

Connecting with the Body: The frontier linking psychotherapy, social change, and spirituality

By Laurie Ure, LICSW, Certified Bioenergetic Therapist
www.laurieure.com

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Helping clients connect more fully with themselves, especially with their bodies, lies at the frontier of psychotherapy. Therapists have a unique opportunity to guide clients in deepening connection with themselves (their body, mind, and emotions) and with others. This connection can include advocating for social change. In addition, a solid sense of connection within oneself builds a foundation for connecting with Spirit (or Infinite Love, God, the Universe - whatever name a person chooses to describe this).

Recent advances in neuroscience and in the field of trauma point to the importance of working with the body to heal the effects of trauma. In my experience, all clients benefit from connecting with their bodies, whether or not they identify trauma in their life. Further, hunger for connection or reconnection lies beneath the complaints that lead clients to seek help. Clients may not initially identify their need for connection, but it emerges (usually as a central focus) in the process of therapy.

Connection links psychotherapy, social change, and spirituality

The theme of connection links psychotherapy, social change, and spirituality. Connection

lives at the heart of each of these areas. In psychotherapy, clients need help connecting with themselves and in their relationships. Social change addresses broken connections among groups within society. These connections require repair, reparations, and a deeper commitment to justice. Finally, spirituality centers on connection with something larger than ourselves. This connection unites us as we collectively share our life on this planet.

Connection with our bodies and with other people lies at the core of our existence as human beings. Our lives originate in the connection between sperm and an egg, generally occurring in the most intimate connection between humans. (Or, in some cases, through IVF, a very intentional connection between sperm and an egg.) In addition, existence depends upon connection with parents or caregivers for the first several years of life. Breaks in these connections through boundary violations of all types, including neglect, generally lead to the unhappiness that brings clients to therapy.

The pandemic has brought increased awareness about the importance of connections to nearly everyone. Most people experienced breaks in their regular patterns of connection - either a lack of connection, too much connection within family units, or some of both.

Recent events have heightened awareness of broken connections within society. For example, people receive different treatment based on physical distinctions such as skin color, gender identity, or intimate partner(s). This inequity calls for change within society to repair connections among people and strive towards equality of rights and opportunities.

Further, adverse changes in the environment call upon us to consider our physical connection to the planet and its resources. As we all share a dependence on the earth, the need to attend to the planet's health, and reduce our negative impact, is necessary for the health of life on the planet and our survival.

Therapists can help clients connect more fully with their bodies, along with connecting to their minds and emotions. We also help them connect with their environment, people in their lives, and Spirit.

As a bioenergetic psychotherapist, I work with clients physically within the context of psychodynamic process. Helping clients connect more fully with their bodies, along with their minds, helps them deepen the connection within themselves, along with others, the planet, and Spirit.

How Bioenergetic Therapy Fosters Connection with the Body

Bioenergetic work with clients generally begins with increased body awareness. I frequently ask my clients, "What are you aware of in your body?" Clients sometimes initially express confusion when I ask this. But, over time, they usually become more able to identify body sensations. This

often includes tension in their jaw, shoulders, or back; a pain in their neck; or constriction in their throat, heart, or gut.

Bioenergetic therapy includes experiential exercises for:

- Grounding
- Expanding unconscious breathing patterns
- Releasing tensions
- Expressing emotions physically

Regularly during sessions, after checking in with my client, I invite them to move from a sitting position to a standing one to do one of these exercises. For example, I suggest they lean backward over an exercise ball to open their breathing or do a forward bend for grounding. I also use exercises to assist clients to practice setting boundaries in a physical way. These exercises help to build clients' awareness of their verbal and nonverbal communications. In the exercises, I encourage clients to speak with conviction and express themselves strongly to match their body language to their words. Through practice, clients increase their ability to assert themselves in their intimate relationships and in advocating for change at all levels.

Connecting with oneself includes accessing blocked emotions. This work often involves intense sadness, grief, guilt, shame, fear, disgust, or anger. Experiencing these emotions in the context of a therapeutic setting allows clients to express their feelings strongly in ways that don't harm them or anyone else. I have bats, rackets, oversized pillows, and mattresses in my office for clients to use in a safe way. We link the emotions to memories from their past, including traumatic experiences. We discuss the connection between these memories and their current life.

