

# Setting up a Biodynamic Massage Therapy practice

## Part 1 – the foundations

By Gill Westland

This is the first of an occasional series of articles about setting up in practice as a biodynamic massage therapist and I think that most of what I write could also apply to setting up a body psychotherapy practice. It comes out of my own experiences of setting up a practice in the early 1980's, which developed into Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre; supporting supervisees to get started; and running workshops on how to get started. I will start with basics, which might seem obvious, but are often taken for granted. I am assuming that you have trained in biodynamic massage and received a certificate, which recognises your expertise to begin practising massage with the general public.

*The basic work of health professionals in general, and of psychotherapists in particular, is to become full human beings and to inspire full human-beingness in other people who feel starved in their lives (Trungpa (1)).*

### **What nourishes life energy?**

Biodynamic massage is a form of therapy, which is fundamentally about inviting the life force to come more strongly alive in a person and for it to find its own expression in daily life. To the extent that you are alive and in touch with your own life force, whatever else might be happening, you will be able to invite it to flourish in others.

The first question to consider is who and what has been healing for you? What were the qualities of those healing experiences? What seemed to facilitate the healing? What experiences in your life have seemed less healing? What was this like?

Research into different psychotherapies has found that psychotherapy is beneficial, but no particular psychotherapy stands out (2). The meta-studies that have been done to produce these findings have included person-centred counselling and gestalt psychotherapy, but not body psychotherapy. The ingredients of effective psychotherapy show that the following seem to be significant in the effectiveness of the psychotherapy:

- the therapist being genuine;
- and being able to provide a safe, non-threatening, secure and trusting atmosphere through his or her acceptance and feelings of warmth for the client;
- and able to understand and have moment by moment empathy with the client, but the understanding has to be communicated to the client.

However, the personality of the therapist is more important than his techniques and those with the core qualities of empathy, genuineness and warmth are likely to be more effective (3).

Whilst these studies are about psychotherapy, I think they are useful for thinking about biodynamic massage. Few studies have looked at the fact that in spite of the same training and orientation, there are just some psychotherapists whose clients seem to flourish more than those with another, different psychotherapist. I suspect that Trungpa's comments "Patients should experience a sense of wholesomeness vibrating from you. If they do, they will be attracted to you" (4) are also meaningful in terms of healing.

The second question to consider is how are you cultivating the qualities that seem to aid well-being? What nourishes and supports you in life? How in touch are you with your essential healthiness are you? What nourishes your life energy? How often do you do these sorts of things? How will you maintain your joy for life as you build and sustain a practice? Do you have a spiritual practice? What do you do socially and for pleasure? Do you have a friendship network? How do you look after your body? What do you eat? Do you exercise and relax? Do you have a healing,

grounding and embodying practice, which you do daily and in the pauses between clinics? Do you allow enough pauses in the day for reflection? What patterns of going against yourself do you have? What do you do to compensate for these?

Professionally have you arranged a support network? This might be colleagues that you meet with, perhaps to spend time with, but possibly to support the setting up process? Have you joined the AHBMT, the public voice for the work and the community to be affirmed by? Have you arranged a supervisor, who is sympathetic to your personal struggles and understands the context that you will be working in?

In reflecting on some of the above you may discover blocks in yourself making it unlikely that clients will seek you out. What can you do about these?

### **The environment**

The next consideration is where will you practise? You may like to visualise yourself in some sort of therapeutic room and perhaps draw a picture of it. Does it feel comfortable to you, and a safe place for a client? Where might it be? Places to practise might be a GP practice, an NHS facility, a voluntary agency, a complementary health centre or home. Each location will have its pros and cons. Each will give out different messages about you and your work, and attract different sorts of clients. What will there be in the room? What sorts of furniture? What colours will be in the room? Are there any objects or paintings there?

Not much seems to be written on the subject of quipping a room for therapy and I had not thought that much about it consciously early in my practice. However I remember being shocked some years ago visiting a prestigious psychotherapy training establishment and glimpsing their consultation rooms. There was worn lino on the floor, and shabby chairs; it was dirty, cold and inhospitable to my eye. More recently, I visited a holistic health centre. It was beautifully decorated; clean, and tidy. It had allergy sufferers in mind and there was rush matting, hard chairs, a desk, and a minimalistic feel to it. However, I felt it lacked the necessary softness to invite the body to let go into its wisdom. But, at a psychotherapy training centre that I visited in the summer, I felt restored with each breath I took, before I had even met any of the staff. The atmosphere tingled, but was tranquil. The plants were healthy and vibrant; and it was clean and co-ordinated.

