

# Managing yourself and managing the dis-ease

Using Biodynamic Massage Therapy with Dystonia (spasmodic torticollis).

by Denise Bailey-McCrohan

Denise Bailey-McCrohan is a Biodynamic Massage therapist and Integrative psychotherapist. She describes the different aspects of her work with a client who has dystonia.

*In the ten years I have been working as a Biodynamic Massage Therapist I have found that the clients who make the most improvement are those totally, that is holistically, involved in the process. They may come with presenting physical symptoms but when they look at the other problems in their lives they can be helped to make connections. How fully the emotional, mental, spiritual and physical connections are made will depend on the client's understanding and the therapist's ability to interpret what is presented. As a Biodynamic Massage Therapist and an Integrative Psychotherapist I believe that when other areas of dis-ease and dis-comfort are addressed it can facilitate the dis-stressed body's healing process.*

A client was referred to me in March 1997 by a physiotherapist. She was suffering with spasmodic torticollis, one of the Dystonias that are a puzzling group of neurological diseases. Although I will refer to her condition as Dystonia, there are many other forms, including blepharo-spasm, spasmodic dystonia, writer's cramp, and generalised dystonia. They all have in common a disorder of muscle control producing spontaneous muscle spasms.

The cause of this group of conditions is not known and their treatment is difficult. Some patients respond well to anticholinergics, and recently, intramuscular botulinum toxin has been used with considerable success. Some patients have derived benefit from stereotactic neurosurgery but this carries considerable risks. "Apart from the medical and surgical treatments ... the patients' attitude to their illness will be one of the most important factors in deciding how it affects them. Dystonia does not kill, but causes considerable distress and disability." (Marsden CD, Quinn NP, The Dystonias BMJ 1990.) Spasmodic Torticollis is the most common focal dystonia (affecting one part of the body) which involves the neck, with twisting to one side (torticollis), forwards (antecollis) or backwards (retrocollis). The neck might pull, turn or jerk; eventually it may be held permanently in an abnormal posture.

## Massage

At the time of writing this article this client has had regular weekly sessions of Biodynamic Massage for 10 months. This massage is effective at many different levels:

a) The physiological levels of working in the aura, skin, tissue, muscle and bone. These levels were introduced in that chronological order. In the beginning I used light non-invasive movements; then more flowing and energising touch; introducing deep, specific pressure at points of pain and tension (starting by using the thumb and leading to the use of the elbow), and at all times, holding and energy distribution.

The list of techniques is endless because Biodynamic massage offers such a versatile approach, and as we worked together we discovered what felt right. This massage uses the client's feedback and the peristalsis (heard through a stethoscope) and the therapist's knowledge and intuitions to give as full a picture of the body as possible. As the relationship between client and therapist develops this picture deepens and extends.

b) The subtle energy flow of the body can be worked with effectively. As my client's energy was erratic and blocked, calming and soothing the system gave immediate relief. This involved working with auric holding and releasing, energy distribution and releasing at first.

As the system became stronger, deeper touch could be used to release blocked energy held in the muscles and tissue. Employing the client's own ability to visualise was useful at times.

c) The autonomic nervous system had received a profound shock and needed time and space to heal. So I worked slowly and carefully to avoid retraumatizing the system. Holding and calming, breathing work, and a healing presence and touch facilitate the body's natural drive to heal itself.

d) A psychological understanding of the body has been an important component of our work. The English language uses many sayings that illustrate the connection between feelings and how they can affect our body, for example, my heart was in my mouth. An awareness of the manifestations of distress in the body, made it easier to put physical reactions into context.

I would like to use this case study to illustrate the following five points:

### 1. Working with acute conditions can bring dramatic improvements.

Many clients come for alternative therapy when all else fails and the condition is in its chronic phase. Seeing someone at an acute state allows the work to be more effective and immediate. My client had had Botulinum toxin injected into the muscles of her neck every eight weeks and she had receive four injections shortly before our first meeting.

The Dystonia appeared in the first instance when she retracted her head violently while standing up. Her husband was passing a cup of coffee over her head and she ducked to avoid it. This occurred in October 1996 and since then she had been unable to control the movements in her head and had constant pain in her neck. For three months she had been in the embryonic position with acute pain throughout her body. By March she was mobile but her head shook constantly and she had pain and distension in her neck. Any movement caused spasm and any stress (such as walking and talking to people) made the spasm worse. Because my client had severe problems in the neck region it would be inadvisable to touch that area.

Aura work was an ideal solution to releasing the pent-up energies and to soothe the system. Her body, mind and emotions had received a profound shock and initially my work was in helping to relieve that. I wonder if working with acute physical symptoms is so effective because we are facilitating our bodies natural drive to heal itself. By releasing the trauma in the system we are enabling that healing process, rather than locking it in place.

