

# **BODILY EXPRESSION AND EXPERIENCE IN BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY<sup>1, 2</sup>**

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I will talk about two aspects of Body Psychotherapy: the role and importance, first of bodily expression and second, of experience.

Body psychotherapists give a great deal of attention to their clients' bodily expressions. This focus, as much as anything, gives body psychotherapy the great power it has. This is so because these expressions both reveal and provide access to those unconscious structures<sup>3</sup> that have the most profound effects on behavior and experience. These structures contain the models we hold of who we are, what we can expect from the world, and how we must behave as a result. These models are formed early in life, become habitual and operate, like all habits, outside awareness. Though unconscious, they strongly influence consciousness and, to a great extent, control what we can and can't experience. Among the things that they control are those bodily expressions we attend to. I'm going to call these inner mental structures, "core beliefs." Although they are not stored as statements of fact, as normal beliefs are, they function just as though they were held as such. Habits, which operate without conscious choice, operate "as if" they were expressions of beliefs and there is value in naming those "beliefs."

For profound psychological change, who we habitually and unconsciously believe we are needs to change. Our unconscious beliefs about what we can expect from the world need to change. Change has to happen in the unconscious structures which hold these core beliefs.

Therefore, as therapists, we need to understand our clients at that level. Despite the fact these unconscious structures have many nonverbal components, such as memories, images and habits of expression; thinking of them as beliefs can be very helpful. This helps the therapist translate bodily expressions into statements that can be seen as unquestioned assumptions. Although encoded only as emotional and bodily habits, unconscious structures are, in effect, expressions of belief. They operate as if the person believed something that makes these habits and emotional reactions appropriate to that belief. This job of observing bodily expressions and inferring core beliefs from them is one of the more important tasks of a body psychotherapist.

Due to their unconscious nature and emotional underpinnings, core beliefs are actively maintained and, when challenged, vigorously defended. Whether beneficial or detrimental, they are deeply ingrained. They have been with us for a long time. They were learned early through interactions with care takers and others close to us. They are the essence of our longest lasting

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<sup>1</sup> This paper appears in German in *The Handbook of Body-Psychotherapy*. Published in 2005. Halko Weiss and Gustl Marlock, Eds. Frankfurt: Hogrefe Verlag.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples would be Reichian, Bioenergetics, Hakomi, Hakomi Integrative Somatics, Bodydynamics, Core Energetics, Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor. See these two websites for more: [http://www.ahpweb.org/rowan\\_bibliography/chapter12.html](http://www.ahpweb.org/rowan_bibliography/chapter12.html) and <http://www.usabp.org/definition.htm>

<sup>3</sup> These unconscious structures are called by many names: contextual systems, mental models, cognitive schemata, etc. In this short paper, I will be using the term core beliefs and core material.

patterns of being and doing. The core of our characters. The fabric of our personalities and lifestyles. More than any other thing, they are who we are. They orchestrate the self, itself.

The placebo effect is a good example of how powerful an influence beliefs can have. Without powerful emotional events or special practices, core beliefs remain unexamined. They are, paradoxically, most influential and most unknown. (*The fish will be the last to discover water.*—Albert Einstein.) It is not that we're just not thinking about them; we are thinking *with* them. Living them!

*The entire world of past experience [is] embodied in the present in the form of character attitudes. A person's character is the fractional sum total of all past experiences.... The doctor does not need to reconstruct a traumatic moment; the traumatic moment continues to exist in every breath the patient takes, in every gesture he makes.*<sup>4</sup>

To work with core beliefs in the least violent way, we must first work to establish feelings of trust and safety. Since the most deeply held beliefs are about our identities and our place in the world, bringing them into consciousness is paramount to putting our personal identities in doubt. To even approach this material, a high level of trust is needed. Once safety is established,<sup>5</sup> we can proceed with the work of bringing elements of the client's core material into consciousness, working with the emotions that are parts of it, and translating as much of it as we can into statements of beliefs. Experience is important here for two reasons: one, experience is always an example of beliefs at work. Experience is organized by habits and emotions that are aspects of the inner structures. So, carefully following the external signs of present experience, the therapist can begin to discern the core material influencing it. Second, the client doesn't need only to understand his or her behavior—as insight theories would have us believe—the client needs new experiences, in order to feel what a change in belief would be like. Talking about ones past and what one would like is no substitute for actually experiencing a change. And such changes can be helped to happen right in the therapy session where they can be supported and reinforced.

