

Biodynamic Massage: A Truly Therapeutic Massage

by Denise McCrohan

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Biodynamic Massage works across a wide spectrum from deep muscular work, to connective tissue massage, to light energetic touch and work in the aura. And it also puts particular emphasis on the psychological understanding of the body. Having an understanding of the somatisation or expression of distress in the body and the potential to work towards its physical and emotional release makes it a truly therapeutic massage.

One of the most powerful industries in the world tries to find solutions for our physical distress through medication. Exploring your bodily sensations through massage may give you a better understanding of the reasons for your physical distress, whether this is somatically expressed as a headache, backache, irritable bowel, sleeplessness or depression. Understanding that these may be the result of years of holding back your

anger, sadness, or disappointment can help to relieve your symptoms.

I have worked for nearly 10 years with people who have started their journey of self-discovery and change through Biodynamic Massage. For some people this has just been six sessions which have enabled them to get a greater sense of themselves and their body. For others it has been a journey of many years with a positive outcome for difficult health and stress problems.

Wilhelm Reich, a student of Freud, began to include the body in psychoanalysis in the 1930s. His work led him to believe that the physical armour, or physical tension, is always an indication of psychological tension. By working with massage, we can soften the physical armouring, release deep, suppressed feelings and free old, fixed patterns in the body.

Reich had a major indirect influence on the development of Biodynamic Massage.

The background to Biodynamic Massage

Gerda Boyesen, a physiotherapist and practising psychologist, brought this highly effective psycho-physical therapy from Norway in the 1960s. Biodynamic Massage is one part of the psychology that Gerda Boyesen evolved and called Biodynamic psychology. The term 'Biodynamic' was chosen because 'bio' means life and 'dynamic' means movement or force. Thus biodynamic massage is concerned with the re-establishment of the natural life force in the body.

Boyesen had analysis training with Ola Raknes, who had worked with Wilhelm Reich. Through this training she realised the importance of linking bodywork and verbal work in psychotherapy. She continued her studies to become a physiotherapist and then did neuro-muscular massage at the Bulow-Hansen Institute.

In Norwegian psychiatry it is usual for patients to receive physiotherapy. During her work with mental health clients she noticed that, when there was a physical release of the autonomic nervous system such as shivering, crying, sweats and so on, the clients made good psychological improvements. She also noticed that this physical release often opened up the peristalsis (wave-like movements in the alimentary or digestive canal) and stomach rumblings could be heard.

She believed that stress is processed through the alimentary canal and that the stomach noises indicate that the client's body is 'digesting' unresolved stress. She called this psycho-peristalsis. She went on to develop many different massage techniques with the aim of clearing the body tissue of the 'stress remnants' from old, uncompleted emotional cycles. She used a stethoscope, placed on the abdomen, to follow the peristaltic noises.

The Vasomotoric Cycle

A primary theory in biodynamic massage is that energy is always moving through cycles, Gerda Boyesen called this the vasomotoric cycle. When these cycles are constantly interrupted and incomplete, discomfort and eventually ill health can result. The aim of the therapist is to encourage the completion of the cycles to clear the system and restore harmony and the free flow of energy through the body.

The vasomotoric cycle has four movements that correspond to the two movements of the Autonomic Nervous System:

A: Sympathetic Nervous System (on guard)

- 1 Contraction/Charge
- 2 Expression/Action

B: Parasympathetic Nervous System (harmony)

- 3 Winding down
- 4 Relaxation/expansion

The stages in the cycle can be illustrated by a deer's response to danger:

- 1 A sudden noise startles the deer.
- 2 The deer runs away from the noise.
- 3 When the deer feels safe, it shakes to release tension.
- 4 In a short time the deer will relax and continue feeding.

As adults we often find ourselves in situations where we are inhibited from expressing our startle reflex, such as the boss shouting at us. Because we do not express our emotion the charge is left in our body causing stress and tension. This can build up to such an extent that we are constantly on guard. A therapist's role would be to encourage the expression of the client's anger at the boss, and massage areas of tension to facilitate harmony. If left unexpressed, this tension could manifest itself as a stiff neck, headache, upset tummy or irritability. The list is endless. It is the inability to discharge the impact of the startle, which causes the problem, not the boss.

Every emotion, shock and frustration has a direct physiological consequence, as well as a psychological one. Making sense of the energetic and emotional meaning of physical posture and bodily symptoms (and working therapeutically with this information) is the unique contribution of Biodynamic Massage Therapy.

The massage techniques

Biodynamic massage has evolved many massage techniques. These include energy distribution, aura-work, lifting, packing, holding, deep draining, hypotonous work, stretching, basic touch and connective tissue work. These can be energising, calming, reassuring, grounding, and affirming. Every client at each session receives an individualised massage that works towards an on-going process of releasing stress and tension.

