

Psychotherapy Guidebook

BIOENERGETIC ANALYSIS

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Bioenergetic Analysis

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DEFINITION

The core of Bioenergetic Analysis brings us back to the energetic and functional unity of mind and body. We do not simply have bodies; we are our bodies. Our living bodies are expressions of our total selves — our past and present, our personal and interpersonal experience, our conscious and our unconscious attitudes, our motion and our emotions. We are embodied beings.

In this functional unity of human experience, Bioenergetic Analysis recognizes antithesis. Energetically, in every aspect of the individual, the presence of the opposite is implicit. When this oppositional dimension is energized, it can make contact with its polar counterpart and move into a new integration of life force at a higher energy level. One-sided individuals tend to exhaust themselves in struggle and become run down energetically.

At the same time, the unitary process is an organismic phenomenon. No matter how complicated individuals are, we function on an organismic level, as a single cell. The essence of the organismic function is pulsation —

continuous expansion and contraction, charge and discharge, reaching out and pulling back, giving, and taking. In this way, we are always moving and our movement is regulated by the goal of pleasure and “grounding.”

The principle of charge and discharge and their relationship to each other account for the energy level in the personality. The living organism can function only if there is a balance between energy charge and discharge. Breathing charges up the energy level, while self-expression discharges the energy. Since the two go on simultaneously, the amount of energy taken in will influence how much is given out and vice versa.

The difference between health and illness is our grounding of both pleasure and-reality functions in the pulsatory process of our biological life force. A person’s balance and grace are based in this pulsatory process that couples the excitatory and the inhibitory in a functional unity. The complete loss of such rhythmic excitation is death.

The energetic movement within the organism is manifested by movement in the body fluids — the blood, lymph, interstitial fluids (between the cellular components of an organ), and intracellular fluids. The body’s motility depends upon this involuntary flow of excitation. Experiencing this flow of excitation can take us beyond our anatomical boundaries into interaction with the world. We can thus become aware of the functional

identity of ourselves and the world at the same time.

What disturbs the flow is muscular armor, based on chronic tensions and rigidities. Muscular armor is not a static phenomenon, but rather a dynamic contraction that has functioned chronically over a long period of time to block excitation or defend against a hostile environment. Since muscular armor has usually persisted for many years, release requires consistent work over an extended period if a significant difference in behavior and personality is to occur.

All the tension patterns of an individual add up to character structure, which is the way the self has chosen to survive in the world. As Dr. Alexander Lowen said in 1971, "Energy, tension, and character are interrelated since the total tension pattern controls the amount and use of the body energy. Therefore, bioenergetic analysis is basically a character analytic method of seeing people." Character armor both blocks and asserts our way of being in the world. It is a way of saying no to the self in order to say yes to existence. To survive in childhood, a system of defense is often necessary and functional. In Bioenergetic Therapy, a person begins to experience both the blocks and their origins. As the character armor begins to soften, pulsations fill deadened areas of the body with a new consciousness of life.

Grounding ourselves in our body and in our relationship to the earth is

the main contribution of Bioenergetic Analysis to character analytic work. When we can identify with our flesh and blood, our needs and desires, our participation in reality we are grounded. The functions of grounding, as Dr. John Bellis has pointed out, are related to the development of the ego and its contact with reality: 1) its motor functions — standing, rising, walking, 2) its perceptual functions, including the integration of what is heard and seen with its motor functions and its intellectual functions, 3) its vocal functions, including the individual's attainment of his own voice and an extended somatic character typology, the harmony of heart with ego functions.

HISTORY

Bioenergetic Analysis was developed by Dr. Alexander Lowen out of Wilhelm Reich's theory of muscular armor and life energy. As a student of Reich in the 1940s, Lowen absorbed Reich's innovative energetic concepts: the muscular basis of character armor and the physical basis of the libido in the energy economy of the body. Reich called this energy "orgone energy," derived from the term "organ-ismic," and used such therapeutic techniques as touch to loosen bodily rigidities, deepen the breathing, increase the pulsations, and release the life force, with the goal of full orgasmic potency. In the process of modifying Reich's work, Lowen dropped the term "orgone," and added the concept of grounding, and techniques that include structured exercises and stress positions.

In 1956 Lowen, with his colleague Dr. John Peirrakos, founded the Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis in New York. Other centers and institutes have developed around the country, including, most notably, Stanley Keleman's in California and John Bellis's in Connecticut.

TECHNIQUE

The basic bioenergetic technique integrates direct body process and experience with an understanding of the character and grounding patterns in the body. Character patterns can be recognized in the body's form and motility. For example, masochistic bodies are dense and highly muscled; rigid bodies are unyielding and stiff; schizoid bodies are fragmented; psychopathic bodies are often top-heavy.

By getting in touch with the language of the body the individual becomes aware of the layers of his armor. The experience of their defensive function invokes new sensory patterns. New pathways to the brain are thereby generated with excitement, form, and imagery.

