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HEALTH  
SPECIAL

THE BODY-MIND CONNECTION

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## How Your Body Can Help Your Mind

*Who just talks about their issues anymore?*

*Now cutting edge therapies can teach us to use breathing, touch, movement and more to explore and embrace our emotions*

>> by ANDREA COOPER

I may be the only woman in America who was fired by her psychologist. Well—almost. I'd gone to him on and off for a decade as I coped with the effects of an abusive childhood, but we'd come to the point where he thought I needed to do more than just talk. He urged me to sign up for some sessions with Dana Endsley, a bodyworker who practices in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The next thing I knew, I was at my first session, and Dana was adjusting my weak, turned-in ankles. The whole experience seemed a bit woo-woo; I was glad I hadn't told any

friends about coming here. Dana repositioned my feet and asked me how I felt. "This is how I'm supposed to be standing?" I asked, incredulous. Suddenly I was noticing a strength in my legs that hadn't been there before. I was more solidly connected to the ground. My mood altered slightly too, leaving me a little more confident and easy in my stance. So *this* was what it felt like to have a strong foundation.

### A THERAPY FOR MIDLIFE WOMEN

That was my introduction, back in 2001, to an emerging field that's based on a simple premise: Talk therapy is not the only way to improve your mental health, handle your problems and be happy. I still see my psychologist for occasional touch-ups. But it was Dana—with her extensive training in the use of massage and bodywork methods to ease the aftereffects of trauma—who helped me discover that healing and change can be promoted in the body as well as the mind. Body psychotherapy contends that our past and present, our failures and successes, are all stored in the body, there to be revealed. Emotions trigger chemical reactions, gestures and



movements, and our physical selves may hold the memories of those strongly emotional times. Practitioners can treat a major trauma and also handle more common concerns, including divorce, death of a loved one, lack of self-esteem and depression.

This style of therapy can be particularly effective for over-40 women, says Elliot Greene, a past president of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy (USABP) and a private practitioner of bodywork in Silver Spring, Maryland. By this stage in our lives, sadnesses and stress have had a chance to accumulate, and midlife can be the ideal time to look at them more closely and address concerns that may be holding you back from realizing your potential.

There are various forms of body psychotherapy; all of them are some combination of talk, movement, breathing, exercise and sometimes touch. The goal is to help you probe your emotions, understand your experiences, determine where you are in your life and, perhaps, what you want next. The ultimate success might be changes in your nervous system that allow you to react to stress and challenges in healthier ways, in both your mind and your body. "Bodywork is a very comprehensive way of approaching issues, because it includes mainstream psychotherapy but adds a critical dimension. It provides an avenue for really expressing and exploring your emotions, not just talking about them," Greene explains.

If the whole body-healing-the-mind idea sounds farfetched, consider the now established tenets of mind-body science, which once seemed implausible. We've discovered that exercise—and the physiological changes it causes—can help ease depression. That wounds don't heal as quickly if you're under stress. That there's a reason why your stomach churns when you're afraid: The gastrointestinal tract is packed with neurotransmitters, including serotonin, which regulates mood. Given that background, body psychotherapy may simply be one of the next frontiers in mind-body studies.

## Picking the **Right** Therapist // // // //

» The easiest way to find a practitioner is to get a referral from your psychologist or a friend who has undergone body psychotherapy. Another good starting point is [usabp.org](http://usabp.org), the site of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy (click on "Find a Body Psychotherapist").

**Ask about credentials** According to the USABP, a practitioner should, ideally, have a college degree, graduate degree and training in body psychotherapy. She should also have undergone psychotherapy, including body psychotherapy, herself, so she knows what you're going through.

**Find out how the bodywork might address your particular concerns**, such as surviving child abuse, the death of a loved one or depression.

**Make sure that you like and respect the person** Many body psychotherapists believe a strong, trusting bond is key to the healing process.

**Ask about cost** Expect to pay anywhere from \$85 to \$250 per one- to two-hour session; your insurance may cover your treatments, depending on the type of practitioner.