The experiences evoked, like feelings, bodily sensations and tensions, memories and images, are not always clearly understood by clients. Finding the meanings they embody is an important part of changing them. By thinking of them as beliefs and verbalizing them, we go a long way towards understanding.

To begin the work of making the unconscious conscious, we look for indications of the influence of these core beliefs in habitual, nonverbal expressions. We work to understand what beliefs are being expressed through these behaviors. We use techniques designed to evoke strong, clear experiences that make the organizing beliefs obvious to the client. For example, a client with a habit of never asking for help and an underlying belief that one can't expect such help, we might simply ask the client to be calm and notice what he experiences when we tell him, "You're not alone." Having done things like this hundreds of times, I can tell you that it almost always evokes an intense experience of sadness and/or disbelief.

Not all bodily expressions are useful for this. Short lived, momentary gestures and facial expressions that appear and pass in a moment are more useful as indicators of present experience. This channel of communication makes nonverbal commentary on the client's present state and verbal communications. It generally operates close to consciousness.<sup>6</sup> These expressions are a

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<sup>4</sup> Reich, Wilhelm, (1949) *Character Analysis* New York: Noonday Press.

<sup>5</sup> Kurtz, R. (1990) *Body-Centered Psychotherapy*. Mendocino, CA, LifeRhythm.

<sup>6</sup> An example of a short term bodily expression would be this: a person saying, "Yes, I understand." while at the same time, holding his arms out to the side, slightly down, with the hands open, palms up. Verbally he's saying that he understands while at the same time, his body is making the comment, "but there's

language in their own right, one that speaks about immediate moods, feelings, attitudes and even ideas. (If you've ever seen Marcel Marceau, you know how effective that language can be.) Animal communication is similar.<sup>7</sup> It's possible to discern indicators of core beliefs by paying close attention to short lived expressions, but it's the more habitual, longer term expressions that reveal the oldest and deepest beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Contacting or evoking these beliefs will usually evoke experiences in clients, and it's these experiences and the work that we do with them that makes body psychotherapy so powerful.

Although habitual bodily expressions, like speech patterns, tone of voice, characteristic facial expressions, gestures, postures, tensions, and movement patterns are all reliable indicators of core beliefs, it should be noted, however, that not all core beliefs want changing. Only some of them cause unnecessary suffering; the great majority are quite useful and benign. The ones that do cause suffering can be very influential and are usually easily recognized. Pain, fear, disappointment, grief, frustration, anger, confusion, the feeling of being lost, alienated, can all be read in habitual bodily expressions. When one of these is prominent and persists, it suggests a core belief needs changing. A very simple, common example is a habit of never looking directly at the therapist. The head is always at an angle to the therapist and the eyes have to look a bit sideways to compensate. This kind of habit suggests fear and mistrust and reflects a belief that one must protect oneself from emotional hurt. Of course that hurt has already happened and it has shaped the habit we're observing.<sup>9</sup>

Once recognized, depth psychology methods, such as Hakomi, apply techniques to make them conscious.<sup>10</sup> Because they are not easily accessible and because they are contextual systems, these unconscious models are like prisons. Bringing them into consciousness then is something like a prison break. Because they are emotionally charged and because they are limiting, antiquated and inaccurate, the process can be difficult and emotionally painful. The good news is that making them conscious brings with it the discovery that the chains and bars of this prison are all constructions of the mind. With that comes relief and a new sense of freedom. And there all real change begins.