Releasing emotions in this way enables clients to free the physical tensions (previously unconscious) they used to block their feelings. They have more energy as they no longer use energy stored as tension in their muscles and fascia to hold back feelings. It also allows them to contain the expression of emotions when that serves them in their present life. In working this way, clients usually report feeling calmer, more relaxed, and less depressed. They have more energy as they no longer use energy stored as tension in their muscles and fascia to hold back feelings. Further, it allows them the ability to express, as well as contain, their emotions as needed in the present.

For example, when a white-bodied person is not filled with toxic, misplaced shame from their childhood, they can tolerate the uncomfortable but necessary shame about racism. This includes shame about social inequities, along with violence and abuse, that persistently takes place in the US to black bodied Americans. They can bear the shame resulting from generations of slavery, where black-bodied people had no rights, especially to their own bodies. Accepting this shame can lead to compassion and understanding of the difficult conditions which continue to impact people in black bodies. In addition, this shame can lead to actions towards relational repair and reparations.

Similarly, when a person has released the intensity of anger and rage from abuse perpetrated against them in the past, they can then use their anger appropriately. Many people have learned to squelch their anger completely. A lack of ability to access their anger when needed creates a high cost of their inability to speak up for themselves. It depletes their energy, which is used to hold back their anger. They often need encouragement and support to access their anger in a safe setting.

When people use their anger appropriately, they can speak out strongly to protect themselves and those they love. They may need to assert themselves in their personal relationships or for societal change. Speaking out, such as writing letters to the editor or articles, participating in protests, and raising one's voices against hatred, mistreatment, or abuse, become more accessible and less frightening.

Benefits of Connecting with The Body

When a person experiences a deeply grounded connection with their body, they can more fully experience their connection with the rest of life. They can feel their equality with others - not better than or less than other people and other beings. Similarly, when they connect with their emotions and expression, they can assert their needs and wants in relationships. They can express themselves with conviction.

Connecting with one's body includes focusing awareness mostly in one's core - in the solar plexus, heart, and center (a few inches below the navel) - rather than in one's head. Shifting focus to one's body rather than "being in one's head" includes using one's mind to notice what's happening in one's body, rather than in the past or the future.

Focusing on one's body allows a person to respond to their body's signals more closely, such as monitoring energy levels, attending to hunger and thirst, and acknowledging anxiety (tension, increased heart rate, and decreased breathing). For example, anxiety signals fear of possible danger with a need for heightened awareness and sometimes protection. Tending to one's body also allows one to use information, as in "gut feelings," as guidance for life directions.

Through a deep connection with one's body, a person can learn to experience the subtle vibrations of love moving through them, which connects them with Spirit/the source of love. In sexuality, one can enjoy pleasure and feel connected both on the earth and with the cosmos. Bioenergetic exercises also help with releasing deep shame and fear often associated with sexuality. Through freeing physical constrictions and working through negative messages about sex, a person generally has more energy to enjoy connecting sexually. In addition, one can access compassion, faith in oneself, and love for life.

The path of deep connection sometimes involves facing painful realities. It means confronting the truths of history (both personal and societal) and tolerating the accompanying feelings. It also

requires accepting one's vulnerability, along with the vulnerability of others, which many people find challenging to do.

In addition, deep connection means acknowledging negative states such as jealousy, greed, self-importance, elitism, hunger for power, and superiority. It means not hurting others (and ultimately oneself) by acting from these states. It also includes learning to stop pervasive negative self-talk and replace it with positive messages instead.

Exploring this path requires having basic needs for quality food, clean air and water, stable shelter, education and basic safety met. Attracting relationships with people who see your value, care about you, and believe in you becomes important. Someone who values connection within themselves, such as a therapist, may need to serve as a guide on the journey.

As a person becomes more connected within their body, they can experience interconnectedness with others. This connection usually leads one to work towards safe and healthy living conditions for other people. The U.S. Declaration of Independence affirms this in acknowledging the equality of all people and the basic rights of everyone to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Role of Psychotherapists in Building Connection

As psychotherapists, we stand at the center of social change. We need to first seek deep connection within ourselves - with our bodies, minds, emotions, and Spirit. Through this connection, we can serve our clients in connecting more deeply with themselves. We can help them become more assertive and grow in self-expression to advocate for social change. We can guide clients in connecting with Spirit (however they name it), as a loving being larger than themselves. We also have a mission to advocate for justice and equality within societal systems that impact everyone.

Finally, therapists can offer compassion, unconditional love (agape, not eros), and faith to the clients we serve. In this, we participate in collectively uplifting everyone.