

# Centre Profile: The London Body Psychotherapy Centre

*Deirdre Gordon*

---

The body is a vessel that we use for this lifetime. It is relatively clear that when we come into this world we already contain tendencies or genetic information which will influence how we respond to our experiences, of which conception is the first. As we develop in the womb we are already on our way to becoming the 'conditioned being' we identify with. We develop this being physically, energetically and mentally and carry on reacting to our environment from our limited world view, becoming-and-becoming who we are with more or less awareness.

The greater the awareness, the greater the chance of disentangling reaction from response, the greater the opportunity of detaching ourselves from a preconceived view of our surroundings. There are many ways of gaining this awareness and, given free rein and a spacious arena, individuals will naturally follow their own path. The London Body Psychotherapy Centre's approach is to hold the possibility that the body plays a vital role in unblocking our conditioning and thus becoming a less cluttered vessel on life's journey.

## *History*

The LBPC is the sister centre to the Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre, which

has been running for six years. The CBPC was the brainchild of Gill Westland and has developed organically. It now has a reputation for providing quality body psychotherapy on a one-to-one basis, in groups, in supervision and with various trainings attached.

Gill's background is that of an occupational therapist who has worked as a manager in mental health and also trained at the Gerda Boyesen Centre and the Karuna Institute. Occupational therapy students used to be trained in both medical and psychiatric disciplines regardless of their eventual direction as professionals. Although these subjects were taught quite separately, the seeds of Gill's connecting the two can be traced to that time.

I have worked at the Cambridge Centre from its beginning and have a similar background to Gill's, having also worked as an OT manager in mental health and trained at the Karuna Institute. In addition I have trained as a craniosacral therapist.

Three years ago I began to plan a similar centre to the CBPC for London and, with Gill's agreement and encouragement, started the LBPC. The LBPC is in a steady process of development. It provides good quality body psychotherapy on a one-to-one basis, groups which involve body

*Deirdre Gordon founded the London Body Psychotherapy Centre in 1995. LBPC is at 19 Sudbury Court Drive, Harrow, Middlesex HA1 3SZ Tel: 0181 904 6488.*

awareness more directly, and supervision of various kinds, including contemplative supervision. The Centre also runs occasional trainings, for example on somato-emotional trauma work and on character, personality and psychomotor development. (Both these are led by Babette Rothschild, an American therapist normally resident in the USA who specialises in trauma and body.)

### *What is body psychotherapy?*

We increasingly read and hear about the mind-body connection and the fact that the mind and body are indivisible. They are so interconnected that you cannot consider one without the consequences to the other.

The body psychotherapist keeps the body as the base line. The therapist will fluidly follow process, connecting the process to breath, awareness, the felt sense and to inner experience. The therapist may do this within him- or herself, or by reconnecting the client to body when appropriate. This does not make the body more important than the mind; it cannot, since they are intertwined. The body psychotherapist merely uses the body as the ground, the way in, the access to the whole.

Other aspects such as the spirit, the emotions, the energetic are not more or less important and there is hopefully space for all of these in our work. The degree to which these aspects are available depends on the scope of the therapist. The way the therapist might refocus the client to the body will range from the more gross form such as saying, 'Are you aware of your hand clenching as you say that?' to the more subtle noticing of the gentle energetic vibration in the client's legs.

Body psychotherapy doesn't necessarily mean touch. Some of the best known body psychotherapists, such as Stanley Kellerman, don't touch their clients at all. Analysts often work with the body too; although they don't necessarily say so, or know so. Professor Eugene Gendlin found that it was possible to identify which clients were likely to benefit from psychotherapy by noticing their ability to move freely from thinking to the felt sense, moving between the two and connecting the physical experience of emotion to thinking. This skill can be taught; Gendlin calls it 'focusing'. Discovering a natural phenomenon, he turned it into a technique that can be taught to anyone. When an analytical therapist has this natural ability they will be using their own body to receive and identify information and will be giving space for their clients to do the same.