**Here's a short outline of the method:**

1. The therapist maintains an active focus on the client's bodily expressions—such as gestures, posture, tone of voice, coloring, facial expression, mood and emotion.
2. From these bodily expressions the therapist gathers information from which unconscious structures are inferred.
3. Using ideas about these unconscious structures, the therapist then creates interventions designed to bring them into consciousness as emotionally meaningful experiences.
4. If this is successful, attention shifts to working with the emotions and memories evoked by the intervention and now clearly being experienced.
5. The experience of the release of emotion and the realization of the long term meaning and impact of the material made conscious initiates deep, psychological change.

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nothing I can do about it." An example of a long term expression might be the habit of always speaking quickly and loudly, as if one expected that others wouldn't be generous with their attentions.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Darwin wrote about this in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

<sup>8</sup> A more detailed discussion of how beliefs and unconscious structures is given later in this paper.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Porges' work with the Social Engagement System applies to this particular habit. *Neuroception: A Subconscious System for Detecting Threats and Safety*, <http://bbc.psych.uic.edu/pdf/Neuroception.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Not all methods take this approach. Clinical hypnotists often work directly with the unconscious, bypassing consciousness as a matter of choice.

To elaborate:

What makes body psychotherapy so effective is this: the client's immediate behaviors and experiences provide a kind of information that words alone cannot provide and this information is a direct expression of the unconscious. As Daniel Goleman reports in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, 90% of emotional communication is nonverbal. This emotional communication is controlled by unconscious memories and habits which are almost always outside of awareness. Bodily expressions are part of this communication, often affecting those receiving the communication as much or more than those expressing it. Understanding this body language is immensely useful in psychotherapy. It is the most immediate and available information about the client's way of being in the world. Understanding it and responding to it compassionately helps immensely to create a high level of trust in a short period of time. Nothing works better to support a therapeutic process.

The earliest unconscious structures are encoded in "implicit" memory. Siegel has written extensively on it.

*These [forms of memory] are available early in life and, when retrieved, are not thought to carry with them the internal sensations that something is being recalled. .... Implicit memory involves parts of the brain that do not require conscious processing during encoding or retrieval. When implicit memory is retrieved, the neural net profiles that are activated involve circuits in the brain that are a fundamental part of our everyday experience of life: behaviors, emotions, and images.... We act, feel and imagine without the recognition of the influence of past experience on our present reality.*

*With repeated experiences, the infant's brain.... Is able to detect similarities and differences across experiences. From these comparative processes, the infant's mind is able to make 'summations' or generalized representations from repeated experiences.... These generalizations form the basis of 'mental models' or 'schemata,' which help the infant (in fact each of us) to interpret present experiences as well as to anticipate future ones. Mental models are basic components of implicit memory. <sup>11</sup> [His emphasis.]*

The mental models of implicit memory *do not require conscious processing during encoding or retrieval.*<sup>12</sup> In other words, these mental models are operating (influencing behavior and perception and *perhaps* body sensations) without one being conscious of them doing that. For the individual, these models are just the way the world is, without the luxury of doubt that consciousness affords. Bringing these models into consciousness, where doubt is possible, is a first step. The mental models stored in implicit memory, though not normally conscious, are nonetheless controlling, and constantly "speaking" through, behavior and experience. Working with the body makes these models accessible to consciousness.

*.... emotion is a central organizing process for consciousness.... any theory of consciousness must have a theory of emotion as one of its linchpins....* <sup>13</sup>

At some point in brain evolution, behavioral flexibility was achieved by the evolution of consciousness dwelling on events and their meaning, as guided by internally experienced emotional feelings.<sup>14</sup>

A vast amount of psychosomatic literature supports the notion that satisfying emotional

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, New York: The Guilford Press, 1999. pages 28-34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Watt, Douglas F. (2001) *Emotions and Consciousness*, [www.phil.vt.edu/ASSC/watt/default.html](http://www.phil.vt.edu/ASSC/watt/default.html)

<sup>14</sup> Panksepp, J. (1998). *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*

experiences is a vital part of a happy, healthy life.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, painful, unsatisfying experiences are what our clients bring us. All experience, satisfying or painful, takes place in consciousness. (One might say appears in consciousness.) For that reason, some discussion of the connections between consciousness and affective experiences is in order.

