

About The Body

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III. Body

When I look at the importance of the body in psychotherapy, I am happy that nowadays to acknowledge the body in psychotherapy is no longer such a monstrosity in our approach as it used to be in the beginning. But nevertheless our young colleagues are still confronted with this typical frown "Oh, really? You are working with the body"?? - and it is still like this: whenever we introduce our work to colleagues we immediately are admonished that we have to be careful, that there are important ethical questions and that there has to be a lot of supervision because we move on a dangerous ground –as if leaving the body out would be less dangerous.

"Whether we like it or not we are embodied creatures, " Brian Thorne writes somewhere.

Students often feel attracted to a training, which includes the body. Most of them had had some experience in body therapy, some of them know focusing as a body oriented "technique".

But often, when entering our training program, they misunderstand something, because to become a client-centred and experiential body-psychotherapist means not at all simply "adding some body techniques to the approach". There has to change something in their whole bodily being. So here is the fascinating balance of doing and being again!

When we started to design our curriculum more than 25 years ago, it was self-evident to us, that leaving out the body would be a short- sighted interpretation of Rogers' concept of a "person", "an organismic being", which has been cemented by the German translation (Gesprächspsychotherapie).

It seemed to us more than unjustified to tear asunder different parts of our whole being. All processes in us are directly linked together, and a separation between "soul" and "spirit" and "mind" and "body" or between various modalities into which the felt sense can unfold (Geiser, 2004) is as artificial as are all separations within a living being.

Mia Leijssen said in her speech in Egmont last summer: "Experiential psychotherapies have a common ground; not only do they recognize the importance of the relation, they also recognize that the expressions of the client should be lived through, or felt through the body."

Yes, I agree. But what "body" do we mean? Mia rightly pointed out that there is a confusion of tongues. Is it the "body from inside", which we ask how we feel today, what is going on inside? Or the "situational body", like Gendlin calls it? Do we mean the body from outside, which we see and touch? What about our physical, biological, breathing, living body?

In our training we use various modes of bodywork. We use touch in different ways. We most of all do "dialogical body work", asking and responding and finding rhythm and meaning together. I will give an example later on.

For some of our trainees this means to remember long-neglected modes of relating which have to do with our physical and biological being, not only with our feelings and our thinking. For some of them this means learning something new, and not only about the body of the client, but about themselves.

So, our trainees learn to get to know their bodies, to build up a strong interest in their own organismic world. They try to maintain a high level of self-awareness, not only awareness of thoughts and feelings, but also of all these subtle or distinctive reactions in their bodies. That means: how do I breathe? How is my body shaped, how does it move, what did I learn during my socialisation about movement, touch, posture, health, beauty, sexuality? Can I be aware of tensions and flows in my body? How does my body react when I am angry or sad? How do I recognise that I feel close to someone or that I draw back inwardly?

They ask themselves: Can I really be bodily alive, accept my weaknesses and strengths, just my bodily being, can I trust the flow of the organism in a deep way? Can I feel comfortable in my body, in touch with my sensual needs and capacities?

Our trainees spend a lot of time on exercises: breathing-exercises, half an hour every morning. Sitting still for another half hour to find out how they cope with doing nothing but breathing, without movement. Dancing and walking to experience themselves in movement.

They learn or relearn to be in a bodily way with others: to touch and being touched, to hold and being held. They give massages to each other, learning how different bodies feel like under their hands.

All these themes must be part of training to get accustomed to touch and to the bodily living together in a group and between them. It takes a long time to deepen these experiences, and we do it again and again. And we ask them to go on with this learning process in their everyday-life.

Then the second step of learning bodywork turns to the clients: What does it mean to be interested in the world of my clients in a bodily way? I want to know how this person lives in his or her body, not in the sense of only collecting information about his or her inner life, but to deeply understand and be able to accept.

So people in our training group learn to look, to touch, to ask their peers: tell me, show me, yes, now I can feel it, describe it from within, make this movement again, I didn't get the meaning in your inner world. I'll tell you what I see and what sort of echo comes up in my body, show me your way of breathing, I'll try it out (we call this bodily mirroring), ah, if I breathe this way I feel so and so...

It helps their understanding that they have the opportunity to get to know as many various forms of being as possible during their training (different forms of breathing, of posture, of movement) so that they can try to slip into the world of another person as well as possible. They learn to make suggestions to widen their clients' perception, always relying on the client for the direction of the therapeutic movement.

They ask for example: do you realize that you breathe in this or that way while you are speaking? What would it be to breathe another way? They can offer small movements just beside the usual, just try-does it feel different? How would it be to look from this side? And then wait and see, whether the client can pick up the suggestion or not (for that aim it has to be near the usual and nevertheless new enough), whether apprehensions arise just as: (but if I try this, it might look silly) or: (if I breathe this way I'll burst into tears and can never stop it). Or she tries it carefully and explores the new field and tries it again and again, and in the course of time alternatives establish, choices can become possible.

Our trainees learn to use touch in a therapeutic way. For instance they can try to make suggestions non-verbally, only with the body, and try a body-dialogue: e. g. between their hand and the shoulder of their client: asking with the hand, the shoulder responds, finding out different ways of attunement and moving together: leaning with the back against the hands of the therapist, pulling the shoulder back to get free, or trying a little fight to measure their strength, or trying out what kind of pressure it needs to feel safe or supported by the therapist's hands.

In working with the body, too, the first step always is acceptance: tell me, show me, let me share your inner world as well as possible, so that I can understand why you breathe this way, why you think that way, and what it means to you. Just stay where you are. Nothing at all is wrong; nothing has to be changed at the beginning. You had good reasons to shape your body in this way. We will try to understand. And perhaps after a while we can start a little dialogue.

"To resist any kind of immediate impulse to change something is an important element of psychotherapy", Jobst Finke writes (2002)

For me as a client-centred body psychotherapist, this is the most distinctive difference to other schools of body-orientated psychotherapy, which are rooted in a psychoanalytical background. In these orientations you look at the body as masked, armoured, ill, you have to free the energy, to loosen the blocks (because you as therapist are an expert who knows for example what a block in the shoulder segment stands for...), it's you who have to sometimes push the client into another state of being. This means being an expert in the sense of the term as Rogers deeply declined it. That is why we can never just adopt techniques like a special way of touch or massage from another orientation without proving whether it is compatible with my inner convictions and attitudes. And the most important issue in the client-centred approach is that it has to do with relationship! It is not about change in a single person (in German: "Ein-Personen-Paradigma"), it is about the two of us, the Between.

Stanley Keleman, a body therapist, writes in a book about somatic bonding (1986): (Some therapeutic circles harbour the illusion that the organism knows what is best for it. But that is often not true. An organism only knows what is best for it in a field of responsiveness). Or to carry forward Gendlin's concepts in "a process model" (an idea my friend Ulrich Schlünder discussed with me lately): Could it be possible that a client's process cannot find a special kind of symbolization out of his or her own "individual" implicit? That there are certain cycles that need another responding body to carry forward the process?

All these are interesting questions.