Body psychotherapy entails the therapist being aware of their own physical responses, resonating with or reacting to their client's experience, not just their own thoughts, images and feelings. That may be all that is necessary in terms of the body at that time, or indeed all that the client can tolerate for a while.

Bringing attention to or developing awareness of the client's felt sense is another aspect of the work. Developing this awareness might range from the less subtle form of asking, 'Where do you feel this in your body?' to the more subtle spacious allowing of a silent shared experience. Obvious, you might think, but not to all. This process can be a revelation to clients who did not know they had the capacity of 'focusing'.

And we also touch! We hold, move towards and away from so as to explore intimacy and distance. We use whatever

we believe will bring awareness to the moment and we use our individual techniques. These include biodynamic massage and biosynthesis, but I use craniosacral therapy to bring subtle awareness to the client's system.

### *Why the body?*

All our belief systems, patterns, memories, feelings and experiences are held in the body. We also believe that the body, the tissues and even the cells have their own intelligence and wisdom. We have great respect for such a finely tuned subtle system and it is no coincidence that many body psychotherapists have a personal spiritual path.

There are different levels in body awareness, from noticing how we physically move our body to breathe and how breath reflects the way we feel in the moment, to connecting the matrix of our bodies with the sense of our own personal truths.

Some levels might be explained thus:

We know that our language sometimes describes our emotions in physical terms, for example: 'They're a pain in the neck', 'Keep a stiff upper lip', 'I felt gutted', 'Stabbed in the back'.

It's probably less well known that if we have a traumatic physical accident, the physical damage won't heal as well or even at all unless the emotional experience has been addressed. Hopefully the expression of anger, shock, loss, fear and distress will happen naturally, but sometimes it does not. A broken right arm, if you are a violinist, might make you feel as though your world has collapsed. The deeper meaning of your musicianship, of its place in your life and its potential loss may have to be acknowledged to help the healing process.

The shadow parts of us are hidden and

held in our bodies. Shock, resentment, envy or joy — anything we can't allow ourselves to feel or acknowledge might be held in muscles, tissues, bones, organs or even outside ourselves. We can access the shadow directly through the body as long as we are ready to tolerate what we fear, and know that we can move at our own pace.

Our beliefs and early decisions and conditioning are held in patterns, like the subtle curling over of shoulders to protect a heart; the sense of a metal bar across a section of the body; or of elastic bands holding a pelvis together as a way of protecting ourselves from overwhelming feelings.

The developmental age of our conflict and the parental response may determine our physical and emotional defences. For example when a seven-month-old boy develops the impulse to reach out for his parent but does not have his needs met, he may respond by either losing the impulse, (leaving him with weak and deadened muscles in his arms), withdrawing from contact (leaving him isolated), or blocking the impulse and becoming distrustful of having his needs met, with consequent tense muscle tone in his arms. But with a healthy response from the parent, the adult man will feel connected to his arms, his need and ability to reach out and his arm musculature will be energised, elastic and alive.

There is also a deeper, more mysterious wisdom held in our bodies. We know the answers to much more than we have conceived; not only what we need, who we are, our own individual truths, but greater knowledge; existential and spiritual answers that you can only access if you know how to listen.

## *The attraction of body psychotherapy*

People are attracted to body psychotherapy because it is a very direct way into awareness. It's happening in the present, it's about how things are now. The unwinding of the experience doesn't require such an intellectual process. Understanding is important, too, but not in the same way as analysing the experience with mental understanding alone. There is a difference between making sense of an experience, as opposed to knowing all about it. You may know a lot about why you are this person through years of intellectual exploration, but 'So what?', as I've heard many people say. If there isn't a corresponding internal experience, nothing will change. Not a lot will change even if a lot of physical therapy takes place, unless awareness is involved.

Fortunately either of these extremes may only need a little of the other for integration to occur. A therapist who works with the body may say their client has been in analysis for years with little to show for it, but three months with them and the client's life is transformed. This is nonsense! Most of the work had obviously been done; it merely needed integrating. It is integration that transforms.

