up to the client to decide if he/she wants to be touched directly on the skin or not. It is up to the therapist to decide the use of any oils or lotions for the treatment. Some massages follow a fixed structure, like the back massage, belly massage, exit massage (head, hands, feet) and all the ‘deep draining’ treatments. But many others follow the client’s verbalized needs, the feedback of the peristaltic sounds and the therapist’s intuition.

London School of Biodynamic Psychotherapy

Full professional training in Biodynamic Body Psychotherapy (Gerda Boyesen method)

LSBP’s 4-year workshop programme is designed to develop the personal qualities, theoretical understanding and practical skills of a wise and compassionate body psychotherapist. Students study the biodynamic theory and methods within the history of psychotherapy, and the emphasis in Year I is on biodynamic massage.

The programme comprises 11 three-day week-ends in North London, plus a week’s residential each summer with our sister school in France. Following the workshop programme, students continue their closely supervised clinical practice, qualifying them to apply for the LSBP Diploma in Biodynamic Psychotherapy. LSBP is a member of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP).

LSBP’s next professional training starts on September 29, 2006 and places are still available. Those interested should first attend an Introductory week-end.

Our next Introductory Week-ends are: September 2-3, 2006.
November 25-26, 2006
February 24-25, 2007

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Who can Benefit from Biodynamic Massage?

Biodynamic massage is suitable for those looking for release of stress-related symptoms and other psycho-physiological conditions. Headaches, anxiety, insomnia, depression, arthritis, ME, etc, have been treated successfully; for those looking for a pleasurable relaxing massage; and for those wanting to increase their body awareness and wanting to embark on a journey of self-discovery through a body-centred approach. The ‘deep draining’ is suitable for those on the path of self-discovery, willing to commit for a certain time and looking for the combination of massage and psychotherapy.

Biodynamic Group Therapy

Group therapy, in contrast to the 1:1 setting relying on the relationship between client and therapist, offers a diversity of relationships similar to real life, optimal ground to explore different ways of contact with each other and the self. It creates the possibility to encounter immediate emotional reality and its effect on the body and mind in a continuous process. The participants find a deeper sense of their true nature and come to understand what is going on in their present lives in the light of their past experiences.

Trust, openness and speaking out freely transforms the group into a safe and secure place, where it is OK to experiment with and share a newly found truth, or to try for the first time to speak up for yourself. Eventually fear and shame can be overcome and a deep loving understanding towards ourselves and each other arises. Beginning to know that ‘I am OK the way I am!’ is a truly wonderful and freeing experience.

Notes

1. This was the method of Aadel Bulow Hansen, who had her own clinic in Norway. Bulow Hansen’s massages – without her having any knowledge of Reich’s theories – succeeded in melting the muscular armouring. Gerda Boyesen trained with her and part of the training was to receive the massages herself, which opened Boyesen’s process to a level she hadn’t been able to reach before.

2. Even though there are other aspects involved in character formation, like...
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genetic inheritance, character types have been and still are important for Body Psychotherapy.

About the Author
Ellena Fries, an experienced Biodynamic Body Psychotherapist, trained with the Gerda Boyesen Institute and ESBPE (European School for Biodynamic Psychology) for five years in Biodynamic Psychology, Body Psychotherapy and Massage. She is also a certificated practitioner for Boyesen's Deep Draining, as well as a Yoga teacher and Reiki Master.

Ellena worked with individuals and groups in her own clinic in Cologne, Germany for ten years, before she moved to Cornwall in 2003, where she now lives and works in and near Penzance as a member of the local Complementary Health Initiative (CHI). Ellena offers sessions for individuals and couples and she facilitates groups for body psychotherapy and/or biodynamic massage.

Her work is based on the ethical guidelines and training standards of the European Association for Body Psychotherapy (EABP).

In the Southwest, Biodynamic Body Psychotherapy is not very well known yet. In Penzance Ellena is currently running the very first biodynamic therapy group in Cornwall. A new group is planned to start in 2007 and welcomes interested people throughout the Southwest. Ellena may be contacted:

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For information on the training visit www.lsbp.org.uk

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The Association of Holistic Biodynamic Massage Therapists (AHBMT)

AHBMT is the lead professional body for Biodynamic Massage therapists and also for Body Psychotherapists using biodynamic massage in their work as part of a psychotherapy process. The main aims of the Association are:

• To encourage a high standard of practice and promote biodynamic massage to the public and to other professionals.

• To provide professional membership including insurance, a code of ethics and practitioner support.

The Association publishes a regular Journal, a Register of Practitioners and holds two public meetings a year, in Spring and Autumn. Membership is open to those practising biodynamic massage, trainees or qualified, and to those generally interested in biodynamic work.

For further information please contact the Chair:
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