Trungpa sees the atmosphere around oneself as a reflection of one's individuality and says it should be kept immaculate. The atmosphere should be 'a reflection of human dignity, and it should be kept physically ordered.' I tend to agree with him and think that the therapy room needs to have a certain order to it, particularly for clients who don't know where they are in space, or had chaotic upbringings. I think it is important to restore the order of the room at the end of each session. I consider this as containing for therapists and clients alike. It also completes and seals off one session from another. Moreover, I know from working in psychiatric hospitals that where patients are treated respectfully that they look after themselves and the environment better.

If you plan to work from home how will that affect your home life? Are you happy to give anyone access to it? Will the room used for therapy have to double up as a family room? This will affect the ambience of the room. Rowan (5) has commented on the therapy room also being a bedroom, the message it gives to the client and the potential for different interpretations about the situation and advises counsellors not to do it. I think that it is inadvisable for massage therapists to work from bedrooms and recall using a friend's bedroom early on in a building in a practice. The room was neat, tidy, had a throw and cushions over the bed and no obvious signs of it being a bedroom, but it was clearly not a sitting room and was lived in as a bedroom. All this was in the atmosphere and it was during this time that one or two men arrived for a massage 'hiding' their disappointment that I was not a prostitute. Rowan also asks for considerations if you are using your sitting room. This will affect the therapy, but is likely to be present in an undertone rather than directly. Your sitting room will show the clients something of your lifestyle. Do you want clients to know what you read, what music you listen to etc.? How much will this expose you or inhibit clients?

Van Deurzen-Smith (6) recommends a consulting room to be pleasant, sound-proofed and private. "But, if necessary, it is possible to make ourselves comfortable even in a strange or hostile environment. We can strive to provide an appropriate setting for our clients, no matter what the conditions, as long as we bring a sense of harmony with us." She gives examples of the rooms created by different therapists in a psychiatric hospital and that with the addition of a few extras, the same rooms are transformed. The additions might be a poster, plants, a rug, pebbles, fruit and biscuits. Within psychiatric settings, it is not unusual for a session to be interrupted by a phone call or a colleague walking into the room with a message. Whilst this is far from ideal, the way the therapist handles this situation can make it worse or bearable. However, in terms of massage it is likely to limit the depth of embodiment possible if there is a background need for the client to be vigilant for self protection.

When considering more of the details within the room care needs to be given to equipment – is your massage table stable? Does it squeak? How easy it is for a short person to get on to it? Will a tall or plumpish person fit securely on to it? What sheets and blankets do you plan to use? Are these hygienic? What chairs will you use? How comfortable are they? Rowan says that straight backed chairs suggest rationality, arm supports give support, softer chairs invite relaxation. Leather seating can be cold and uninviting, upholstered chairs with feather cushions can lead to 'disappearing' into the comfort. With massage clients, for the most part, I think sitting on cushions tends not to be suitable as it is further from the social norm for most clients and too relaxed for the initial part of the session.

How will you position the furniture? Is there enough space, but not too much? There are four basic zones around a person at different distances; the intimate, the personal, the social and the public. Where do you feel comfortable meeting clients? How flexible is your set up to allow moving nearer or further away out of your own or your client's need? How will you angle furniture or perhaps arrange it head on? The head-on position is more suggestive of opposition or attack (Van Deurzen-Smith). I prefer a more angled position to allow the client to turn away slightly, if necessary.

For massage, the room needs to be more than averagely warm, the air fresh, and preferably light and sun catching or at least for some of the day. If these are not all possible, how can you compensate? Does there need to be an extra heater, and/or blanket on hand? If there is no good light can the room be decorated and lit to make up for it?

Finally, where is the cloakroom? Is it near? Accessible? Clean? This is particularly important for massage clients who may need to use the toilet immediately after a session and sometimes during one.

So, before ever a client rings you, you can do much to send out the invitation of welcome to a client by preparing the room – getting it right for yourself, perhaps sitting in it to get the feel of it and to make it your own safe place.

Good luck with your preparations!

## References

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