Bioenergetic Analysis: A Body Oriented Psychotherapy

Eugene M. Bischoff, Ph.D.

"Bioenergetics is a way of understanding personality in terms of the body and its energetic processes."' One of the premises of bioenergetic analysis is that each person is his/her body and that body is an energy system that includes the mind. Our view is conspicuously different from most theories of personality in contemporary psychology, with their focus either on behavioral dynamics or some ethereal concept of the person. Personality is seen as the way an individual moves in the world, body-wise. The person's style of moving and his/her postures are seen as expressive of character, as well as diagnostic indicators of one's presenting problems and early developmental issues.'

As a form of psychotherapy, bioenergetic analysis was developed by Alexander Lowen from the earlier work of Wilhelm Reich, with whom Lowen was closely associated from 1940. The Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis was founded by Lowen in 1956; since then it has expanded beyond North America and now has an international scope. There are three affiliated bioenergetic societies in California.

Bioenergetic analysis seeks to bring about the healthy integration of the body and mind so that the person has the energy to discover pleasure and purpose in life, instead of using the energy to maintain defensive systems learned in growing that have long since outlived their usefulness. Reich discovered the nature of "character armor," which is the defensive pattern adopted by the body to protect the person from psychological pain and suffering. Character armor is seen in chronic muscular shapes and tensions in the body, of which the person is largely unconscious. In bioenergetic therapy, attention is paid to both the psychological problem and to the physical expression of that problem which is shown in the body and its movement and/or contraction. Bioenergetic techniques attempt to help release the physical tensions of the client while dealing with the emotional or psychological difficulties. Bioenergetic analysis is a unique systematic method for dealing with the relationship between somatic functions and psychological trauma or repetitive, unproductive behavioral patterns.

In bioenergetic analysis there are three major areas: grounding, breathing and character structure.

Grounding has to do with one's emotional security and personal authority. "Having one's feet on the ground is the body language meaning how one is in touch with reality, not operating under any illusions, consciously or unconsciously."' All too often people are dependent on persons other than themselves, or on parts of their body (e.g., their brain) rather than on their whole person. Grounding helps the client to discover a sense of self, a separate identity.

Breathing has to do with the oxygenation of the blood which brings vitality, energy and feeling to the body. Where there are defensive blocks in the body, these will be revealed by the breathing patterns. Often breathing patterns which are unconsciously established are caused by chronic muscular tensions due to emotional suffering in earlier years. To develop the breathing is to foster the awareness of feeling sensation and to charge the body with energy and hopefully, the potential for pleasure.

Character structure is important for our understanding of the individual. Understanding of characterology gives us a clue to the basic defensive structure of the individual, to his/her personal history, and the way he/she relates to others. In the practice of psychotherapy, particularly for the marriage and family therapist, an understanding of character is invaluable in determining the course of treatment.

Like other psychotherapists, the bioenergetic analyst and the client join in forming a therapeutic alliance, including an informed consent by the client to work bioenergetically. When the bioenergetic therapist has sufficient understanding of the client's presenting problems and their probable developmental basis, various body movements and exercises will be introduced. When appropriate to the therapeutic goals *and when permission has been received from the client,* the therapist may touch the client's body directly. Such direct contact is often invaluable in facilitating a deepening awareness of one's body processes and how they relate to early core issues, as well as offering possibilities for moving from static, dead positions in life to positions with direction, excitement and satisfaction. Bioenergetic therapists are trained to respect personal/professional boundaries. At no time is sexual or erotic touch permissible by the therapist or the client. Such action can cause irreparable harm to the patient by reinforcing early wounds and breaking the therapeutic alliance. Therefore, an understanding of and experience in dealing with boundary issues is crucial in bioenergetic therapy, as it is in all depth psychotherapies. The issue of touch is a complex and controversial subject in our field. A subsequent article will be submitted to discuss this issue at length. In addition, Robert Hilton, Ph.D., will address this subject at the May, 1990 CAMFT conference as part of his talk on Bioenergetic Analysis. Much can be said for the potential value of touch in therapy, but of paramount importance is the attitude of the therapist in using touch in his/her work. Lowen has the following to say on the subject:

"A therapist's touch has to be warm, friendly, dependable and free of any personal interest to inspire confidence in touching. But, since a therapist is a human being, too, his/her personal feelings may get in the way at times. When this happens, he/she shouldn't touch the patient. Therefore, a therapist has to know himself/herself, before he/she can be in touch with his/her patient. Going through one's own therapy is the basic condition for doing therapy with others. One should expect a therapist to knoll' the quality of a touch, to recognize the difference between a sensual touch, a supportive touch, between a firm touch and a hard touch, and between touching that is mechanical and that which has feeling." '

The bioenergetic analyst is, by reason of training, supervision, and personal therapy, qualified to work with the body, with its feeling and lack of feeling, with its movement and lack of movement. Prior to certification, the bioenergetic analyst must have had a minimum of four years of clinical training, ranging from 100 to 150 hours per year, approximately 150 hours of group and individual supervision, and at least 140 hours of personal bioenergetic analysis. To be certified one must first be licensed to practice psychotherapy. In addition, the bioenergetic therapist, as a member of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, is subject to review and disciplinary proceedings by the governing councils of this professional association. I invite readers to comment and question this article and hope that dialogue will continue in this important area of working with the body and touch in psychotherapy. ❑

Footnotes

1. Lowen, Alexander. *The Way to Vibrant Health,* 1977, Harper & Row, New York, p.3.
2. Smith, W.L., *The Body in Psychotherapy,* 1985, McFarland & Co., Jefferson, North Carolina, P. 14-15.
3. Lowen, Alexander. *Bioertergetics,* 1976, Penguin Books, New York, p. 185.
4. Lowen, Alexander. *Bioenergetics,* 1976, Penguin Books, New York, p. 93.

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CARL H. SHUBS, PH.D

(Lic. PSY 8912) *Clinical Psychology*

321 S. Beverly Dr., Suite "L"
Beverly Hills, CA 90212-4303

Office: (310) 772-0520
Fax: (323) 654-9030
Website: www.DrCarlShubs.com
E-mail: DrShubs@DrCarlShubs.com