Another reason for choosing body psychotherapy is the need, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, to work with the non-verbal or pre-verbal. It is obviously easier to reach these earliest levels non-verbally. Touch, or withholding touch, are major factors in infancy. It makes sense to explore and contact in similar ways. Even pre-birth issues can be contacted with touch. The intention is not necessarily to remember the experience

cognitively; that is rather a lot to expect of most people. However, the body remembers, and when reminded by touch, in combination with contact and the therapeutic relationship, the experience has the opportunity to unwind, express itself or let go. The therapeutic relationship of course is very important too and some of the same elements apply as in core work: clarity, compassion, spaciousness, integrity, authenticity.

Our approach attracts a variety of people. Those more mentally focused might be feeling a lack of connection to themselves, and sense that greater awareness of the body and the felt sense is the key. Others may be more physical and know that the body is their best access to their process. People with long-term physical problems or discomforts who believe that medical attention is only part of the answer may want to find the emotional root of their symptoms.

We are gaining a reputation for dealing with trauma which particularly lends itself to working with the body. Trauma is strongly registered in the system, and the answers to avoiding retraumatising the client are found in the body. Techniques for putting on the brakes, pulling yourself away from re-entering the trauma, bringing yourself back to the present, learning to control the autonomic nervous system, all involve the physical.

## *Fear of body psychotherapy*

There are many psychotherapists who are deeply suspicious of the use of the body, and some of them are fearful. I heard one therapist say that he would not touch because the client might destroy the therapy room. This is an extreme fear of the powerful — and in this case destructive — force of touch, where the client (or maybe

the therapist) risks losing control. The issue is about boundaries and it is not surprising that there is fear. It appears that most of the major founders of psychotherapy have had physical relationships with one or more of their clients in spite of the rule of non-touch. It might be assumed that not touching was an attempt at preventing such catastrophic breaking of boundaries. If so then it didn't work! The breaking of such boundaries can happen whether a therapist touches or not. The fear of loss of control may keep the therapist more distant but the powerful dynamics that lead to such behaviour are more connected to unresolved issues.

Breaking of boundaries is an important consideration. Using physical contact is a different dimension and integrity is vital. If this boundary is highlighted in the area of body psychotherapy the skills of detecting, containing and using these edges of boundaries may be of benefit rather than dangerous. One might suspect that the

breaking of such boundaries is spread evenly amongst all the different types of psychotherapy and is more widespread than is commonly acknowledged.

## Conclusion

What the Cambridge and London Body Psychotherapy Centres offer is unusual; they are centres where body psychotherapists from different backgrounds work together, sharing and developing their ideas and experiences. All therapists working at the centres are either UKCP registered or working towards registration and have trained at either the Chiron Centre, the Gerda Boyesen Centre or the Karuna Institute, as well as in Biosynthesis.

Our intention is to broaden and deepen our collective knowledge at all levels, at the cutting edge of what is known in this field. In this way the centres offer a unique approach to the search for awareness, which is the springboard of self-healing, self-mastering and growth.

---

## Earwig

The boy Blair came in for a counselling session this morning. And ranted. 'You see, I think the Prime Minister should be called the Rev. Blair, don't you? All sensible people seem to see it that way. There is, after all, a marked change in British politics and this would be, as everyone says, a suitable way of making that clear to everyone now that the situation has become clear for everyone to see quite clearly.' 'Praise be to God,' I said, trying to do an empathic build. I thought of asking



him to emphasise what he had just said by putting it into fewer words but my Co-Co teacher is against that sort of thing and I try to stick by the rules.

'Praise be to God indeed,' echoed the Rev. 'Now that is a title worth going for.' I invited him to play Magic Shop à la Psychodrama. He settled for an arm and a leg and we all now call him God. Anyone want a stringy left arm and a flabby right leg? Write to me with an s.a.e.

*Earwig, Therapist to the People's People*