## POPULAR TYPES OF BODYWORK

> **Bioenergetics** Along with its focus on energy, bioenergetics pays particular attention to the muscle tensions or patterns in the body and how they affect movement, breath, posture and expressiveness. [bioenergetic-therapy.com](http://bioenergetic-therapy.com)

> **Core Energetics** An outgrowth of Bioenergetics, this practice uses a more explicitly spiritual approach. [coreenergetics.org](http://coreenergetics.org)

> **Hakomi** This process helps you discover and then study your mind-body patterns and core beliefs. [hakomiinstitute.com](http://hakomiinstitute.com)

> **Radix Movement**, visualization and intentional touch are used to help people feel more fully alive and less constrained by their past. [radix.org](http://radix.org)

> **Sensorimotor Psychotherapy** Verbal techniques are combined with body-centered interventions to treat trauma, attachment and developmental issues. [sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org](http://sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org)

> **Somatic Experiencing** This method is for discovering how to cope with past traumas. [traumahealing.com](http://traumahealing.com)

## HOW THE FIELD GREW

Body psychotherapy was introduced about 80 years ago by Austrian psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich, a student of Freud's. Reich was a respected practitioner for much of his life, but at the time of his death in 1957, he was doing prison time for selling the "orgone accumulator," a device he said helped people harness energy but which the U.S. government called a fraud.

After body psychotherapy became linked with quackery, proponents of the treatment "lived underground for many years and the work developed outside the mainstream," says Barbara Goodrich-Dunn, cofounder of USABP. Conventional organizations such as the American Psychological Association had "an *ewwww* reaction," she says. "For some people, the body was just not a legitimate issue. It was all about the mind."

Over the next 30 years that attitude changed, partly because of some

landmark research published in the *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* in 1994. In "The Body Keeps the Score," trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, MD, reported his finding that bad memories stay trapped in nonverbal parts of the brain that cause the body to react as if reexperiencing the trauma. In a later study, van der Kolk examined brain images of eight trauma patients and found that when they remembered a traumatic event, the portion of the brain that controls language shut down. Van der Kolk concluded that the experience of trauma is lodged in the body, and working with bodily sensations helps relieve trauma.

Since then, the major professional associations have become more open, inviting body psychotherapists to present at psychological conferences. And more and more mainstream talk therapists are referring their patients to body psychotherapists. »



## INSIDE A SESSION

So what, exactly, happens during a body psychotherapy session? Scott Baum, a New York City body-oriented psychotherapist, pulls back the curtain on a typical hour.

"Let's say a 48-year-old woman sees me for help: Her husband cheated on her and she has initiated a divorce, but she's still ambivalent about ending the marriage. She feels stuck and lost." Although this scenario is hypothetical, Baum says he's seen many clients with similar issues.

Baum practices Bioenergetics, a body therapy that taps the body's energy to allow the patient to become more self-aware and have better relationships. He begins by listening

protect herself by curving her shoulders inward," he says. Learning to do that is important, Baum notes, because the phrase *standing up for yourself* is not just a metaphor. "When people want to feel powerful, they plant their feet, they square their shoulders, they look straight ahead. Their whole thrust is, 'I'm here, and you have to take me into account.'"

Baum points to research suggesting that facial expression and body posture can not only convey an emotion but also create and sustain one. For instance, a study published in the journal *Cognition and Emotion* in 2003 found that when subjects were asked to look and act as if

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to get a sense of the underlying story. In this case, the woman has confronted her husband, hoping he would change, but he hasn't. As she talks, Baum notices that her shoulders are slumping forward and she's looking at him from under drooping eyelids. Her decision sounds assertive, but her body collapses when she talks about it.

She feels she has failed. "People have been telling her, 'Good for you!' And meanwhile, she's profoundly confused or enraged or sad," Baum says. There's guilt too, because her daughter is upset. All those shifting feelings can be addressed through bodywork.

"Would you like to experiment with what it feels like to stand up for yourself?" Baum asks her. He has her roll her shoulders back and elongate her neck. "Although initially she may feel vulnerable not sheltering her heart and breasts, it's actually a stronger position to stand with her chest open than to try to

they were happy, sad or angry, they continued to feel those sentiments even after they stopped the exercise. The implication: If you learn a new way of moving through the world, your emotions and attitude may substantially shift too. People will respond to you differently, and that will reinforce the changes.

That all sounds good, but when the woman tries the posture, she feels a wash of anxiety about her husband rejecting her. Baum suggests another approach: "What would happen if you said out loud, 'You've betrayed me and I won't put up with it!'"