When, in the first instance, we find ourselves maintaining social position with a determined jaw, a stiff neck, and fixed eyes, we discover that our face to the world is masking our inner feelings and blocking energy input from the environment. There are two techniques of enlivening the energy underneath the mask: first, by pressure over certain parts of the face (such as the labial

levator muscle), which releases the ability to smile; second, by making a face as children do and connecting it to an appropriate sound, such as a lion's roar. The eyes and voice will often tell us what the person really feels behind the mask.

When, in the second instance, we find ourselves tightening our abdomens, inflating our chests, and locking our legs, we discover that we are utilizing our long skeletal muscles to hold back anger and sexual feelings and, at the same time, stopping the unexpressed energy from flooding us. Stretching seems to diminish the ability of the muscle to hold energy. The technique of lying down and kicking the bed helps to unbind the energy by increasing breathing and triggering pulsatory sensations. The technique of hitting the bed from a standing position will get the energy moving toward the ground and mobilize the individual's aggression against his own character blocks.

When, in the third instance, we find ourselves gritting our teeth, constricting our breathing, and tightening our throat, we discover that we are utilizing the muscles of the joints and sphincters to take up stress that had been released elsewhere. For example, if we sense our jaws clenching and our voice choking up, we may discover that we are trying to block an unwanted response to the sexual feelings in our pelvis. The technique of accompanying every release phenomenon with vocal sound — such as crying, sighing,

singing, laughing, shouting, and screaming — will inhibit this segmental armoring by stabilizing the energetic release and the individual capacity to flow.

When, in the fourth instance, we find ourselves barely breathing and clutching our solar plexus, we discover that we are utilizing the diaphragm and the semi-voluntary muscles of digestion, respiration, and the voice to deaden ourselves against anxiety and alienate the horror in a threatening environment. Techniques to restore natural breathing patterns include the use of a bioenergetic stool, which is an adaptation of the old wooden kitchen step stool. One or two tightly rolled blankets are strapped to the stool. If you lie with your back over the stool and relax, your breathing deepens spontaneously. The pelvis, abdomen, thorax, and throat will expand in turn as each of them is filled by the waves of inspiration moving upward and will, in turn, let go as the expiratory wave starts at the mouth and flows downward to the pelvis that moves slightly forward. Such total body action may contact suppressed feelings of sadness and sexuality in your stomach and fear of reaching out in the chest. Crying and other vocal sounds, like singing and laughing, not only release the feelings but also connect the ego functions with the heart.

As the person's energy level is increased through deepened breathing, the pathways of self-expression through the eyes, voice, and movement need

to be opened up for the release of increased energy. Since life is an energetic process, breathing, pulsation, and expression are not simply devices to liberate some feeling, but rather a life system to generate, expand, and focus organismic growth, and thus achieve, in a word, grounding.

Grounding techniques enable us to possess our energies as well as express them. The technique of pitting the individual against the field of gravity helps to bring out negative feelings about giving in or collapsing. The field of gravity represents the social stress of our success-oriented culture, which has been introjected (via the family) into the ego at the expense of our pleasure functions. Our fear of falling or failing prevents us generally from falling asleep, falling in love, and giving in or letting go. Ultimately, terror of collapse results in a physical collapse of the body. After giving in to the force of gravity, the individual is able to give in to the natural functions of the self. Combined with direct work with the body armor, including massage, controlled pressure, and gentle touching, the bioenergetic parts come together and find roots in the human ground.

APPLICATIONS

Bioenergetic Analysis applies not only to our way of being in this world — how much coordination and grace we have, where there is weakness and where rigidity, which parts are overdeveloped and which deprived, and

where there are habitual constrictions — but also to our way of becoming — how we face the unknown, our sense of helplessness in the midst of the new, what happens to us when old boundaries break down, our incompleteness, anxieties, our hunger for the embodiment of more wholeness, contact, feelings, sexuality, and tenderness. Both expansion and containment are involved: on one hand are the people whose hearts long for love, whose feelings insist on expression, whose bodies want to be free; on the other are those whose defenses choke off impulses, whose anxiety may lead to retreat and closing off, whose depression may keep the energy level low, desires at a minimum, and life immobilized.

Bioenergetic Analysis applies to those who are willing not only to know themselves but also to be themselves, and to those who want to go beyond the known. It applies to those who want to develop a sense of identification with their biological processes and to those who feel alienated. It applies to those who wish to awaken their emotions and to those who wish to care for and nurture their felt excitation. It applies to those who seek a capacity for deep feeling and to those who feel inhibited in sexual expression. It applies to those who want to affirm themselves as individuals and to those who feel themselves bound up in the stress syndrome.

Self-confidence comes from restoring our natural life rhythm, vibration, and pulsation. The pulsatory process enables us to go out into the world and

back to the self in a continuous exchange of sensations and information. As we recognize the self talking to the self, our innate responsiveness becomes clear: we are engaged in generating an internal body that hears our voice, expresses our knowing, and gives us a wholeness of being in this world. This, the enhancement of our life process is the ultimate application of Bioenergetic Analysis.