

Love, Sex & Self-Respect: Your Body Holds the Keys

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Do you wonder about other ways to help your clients, especially to feel more loved, have more pleasurable sexuality and/or respect themselves more fully? Do you wish to have more tools and techniques to address their underlying unhappiness? Although people express it differently, often beneath the suffering which brings clients to the attention of social workers, lies a desire to experience more of the joy of love, the pleasure possible with sexuality, and the good feeling of self-respect. Love, sexuality and self-respect are not merely mental constructs, however. They are rooted in bodily sensation and experience. Bioenergetic therapy includes working directly with the body in addition to talking, and provides social workers with tools and techniques to help people expand their capacity to enjoy life.

When a person's body is chronically tense from anxiety, depleted from depression, or overwhelmed by painful memories from PTSD, for example, their body lacks a capacity to enjoy positive feelings and experiences. The person may be riddled with doubt, pain, shame, self-hatred, or braced from a history of violations and may not be aware of the tensions or numbness in their body. Simply talking about these issues may not get to the root of the problems. The body based methods of Bioenergetic Therapy help people to increase their body awareness, free their bodies from tension, and develop more tolerance for feeling.

Chronic physical tensions which underlie common mental health conditions are generally developed in early childhood experience. The person is often not aware of the tension and they may not identify chronic bodily experience as a root of their pain. Further, in our culture, we are often shy or embarrassed to talk about issues such as sexual experience and our longing for love. As social workers, our job includes encouraging our clients to explore these underlying issues.

If a child's natural, open loving and pleasurable sexual excitement is not matched with loving and acceptance by their parents (or primary care givers) the child learns to close down their feelings by constricting their muscles, especially around their breathing, their heart and their pelvis. The child comes to believe that something is wrong with them - with their loving openness and their sexual feelings - rather than understanding it as a problem in the response from their environment. Out of fear, the child tenses their muscles and blocks their love and sexuality. This constriction and the pain, with accompanying grief of not being met, becomes part of their basic experience of life. It leads to chronic unconscious tension in their body and to negative expectations in their relationships as adults. The person may not identify the problem as rooted in their childhood traumatic experience but often, instead, identifies it as something wrong with them. They may identify the issue as rooted in their basic unworthiness and will blame themselves for their dissatisfaction.

Bioenergetic Therapy has tools to address other conditions which inhibit positive experiences as well. Clients, for example, often need support in creating and maintaining healthy boundaries and in reaching out for what they want and need. Most people were not taught about, or supported in, their right to have boundaries. It is a much different experience for a client to sit in a chair and talk about this than to stand up and practice making boundaries with their arms, solidly ground in their feet and even add vocal expression. People need help in being more connected with their body. Disconnection from one's body is natural when the body has been a source of pain, shame and/or violations. But this limits a person's experience by trapping them in their head and cutting them off from bodily sensations. Inhibited self-expression, especially emotions such as anger or fear that were not acceptable in one's childhood deplete one's energy. It takes unconscious effort to deny or suppress feelings. Working with the body in addition to talking increases our effectiveness, with tools to help our clients access feelings and express them in safe and appropriate ways.

Working towards having more love, pleasurable sex and self-respect often initially means stirring up feelings of shame, fear, self hatred, guilt, grief and anger. Many clients experience pain and discomfort in their bodies when they begin to feel more fully. They need support to tolerate and work through their painful experiences. In Bioenergetic Therapy we focus on helping people feel their connection to the ground through their feet and legs to literally ground themselves. By processing difficult feelings and experiences with a skilled clinician, the person can become stronger - both emotionally and physically. The body changes and the person changes. Their heart can open. They can be more relaxed and calm, have more energy and desire for sexuality, and develop self-respect through identification with their body. The degree of trauma a person experienced in their life, especially in their childhood, impacts the depth of the work required to restore more capacity for good feelings in a person.

Bioenergetic Therapy includes both stretching and physical work to release tensions, guidance to develop a stronger sense of boundaries and more connection to the ground, and exercises for releasing emotions that may be blocked or were unacceptable in the past. It also includes a healing therapeutic relationship where the person can experience a welcoming response from the environment to their natural loving feelings and their sexuality. In this way a person can claim more of their capacity to enjoy life - including loving relationships, pleasurable sexuality and healthy self-respect.

Interested to learn more about this unique approach? Come to the workshop sponsored by NASW on Sept 15. Register at www.naswma.org. Or, attend the fall Bioenergetic conference titled "Love, Sex & Self-Respect: The Body Holds the Keys" sponsored by the Massachusetts Society for Bioenergetic Analysis, Oct 18 - 22, 2017, at the beautiful Essex Woods Conference Center & Retreat. For information go to www.massbioenergetics.org/conference.

