

Contact and support

Working with the body

By Gees Boseker

Introduction

Working with the body is like working with an endless wellspring of information. We can access the body for information through its movements like, breath, gestalt, sensation, feeling, emotion, awareness, energy and maybe even more. Increasing consciousness about body-mind information we will be able to heal pain, understand our feelings and to find pleasure in life.

The task for my bodywork is to work beyond speech and talk and to connect with the world of feeling and emotion through body movement. The landscape of the body carries a richness that goes beyond speech, has grown since nonverbal times and implies and incorporates all the theory ever written in psychotherapy at the same time. You can see developmental theory through the way people move, breathe, connect and make contact with their- and other bodies. In other words: "what has been written in theory is already expressed in the body." Conscious integration of both aspects in body psychotherapy means a lot to me.

In this article I will write about two examples in a practical way of how I do body work in individual therapy- and training groups. I want to give you a glimpse of how I move with the body, what its deeper meaning is, and last but not least how clients benefit from it. I start with how I always start, with body awareness meditation and *looking in each others eyes*; secondly how I move the body to connect with the self; and third how I move deeper into the landscape of the body by working with one of the very important human aspects in human life. For this purpose I choose a triptych about receiving, obtaining and giving *support*.

Looking into each others eyes

One of the most sung about topics is eyes. A reggae singer said, "Looking in your big brown eyes". Many others dive and swim in it, or lose them self in your eyes, What about the hundreds of thousands crying eyes, lying eyes, deep looking eyes, and angry eyes. "There is more to the picture than meets the eye" Neil Young said. There is no question about it, eyes are important. Why? Since the very beginning of visible times, from the very beginning of our lifetime, looking in our mother's eyes is one of the most impressive and important experiences which guides us over our lifespan. Through eye contact with mother we merge, mirror, refuel, find ourselves and create what we can call ego, I or me. Eyes are essential for imprinting and stimulating attachment and the socializing capability. These aspects are important basics for the rest of our lives and we will always be influenced by these wide experiences from the past.

Body awareness meditation and eye contact

Through holding hands and closing eyes I bring people into their inner world. I guide them to connect with their world of feeling, perceiving and emotion. Through conscious breathing, making circles with their heads, getting rid of the mask of their face and starting to make sighing sounds there's always a moment when they start to yawn. They become much more attuned with themselves, letting go tension and stress and their daily worries. This is a first moment of relaxation and at the same time it is a starting point where you can access the body on a deeper level. I do some more breathing and circling movement with the head and shoulders, lifting them up and letting them fall down when they breathe out. Their system is opening up and therefore they experience more contact with their body.

We can move on now into the world of feeling, emotion, needs and longings. When I start to focus on eye contact I take small steps. It's not about preparing them but connecting them with conscious feeling and the slight changes which are going to happen during the experiment. "Open your eyes and look into the eyes of all your group mates. Take a view seconds for each person you

are looking at. Make sure your eyes really meet. Be aware that you will be looked at (in the same way) too. What is happening to your feelings, do you still breathe? Don't change anything at this moment, just observe yourself while you look around. Do you perceive feelings from others and does it make any difference to whom you are looking to?"

After this section I take a moment to connect again with the inner world. "Close your eyes again and go back into your inner world. Breathe and notice what your feelings are while digesting all your former experiences. Did you or do notice any change in breathing now or during your experiment? What were your most important feelings, images and thoughts during this looking into others eyes? Do you recognize these feelings also from your daily life? What does this mean to you?"

I want them to establish and to give effort to real contact because contact starts many times with eye contact and the conclusions they draw from it. I want them to experience in a safe environment, in a conscious nonverbal way how and if they create attunement, mutual contact. Attunement is a mutual relationship between two persons. In a mutual relation people want to attune. Their mutual interest is the mutual search for the feeling of being together, the feeling of belonging together, seeing each other, been seen etc. Attunement and attachment are linked to one another. Attunement creates the possibility for attachment. If there is an attunement problem there is also an attachment problem and the other way around. Attunement is a nonverbal way of communication which already exists in infancy and probably even before. That's why we can stress: no attunement, no attachment.