Consciousness, in both its content and direction, is effective only when it is guided by affect (emotions and emotional memory).<sup>16</sup> Without that guidance, without the valuation and purpose it provides, it quickly becomes lost in irrelevancies. Studies of people with a type of brain damage that leaves them rational but without emotion show this clearly.<sup>17</sup> Emotion and consciousness are functionally linked. The contents of consciousness are strongly influenced by the “contextual systems” of implicit memory.

Baars’ global workspace theory of consciousness describes these connections.<sup>18</sup>

*Global Workspace theory is a simple cognitive architecture that has been developed to account qualitatively for a large set of matched pairs of conscious and unconscious processes.... Consciousness resembles a bright spot on the theater stage of Working Memory (WM), directed there by a spotlight of attention, under executive guidance (Baddeley, 1993).<sup>19</sup> The rest of the theater is dark and unconscious. “Behind the scenes” are contextual systems, which shape conscious contents without ever becoming conscious....<sup>20</sup>*

Among these “contextual systems which shape conscious contents” are emotions, moods, memories and core beliefs. These systems shape all experiences and most body psychotherapy methods have ways to bring them into consciousness. The Hakomi method—the particular version of body psychotherapy that my colleagues and I have been developing over the last twenty plus years—brings this unconscious material into consciousness by using a unique state of consciousness called mindfulness and doing interventions—some physical, some verbal—that evoke memories and emotions while the client is in that state.

All body psychotherapies work with present experiences such as body sensations, emotional reactions, and tensions. Body psychotherapy is not conversational; it is body-centered, present-centered, emotion-centered and experiential. In practical terms this means that although techniques vary widely, from physical interventions such as stress postures and pressure on particular muscles, to “the evocation of experience in mindfulness” used in Hakomi, they are all attempts to use experiential methods to access the unconscious.

The logic of working experientially is this: Experience is organized. It is organized by habits which normally remain outside of consciousness. Some of these ways of experiencing were formed early, are encoded in implicit memory, and exert great influence over a person’s everyday moods, thoughts, experiences and behaviors.<sup>21</sup> One of the things we most want to help our clients change

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<sup>15</sup> A good example would be: Waldstein, S.R., & Elias, M.F. (Eds). (2001). *Neuropsychology of cardiovascular disease*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <http://www.psychosomatic.org/> is a good website to visit.

<sup>16</sup> Damasio, Antonio R, (1994) *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York, Grosset/Putnam.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Baars, Bernard J. (1988). *A cognitive theory of consciousness*. Cambridge University Press, New York

<sup>19</sup> Baddeley, A. (1993). *Working memory and conscious awareness*. In A.F. Collins & M.A. Conway (Eds.), *Theories of memory*. Hove, UK: Erlbaum.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard J. Baars and Katherine McGovern (revised November 5, 1997) *Global Workspace: A Theory of Consciousness* found at: <http://www.phil.vt.edu/ASSC/wat/default.html> (2001).

<sup>21</sup> Schore, A. (1994) *Affect Regulation and the Self: The Neurobiology of Affective Development*. Oxford Press, and the *Handbook of Attachment* (1999), Ed. Cassidy, J. and Shaver, P.R., New York, The Guilford Press.

is the habitual ways in which they organize unnecessarily painful experiences. One of the criteria of success in psychotherapy is the client's freedom from these experiences. We do that by working with the models and habits that organize all experiences. In this way, body psychotherapy is experiential.

In the course of everyday activities, it is not easy (or for that matter, very useful) to focus on how these organizing habits contribute to the creation of our experiences. For that, psychotherapy or meditation is appropriate. Though these habits are not in consciousness, they are not always repressed—though sometimes that is also the case. It is simply that we need them to function automatically so we can use our consciousness for other things. And certainly not all organizing habits are worth examining. Only the specific habits that organize unnecessarily painful experiences are worth it. In doing so, we make fundamental change possible. We make it possible to change our basic experiences of ourselves, of others and the worlds we live in.