My client would experience uncontrollable shaking in her head, for several hours after a session. She found her symptoms considerably improved because of this release. Within two months the characteristic shaking and distortion of the head were not so obvious and she was able to work and lead a more normal life. Another client with Dystonia said, of her, "You wouldn't know that she had Dystonia." She has not had any further Botulinum toxin injections since starting Biodynamic massage.

### 2. The client's commitment to helping herself is vital.

This client was highly motivated to help herself and fight the dis-ease. She has found out a lot about the condition and discovered that in America they used non-medical ways of helping. She began to explore alternative therapies until she finally heard about Biodynamic massage. She has weekly Yoga classes and uses physiotherapy exercises and the Alexander technique regularly. Finding a 'cure' was an important motivating healing force.

When her medical specialist later said that she had gone into 'spontaneous remission', she relaxed her efforts and things started to deteriorate. We are now engaged in finding a way of managing the symptoms, that seem to be waiting for a chance to reassert themselves, and managing her life and needs. The control of the physical symptoms seems to be closely related to managing her emotional

needs. This illness shows, that if the mind and body are not in harmony, the physical symptoms of the disease can reappear.

3. Biodynamic massage offers a wide range of techniques and skills that can be adapted to deal specifically and accurately with complex and delicate conditions.

When a physiotherapist, who specialises in Dystonia, was seen working by my client she noticed that the techniques he used were very similar to mine. The physiotherapist did not consider that massage was appropriate for Dystonia. But when my client spoke to him and said that she was receiving Biodynamic massage, he was quick to reassure her that whatever she was doing was worth continuing. There is a great difference between an aware and an unaware massage. With Biodynamic massage there is not a set sequence of movements that have to be followed, regardless of how the client feels. Client and therapist are both involved in developing and refining their awareness and sensitivity to the body. My client became aware that traumatised areas had felt dead and that the energy was returning and flowing through them. I became aware that working simultaneously on both sides of the body helped realignment and balance, as though I was re-informing the damaged side of the body, how it should be.

4. Working with the emotional aspects of a long term illness.

“Like many chronic illnesses, it is quite common, upon diagnosis, for the patient to go through stages of shock, anger, despair and depression, then acceptance...Helping the patient accept the illness is important, as anxiety can worsen the symptoms.” (Marsden CD).

Dealing with the shock of developing the condition, coping with not being able to do what you once could, dealing with people’s lack of concern, putting herself first!, and considering medical retirement. After a time of improvement, the symptoms started returning when early retirement was being considered. Would it be the right thing to do? How could it be handled? By looking at the pros and cons and voicing her concerns, the pressure was taken off and the physical symptoms improved. Allowing fears and worries to be expressed and discussed is an important part of coping with the condition. It allows for the possibility of gaining support from the people around you and not having to do it on your own.

5. Trusting in the mystery of the process.

After we had been working together for three months the specialist, who diagnosed her, said that she was in ‘spontaneous remission’. He was not interested in hearing about the part Biodynamic Massage played in her recovery. I wonder if it was too hard to allow the element of the unknown to be acknowledged.

I do not make the claim that Biodynamic massage can help all people with Dystonia. Other therapies have been important in facilitating this work and none of this would have been possible without the client’s motivation and her sensitivity to Biodynamic massage. But I think that it is worth validating how useful natural and non-invasive therapies can be in assisting the body’s natural drive to heal itself. My client was able to validate the strong element of ‘Healing’ that was involved with the massage. As a Biodynamic therapist I understand the importance of the exchange of energy and the awareness of the clients’ energy. But how do you explain the energetic response that followed from just touching her jaw; or the untwisting in her neck that was felt when I was twelve inches away from the top of her head; or the sudden releasing in one area of her back, that made a profound change to the whole system. Maybe there will be or is a scientific explanation for these changes, but when you are working in the moment it feels like an unfolding of a mystery. Trusting in the healing power of your work gives the client permission to trust in the mystery of the healing.

The next stage

The next stage in the healing process is in managing to lead a full life within the confines of the condition. The Dystonia provides a very delicate monitor for highlighting dis-ease. If things are worrying or too much, the physical symptoms return. Therefore I see that managing oneself, getting it right for you, helps you to manage the disease.

While not claiming to have an answer for dealing with all clients with Dystonia, I feel validated in Biodynamic massage's capability for dealing with an acute and long-term illness, when the client and therapist's relationship is committed and trusting. The chances of the remission of this illness are 1%, but the possibilities of helping someone to manage the dis-ease and manage themselves, are a lot higher.

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