The looking, nonverbal experiments bring you in contact with these basic human aspects. From here I move on into the self feeling in contact making. "Before you open your eyes I want you to say to yourselves a couple of times in silence, just inside, "I and I am. Then you open up your eyes and start looking again. But this time you think and send out with your eyes, "I and I am." The feeling of being seen and making yourself seen promotes development of self feeling, of a healthy ego. This makes way for developing and sharing feelings and emotions. And this is what I do; I ask them to share their feelings and emotions. Through verbal expression, it is possible to integrate feelings, thoughts etc. They listen to all the different kinds of experiences, which helps them to integrate theirs. Some do feel the depth of contact through eye contact. The moment they start to feel the depth of it, they give energy to it and want more of it because real contact makes them feel like a real and meaningful person. When we go back in time we know that the interaction between a mother and a baby, especially eye contact and vocal sounds, is for the baby a real experience of depth. The baby can feel the depth through her eyes and through this connects with mother's emotional inside world. Others feel seen, like "I see you and you see me." In experiencing another we experience ourselves. Winnicott has said that when a baby looks at his mother, he mirrors himself in her and for that he sees himself. In the end this road leads to an integrated self. There is also the experience of warmth and togetherness through eye contact. Some experience it as refuelling because they have been given a sense of security. Others feel fear and tend to avoid eye contact especially those who come from a past where there was no attunement and a poor attachment, where there is a lack of object constancy or self feeling.

Support

In this triptych I want to show you three different aspects of support, receiving, obtaining and giving, developed out of an immature to a mature period of life. Receiving support is what you expect when you are young, support is absolutely essential for a human being to become a separate person, to achieve something in life and to get a sense of security. On the other end of the spectrum we find giving support. That is what you can give if you have been fed enough. We all use these three different stages in different aspects of our life depending on where we are and what we need. There's no such thing as completion of support. We will always need it and have to ask for support during our adult lives. These three stages ask for different bodywork.

Receiving support

In order to access deep feelings in the body we have to work gradually, moving in a spiral. We start at the outside and slowly work our way in. If I want to access deep feelings and early years I need to go deep into the body. There are no deep feelings at the outside of the spiral. Your babyhood lives deep inside your body system, in your deepest muscles, gut and cells. In order to get there, to spiral

in, I start with individual body work. This ensures that they feel connected with their bodies, energy, breath etc. This body work sets the foundation for the theme of support. To make it possible to go to a regressive state I have to spiral my way deep into the body. In order to connect with a regressive state you need your feet, breath and good conscious. It takes an adult person to go that deep.

Therefore I start with grounding exercises like stretching, shaking the whole body and different breathing exercises where they experience inner fullness, space and wholeness. From here I can move on a bit deeper because their bodies have become more flexible, the energy is moving and they are aware of what's going on in them. Their system is opening up. It's important to know what's moving in their bodies. It makes them less scared and gives a healthy feeling of control. They can increase movement and they can stop it. It's important when it comes to boundaries. It's especially important when we move more towards regressive work. This aspect of maturity will always be there! And this is always needed in process work. When there is enough grounding and breath I bring them slowly towards the floor. From here I access a deeper level of the spiral.

Because I want to do regressive work, I give exercises like pelvis bumping, playing with legs, grabbing your feet and give them a massage etc. It helps them to become more playful with their body. And because they play with their bodies, there's a good chance that some little children will come out soon. I let them play with spontaneous movements like cross crawling on the floor, touching each other and having fun with their and other bodies. I am deeply convinced that all our developmental stages, all our early experiences are still alive in our bodies. It may not been seen at work or daily life, when you move your body in particular ways a specific developmental stage will come out. So, we have a baby, toddler, teenager, adolescent vividly housed in our bodies. That's why when adults do cross crawling they feel like a child again. If not split off everybody is connected to a young child.

I can take the next step: working with support. This work takes place in pairs. A- is the parent and B- is the child. A- is sitting with its back against the wall and B- is sitting in front of A- backwards (see picture 2). A- places the hands against the shoulder blades of B. When both are attuned enough and B- is ready to give full body weight to A, A- very slowly takes B- to the chest. B is doing nothing but breathing and experiencing what's moving inside. After a while A- puts B- up again, and again B- is still doing nothing but breathing and experiencing. During the introduction of this work its very important to know for B- that they *are* the babies and don't use any muscles at all. I want them to experience as much as they can how it is to let it happen. This guides them back in time, and all kinds of issues related to their infancy will come up. Moving towards the chest is mostly experienced (by B) as connecting. They feel attached, have feelings of oneness and trust.