Placing a stethoscope on the abdomen, the therapist would follow the peristaltic sounds closely. These sounds indicate to the therapist that the body tissue is succeeding in letting go of some 'stress remnants' from old uncompleted emotional cycles. By working to increase the sounds, the therapist progressively clears the body tissue of its armouring to allow energy to flow more freely.

There may be involuntary autonomic nervous system reactions such as muscular twitchings, yawning, shivering, crying or a need to urinate. These reactions are seen as signs of the body rebalancing itself.

Working with Biodynamic Massage

On a physiological level massage encourages the deepening of breath, releases tension in the tissues, increases body tone, stimulates the lymphatic system, increases the circulation of blood, and stimulates the digestion and elimination of food. Massage can also release endorphins, the body's own pain killers, and so help to relieve pain, depression and anxiety.

The massage therapist's ability to create an atmosphere of safety and comfort is important in enabling people to relax and gain these benefits. Touch that is caring, attentive, non-sexual and undemanding is very nurturing and creates a sense of well-being. Some people are uncomfortable about some parts of their body being massaged, such as their abdomen, buttocks or legs. These feelings would be respected by a therapist trained to be sensitive to each individual's feelings about being touched.

While I was receiving a massage many years ago I was upset by the work the therapist was doing on my legs. I was finding this disturbing so I asked her to leave that area but she insisted that she needed to complete that part of the massage. A more sympathetic response to my feelings would have helped me to come to terms with them rather than causing me the upset I experienced.

Biodynamic Massage Therapists have a training of 1-3 years to learn techniques that enable them to work sensitively with their clients. Therapists have regular supervision

where they discuss the clients' process. If a therapist belongs to a professional association with its own codes of conduct and ethics this provides an additional safeguard.

In the initial session the therapist would take a Case Study of the client. This would include information about their past and present health, any medications they were taking, and also how they were feeling and what they wanted from massage.

Who can it help?

Finding the type of complementary therapy that suits you, an experienced and well-qualified therapist, and committing to regular sessions over a period of months or years all combine to allow massage therapy to be effective. Having a supportive lifestyle is also vital.

As a Biodynamic Massage Therapist I work with clients who are manifesting stress-related problems such as diverticulitis, irritable bowel, neck and back problems, high blood pressure, lack of concentration, inability to relax, irritability, headaches, sleeplessness, anxiety and depression. Some of my clients have needed support with ME, Distonia, frozen shoulders, post-operative care, pregnancy, bereavement, and trauma. Biodynamic Massage is also used with cardiac patients, the elderly, mental health patients, the terminally ill and those with learning difficulties.

Biodynamic Therapists work with other therapists such as doctors, psychiatrists, osteopaths, acupuncturists, Alexander technique therapists, cranial therapists and psychotherapists to facilitate the healing process.

Just as a cell observed by a physicist changes, so also a client changes if they are offered the attention and space to develop. Both the quality of the attention of the therapist and the desire of the client to change are vital in bringing about transformation and growth. I believe that Biodynamic Massage Therapists offer that attention and space. Have you got the desire to change and transform your life?

Case Studies

'Mary' has been receiving massage for several years to control diverticulitis (chronic inflammation of the intestines) without recourse to medication or surgery. She has been able to release her anger and distress about years of infertility treatment and a hysterectomy. The inflammation has been taken out of her system and out of her intestines. During the time we have been working together she has been able to make a lot of connections between her lifestyle and her feelings, and how the unresolved issues are somatised.

She has made changes in her busy life that have reduced the pressure, and she says that massage has helped to soothe and calm her system.

A young woman came for eight sessions in the weeks before her marriage. She suffered from irritable bowel and wanted help to control her stress levels. She found that her digestion, sleep, and stress improved significantly. She coped well with a hectic pre-wedding schedule without her usual symptoms of distress and pain.

One of my clients has a serious condition called spasmodic torticollis (dystonia) which causes muscle spasm and uncontrollable movements of the head and neck. It was necessary to work away from her body when she first came because her condition was so acute. After a few sessions there was a terrific jolt of energy when I placed my finger lightly at the joint of her jaw. She had been talking about her anger at being invaded by this disease and her inability to express that. The jaw can hold back expressions of anger and I was able to facilitate the release of that accumulated energy. Because of the responsiveness of my client and her involvement in exercise and other therapies she has made a dramatic recovery.

A 62-year-old client came for her first ever massage recently because of a stiff neck and lower back pain. After six sessions she had free movement of her neck and her back felt much easier. She continues to come because she enjoys the massage and feels good afterwards.

About the author

Denise McCrohan is an Integrative Psychotherapist and Biodynamic Massage Therapist who trained at the Chiron Centre for Body Psychotherapy at Ealing, London W5. She is a member of the Association of Chiron Psychotherapists and the Association of Holistic Biodynamic Massage Therapists. Denise can be reached on Telephone: 01784 452911 The Association of Holistic Biodynamic Massage Therapists, 20 Oak Drive, Larkfield, Aylesfield ME20 6NU.

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