In Hakomi, we access unconscious material by helping clients study how their experiences are organized. It is the juxtaposition of the ideas and expressions we use with the experiences they evoke that makes it clear to the client what these ideas, beliefs and memories are and that they are controlling what he or she experiences. Our method is designed to help clients notice how that happens. We do it by evoking experiences while the client is in a state of mindfulness.<sup>22</sup>

Mindfulness is a way of noticing the moment-to-moment flow of one's experience. With practice, one begins to realize how experiences are put together. Mindfulness is a calm state of mind, in which attention is focused on present experience, noticing it without controlling anything but the noticing. In this state, one simply follows the changing contents of the mind without the intention to control what happens. It is a kind of voluntary vulnerability. For us, the important thing is that mindfulness offers the possibility that core beliefs can be made conscious.

Advanced meditators can stay in mindfulness for extended periods of time, several hours or more, and in doing so can reach states of mind where silence and peace pervade one's whole being. That level of mindfulness takes years of practice. Luckily, for our purposes, only a few brief moments of mindfulness are necessary and great depth is not required. We need perhaps ten seconds of mindfulness into which to introduce a statement, a movement or a touch, something simple and short designed to evoke an experience which will cast light on what core beliefs are organizing it. If we have chosen well, our statement or whatever will evoke something meaningful, something that reveals core beliefs.

A core belief like *people shouldn't be trusted*, often express it physically by the person habitually holding his head turned slightly away and looking at others from a slight angle. If attended to, it is usually accompanied by a feeling of mild doubt. Noticing this, an experiential therapist could do this experiment: ask the client to become mindful and, when he's ready, to slowly turn his head in the direction of facing the therapist directly. Having done this experiment many times, I can report that it will often evoke a feeling of fear. Staying with the experience often brings up memories of being hurt by being lied to, tricked or betrayed. The belief may be perfectly clear at that point. If it's not, staying with the emotions and the memory will eventually make it so. This kind of evocation, using the body and mindfulness, is a very effective way to make the unconscious, conscious.

Some core beliefs cause suffering by limiting which positive emotions can be experienced. For example, a person with a core belief that says the world is full of dangers, will be blocked from feeling safe. In many situations, recognizably safe by any reasonable standard, he will still not feel safe. His blood pressure and heart rate, his autonomic nervous system will still be functioning as if

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<sup>22</sup> For a thorough description of mindfulness, see Nyanaponika, (1972) *The Power of Mindfulness*; Santa Cruz: Kandy.

he were in danger. If an experience of safety even begins to happen, his habitual state of mind will prevent it developing. Thoughts of peace and relaxation are banished. A familiar, chronic, low level of mobilization, wariness and danger are maintained. The very idea of safety is unsafe.

The emotionally positive experiences that are prevented by core beliefs are called in Hakomi, missing experiences. A common goal of most body psychotherapies is helping clients recover the capacity to feel and act on missing experiences. We also work to help clients to establish new core beliefs based on that recovered capacity and to establish new habits of organization around them. In order to do this, we evoke and stabilize the missing experience in the therapy setting.<sup>23</sup> This is done, of course, after the limiting belief has been made conscious and whatever necessary emotional work resulting from its evocation has been done.

So, in all these ways, bodily expression and experience are central to the practice of body psychotherapy. Bodily expression is the primary language for the communication of unconscious structures. In addition, studies have shown that the single client factor that best predicts success in psychotherapy is whether or not the client can stay with his or her experience.<sup>24</sup> If he can't, therapy will not be effective. This one factor so important because experience is organized by beliefs which need to be made conscious. It is the therapist's ability to use bodily expressions and the experiences linked to them that makes the whole endeavor successful and, by the way, interesting and challenging for those of us who practice the profession.

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<sup>23</sup> In some systems, this is called, "a corrective experience."

<sup>24</sup> Done by Eugene Gendlin and his students at Chicago University. See Gendlin, E.T. (1996). *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy. A manual of the experiential method*. New York, Guilford.