"Oh, I could never say that," the woman replies.

Then maybe she can vocalize the tone, Baum suggests. Her first sounds are grunts, which soon turn into shrieks and screams. "She's angry at being treated dismissively, and she's making that known," Baum explains.

Certainly, the goal of bodywork therapy is not to have the patient



walk around the world screaming. It's to learn when you're screaming inside and bring it out in the therapeutic venue, so you can go forward with your life.

To conclude the session, Baum has the woman take deep breaths to stretch the muscles around the diaphragm, so she'll have more air and energy available. When it's all working—posture changes, movements, vocalizing, breathing—“you can feel more and know more about what's happening inside you,” Baum says. That's essential, he notes, because you can't resolve feelings you don't know you have. Baum rejects the Western assumption that intellect and emotions are separate. “Everything we study in neuroscience now tells us it's all one system.”

#### LEARNING FROM THE BODY

No matter which type of bodywork therapy is employed, the underlying tenet is the same: The body can give very obvious clues about what you need. “Mostly what we help clients do is listen to or interpret their own gestures,” says Pat Ogden, founder of the Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute in Boulder, Colorado. More than once, female clients have asked to sit next to her in a session, then revealed that nobody has ever been on their side emotionally.

One woman came to see Ogden because her husband complained that she was not warm or open. In their work, Ogden asked the client to reach out to her. The woman did so stiffly, with her palm down, then blurted out, “I don't see the point of this. No one was ever there for me.” The gesture helped lead her to the memories that had triggered this insight.

One breakthrough in my own therapy resulted from a floor exercise. Dana had me make a circle around myself with string, then directed me to try to grab a book outside the barrier. The setup was a representation of the memoir I wanted to write and the obstacles

I was putting in my own path. I stretched out my arms; the book was out of reach. A memory flashed through me of my abuser, who had often said I would never be successful. Dana asked if I could find a way for my body to give me more support. I curled my legs under my butt, leaned forward, and grabbed the book easily. By creating a more supportive base for myself, I could get what I needed, and soon, I began taking my writing more seriously.

Still not convinced? If you're wondering whether body psychotherapy is really beneficial or just a gimmick, Hakomi therapist Cedar Barstow, who

it looks—can be a life-changing experience. “The emphasis of body therapy is on how your body feels, and how it would feel if you were really confident and fulfilled in your life,” Ogden says. “That's very different from going to the gym.”

I saw my bodyworker once a month for two years, then stopped after seeing the positive changes I made in her office spread to my life. I realized I had been like a puppet character in one of my nine-year-old son's videos. A floating head with no body, the puppet tried and failed to win a contest to be a superhero. Sure, that character was a great thinker. But

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practices in Boulder, Colorado, suggests, “Give it a try. Within three to six sessions, you'll discover whether it's working for you.” At its best, she says, “body psychotherapy immediately engages your attention and gets you away from the endless loop of trying to figure something out just using your head.”

That's especially true, I think, for midlife women. I don't believe I would have been ready for this when I was younger; I might have felt it was too scary or just plain odd. Being in midlife makes it easier to be open. “It's a time when women can really blossom. I think that physical patterns can be such a hindrance to that blossoming... [but] if you pay attention to your body, it can be a real asset,” Ogden says. Body psychotherapy, she adds, can undo the physical patterns that hold you back, whether they come from old issues or relatively new concerns, such as feeling less desirable as you age.

Discovering how your body can support you—even just thinking about your body without obsessing over how

he could have accomplished a lot more with a body.

In a weird way, I had been just like that floating head. As a child-abuse victim, I tended to ignore my body whenever possible, having learned at an early age that it wasn't exactly a safe place. The bodywork showed me that having a body could actually be beneficial. It could be a source of delight, in moments as simple as eating, taking deep breaths, feeling the sunlight, hugging or dancing. I could use my body to connect more fully with my husband and children. I could use it to succeed in my work. The therapy triggered a fundamental shift in my self-perception. My body is not an obstacle, I discovered. My body is me.

This fall, I'm seeing the bodyworker again, but this time for neuromuscular massage to deal with stiff shoulders from writing at the computer all day. Her gift to me from years ago has lasted. I am no longer secretly cringing, waiting for the next blow. I stand a little taller. And I like the view. ☺