The illusion of the perfect state of symbiosis is beautifully described by one of the patients: "It feels like a sea of warmth where I totally could lose myself". And this is very similar to Kaplan's words about babyhood, which she calls oneness. The infant lives in a illusion of merging, harmony, wholeness, bliss and perfection. You can see this happening when two people during the experiment start simultaneous breathing. Two bodies are becoming one. They feel like one energy and that's exactly what they describe.

"The baby's soil is attachment" Kaplan says. But what happens when Mammy has nothing to give, gets angry about my need, thinks I am too heavy for her or want to throw me off of her lap? These deep fears and feelings are there too. We talk about the schizoid and oral wound. Putting upright again was mostly experienced as separation. Separation which is healthy and natural is many times experienced as painful. People feel left alone, lost, abandoned and isolated. Looking into this there was no doubt about it that their separation problem reflected a lack of good holding and object constancy. When there is enough experience of bliss and unconditional love, a person will be able to create love relationships and will recognize an inner feeling of comfort and self support when it is needed. If not, human relationships will provoke fear because of the lack of attunement and attachment as well as support and holding. This wound, which means a primal shortage, is so painful that they will never submit to the support of others or trust themselves to give support because they don't recognize the feeling in themselves.

Obtaining support

In order to get what you need you have to move your body towards the desirable object. Your movement is asked. If you want to have something, then get it. This takes an individual or at least an little human being who's becoming an individual because he's exploring him self as much as he can. This child has a growing sense of inner power and a capacity to move. It's a practising child, a child according to Mahler, in the practising period or in the rapprochement sub phase. This child is exploring the world and step by step separating from its mother and at the same time needing her, needing her support, her emotional availability. If the child comes back to her it needs her support, her

groundedness stability, to be a haven so that it can refuel and connect with her body before it goes out to the world again to explore it and make it his. In order to individuate it needs her emotional availability and supportive hands. How do we move the body in relation to this developmental stage?

Because a child at that age has a lot of energy, we do a lot of exercises and use a lot of energy. To make way for the final experiment about getting support, I let them play a lot with their bodies. After doing stretching, grounding and a lot of breathing exercises I bring them to the floor. After some more stretching of the back muscles, we move towards regression again. Muscle stiffness and shallow breathing may prevent people from becoming attached or involved. Their back muscles and shallow breathe say, "stay out of it, hold back, stay separated". Breathing and stretching exercises are very important because of that. To get them more and more involved with the theme I let them have fun. "Walk on hands and feet and explore the room, meet your group mates and do experiments with your body. Run fast, walk slow. You have a lot of energy and you are willing to use it. So, let it stream, let your energy flow. Move further in a cross crawling way. Use the energy of that child in you who wants to grab and get whatever he wants. This child feels strong and is having a lot of fun. You know that, Mommy is watching you and sends a lot of love feelings to you. You get empowered by that and that's way you can give some more of your energy." Can you imagine the group energy? When people are really involved in work like this they experience their body as very much alive and warm, they feel light and playful. And if they don't, they know that there is an important, painful feeling coming from the past.

For the next stage we work in pairs. A- is the parent and B- is the child. B- is sitting backwards in front of A (picture 3). This time A doesn't place its hands against the shoulder blades but keeps them from it about 20 cm/7 or 8 inches. The important part is *that the parent is just there, awaiting the child when it calls for support*. When you want them really to get involved make sure you build this experiment step by step and use good associative speech. Lets say, make it a good song! Its not only about sentences but also about the colour of your voice and speed of telling etc. They can cling on to that which makes them feel safe to go deeper inside. "First of all, parents and children make sure you sit comfortably. Breathe deeply and ground yourselves. Take time for that. Check your bodily and emotional feelings. Open your whole system for this experiment. Allow yourself to feel whatever is there. Parents, let your hands be ready in case your child moves towards you. You are the parent who's there for your child whenever it needs you. Children become aware that your parent is there for you. How does that feel? Children, slowly, slowly move backwards. Make it really slow in order to feel every step you make. Feel every subtle movement and change you are going through, and be aware of what it does to you, and what it means to you. And then there will be that specific moment where you feel the fingers of your parent, the very first slight touch at the back of your shoulders. How does that feel? Are there images coming up, or thoughts, or feelings? What is your body doing? Do you want to have more of it, or do you tend to leave? Keep moving backwards and the touch becomes a little more firm. Can you let your body surrender to the hands? What is your breath doing? Can you allow your self to really take a rest in the hands of your parent?"

