

Touch in Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice,
Edited by: Edward W. L. Smith, Pauline Rose Clance, Suzanne Imes.
The Guilford Press, 1998, £17.99

'Therapists - both because of their own fears and their involvement with the fears of everyone else - are the ones who must struggle with issues of touch and dependency at the same time that they are punished for doing so in this increasingly adversarial legal and cultural environment.' (p. 151)

The 17 contributors to this book all seek to engage with that struggle and encourage us all to consider touch as an effective therapeutic tool despite our fears. It courageously acknowledges the dangers of touching our most vulnerable clients and continues to support the use of touch by offering their accumulated years of experience and learning together with the experiences of their clients.

The book is divided into three parts: ethics is considered alongside theory in the first part, followed by research and practice. I felt held and contained on my journey through it and appreciated the very grounding way in which the depth of feeling and sensitivity of the material was presented. Although the authors acknowledge the impact of the cultural environment in which psychotherapy has emerged its main emphasis is on the use of touch as a therapeutic tool and the cultural environment of psychotherapy itself.

On many occasions through the book we are reminded of the conflict between Freud and Ferenczi. Freud is very explicit in a letter to Ferenczi:

'A number of independent thinkers in the matter of technique will say to themselves: why stop? Certainly one gets further when one adopts "pawing" as well ... And then bolder ones will come along who will go further to peeping and showing, and soon we shall have accepted in the technique of analysis the whole repertoire of ...petting parties, resulting in an enormous increase of interest in psychoanalysis among both analysts and patients.' (Quoted in Jones, 1955, p. 163)(p. 8)

This very explicit concern is of course at the heart of our fears around the use of touch irrespective of whether we believe touch to be therapeutic or not. But little space is given in the book to support those who believe the use of touch serves only to muddle the transference process and its analysis. In fact the authors collectively

'chose not to represent the position that touch should never be used'.
(p. xii)

Two agendas run concurrently through the book; one is the practice of the art of touch in therapy and the other is the cultural political place of touch in our society. I felt that the omission of the non-touch perspective diminished the value of the debate regarding touch as a therapeutic tool, however, as a political statement it felt important to me.

Over and over I was reminded that touch is a fundamental form of human contact and communication. In a moving chapter by Reuvan Bar-Levav he quotes the work of R. A. Spitz (1957) and says:

'We know why Spitz's babies died in England, even though they never told us. They were not mothered properly. They were carefully attended to, fed, and changed, but this was not enough. And how were they not mothered properly? They were not held and touched enough, not well enough. They literally wilted and died.' (p. 53)

This, for me, is the most important message of the book, a message that is carried throughout the many anecdotes that form the backbone of the book. The research used in the book is qualitative and subjective; it is also a very small sample. One of the clients describes her experience of touch:

'What comes to mind immediately is warmth. The circumstances in which my therapist touches me are always to convey love and warmth. My personal experience with touch has been extremely important and helpful. Physical touch by my therapist has helped me get in direct contact with my emotional experience. Touch has added a dimension to my therapy that has deepened my therapy and awareness at a visceral level.' (p.189)

The authors are also very clear that touch in therapy has damaged many people and the learning of how, when, under what circumstances, and with which clients, touch might be therapeutically effective is repeated over and over throughout the book.

In another chapter Pamela Torracco says 'Real contact can occur only when a therapist can "reach in and touch" a patient on such a deep level' (p.220) and she is referring to the level of soul. She also refers, as do other contributors, to the need to impact that part of our physiology containing pre-verbal memory so important in our very early development.

I valued reading this book. I felt encouraged and supported to continue to reach out and touch my clients in any way I can. Sadly the book ends with the advice to avoid touching our clients in one on one sessions because of the dangers to both ourselves as well as our clients. It is sad because it suggests caution rather than the courage so often expressed during the book as its contributors took risks to heal their clients.

Dave Mazure

Making peace with pain

Vidyamala Burch's 'Living Well with Pain and Illness' (2008) is a very useful book on many levels. If you, or someone you know or work with, have been living with chronic pain or illness over sustained periods, it will be a great tool. It provides comprehensive information on scientific advances in the understanding of just what pain really is and, at the same time, offers valuable techniques for self - management in dealing with long term pain or illness.

Burch reviews recent research before presenting a bio-psychosocial model for chronic pain. Most of us who have long term pain or illness become embattled and distracted 'fighting' it, sometimes then collapsing from the effort. Here we are encouraged to change that experience, that relationship, into one of mindful acceptance and kindness.

I was struck by how many parallels could be drawn between this work with the body and sensations and the psychological or emotional domains on which we spend so much of psychotherapy time. The lessons rehearsed here can be widely applied to all situations in which we engage in struggling to avoid what we don't want and have got.

Having lived with severe pain for most of her life, the author makes a compassionate and thoughtful guide. The book is presented in clear, confident, fluent style in a well designed workbook format.

Detailed exercises for movement, breathing, meditation and changing thoughts are given: these synthesise yoga, pilates, meditation and bodywork systems. They also form part of the 'Breathworks programme' (see: www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk) for whom Ms Burch is an experienced trainer.

As someone who has lived for decades with constant pain myself, and worked with many clients also managing pain or long term illnesses, I thoroughly recommend this title as a helpful companion.

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Self & Society Letters

*Letters for the next issue of S&S should be sent
to the Editor by 21st January 2010 - Ed.*