After some time I begin the way back. And the child itself decides when it wants to separate. Parents are doing nothing but just being their, making sure that they breathe and stay connected to the child. Ask them to sit face to face and share nonverbal feelings through eye contact.

When we listen to the comments, the practising and rapprochement sub phase apparently seems to be very important. In the second phase, the practising phase, the child is actively exploring himself. The child is going out into the world but needs mother's guidance. Most of them liked the active and exploring body work. Those who have a lack of object constancy and poor holding background couldn't feel safe and weren't that alive during the bodywork. They tended toward extreme control or losing control. In the third, rapprochement phase, the child is more conscious about his separation and needs mother more then ever for support and recognition. In the pair work many people emphasize fear of desolation, isolation and abandonment when they were moving towards the hands of the parent. Some of them were afraid that mother was not available or were afraid of losing the mother and being left alone. Because of that, others felt that they were trying to control or were afraid to lose themselves. During experiments like this you can expect a lot of tears and deep feelings. At the same time, their courage their healing capacity is called forth. They felt their pain from the past and at the same time the supportive hands in the present time. Bringing consciousness to that together with the effectiveness of touch creates an emotional corrective experience.

Giving support

The last part of the triptych concerns the ability to give support. When you are able to give, you carry an imprint in you of the support that's been given to you by your parents. In order to give support, your parents have to give you support first. Only then can a person recognize these feelings in him self and carry them further, giving to others when it is needed. Carrying the good fruits from the past makes it possible to be there for others. In this body work section I focus on bringing your good potentials into the world, connecting with your holding capacity, attuning to the needs of others. Come in touch with the inner parent.

The connective body work starts with alignment, standing straight, in line with you whole body, head above your pelvis and shoulders in line with you ankles. Stretch your whole body straight and work with solid grounding and a lot of breathing exercises. Expand, to feel your energy and to connect with the inner feeling of strength, autonomy and independence. The body shapes it's mind and out of that feeling of maturity can grow a feeling of "I am", and "I have something to give." But these individual feelings need to be expressed, this energy wants to find another person to share it with. This is deeply human and comes from the earliest attunement and attachment. This feeling of relationship brings a deep feeling of meaningfulness and being someone.

The next step will be working in pairs and showing themselves. "Choose someone to work with, stand opposite each other and make eye contact. When you feel ready you slowly open your arms horizontally. Try to breathe in this position and say two or three times, "here I am". Stay connected with yourself and with your partner. After some time bring your arms down again and move away. Choose again a new partner and repeat the same words and movement". They will deeply experience if they can do it or start to feel tense and contract their muscles and at the same time if they are there with their full energy, or if this energy is collapsing, holding back or blown up etc. With these seeds and body/mind consciousness they start with the last experiment. This time they work in groups of four (picture 4). One person receives the support and the other three give support. I tell them which body parts receive the support. They decide as a team who is supporting which body part. The work for them is to collaborate, stay attuned with each other while giving this person support. Operate as one energy which creates the whole experience of giving and receiving support.

Listening to the comments afterwards people spoke about the effort they gave to collaboration and being a giving person. "If you really do it together you get the experience of being a team", someone said. This can be a powerful experience. This feeling of being a team is a feeling of attunement which is the same as being a holding environment or a container. Within this container it is possible for the receiver to feel and learn from whatever feeling comes up. Within this holding environment the receiver can feel safe to welcome every feeling coming from inside. As a team they carry and give support as a whole. Every single person contributes a piece of that whole and a piece of their individuality, which itself become the whole experience of wholeness and oneness. That's what happens when individuals attuned. They feel one, healthy and strong, people who have something to give, respect others and take care of themselves too. This is a deep learning process for every adult person, to live out all the fruits and seeds given to Them, to integrate all the developmental stages and bring them into life; being an individual and being a connected person, living autonomously and separated and connected in love relationships at the same time.

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Picture 1. Eye contact.



Picture 2. Moving to the chest.



Picture 3. Moving to the hands.



Picture 4. Giving support. Teamwork