

# Body-Focused Psychotherapy with Men



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Balanced living is found in the intermediate zone, in the territory lying between the poles of the extremes. Our attention is called to this truth in Aristotelian philosophy by the “doctrine of the mean,” known more popularly as the “golden mean.” Often it is easier to walk the path of the extreme. “All or nothing,” “always or never.” These are easier to recognize than “not too much, not too little,” and “sometimes.” It is easier to lean on the pole of an extreme than to find one’s balance on the middle path, not wandering too far to either side. Extreme behavior lacks such balance, and is therefore the symptom and the portent of a life uncentered. This is not to say that a person who lives creatively stays on a very narrow path, never tending toward one pole or the other. Rather, it means that the person who lives creatively makes mini-swings within the middle territory, but does not swing all the way to one extreme or the other. Being centered is a flexible, dynamic process of balancing by means of such mini-swings. Polar positions are not free, but rather are rigid and static.

To make this more concrete, and specific to the psychological dynamics of males, this chapter will explore the dimension of male rigidity. This requires some basic understanding of the male rigid character structure. Character structure, as presented in the psychoanalytic and Reichian tradition (Smith, 1985), is seen as developing from early life experiences. Character development depends on the degree of fixation at the various erogenous levels, as result of certain traumatic experiences. The result, which manifests both psychologically and physically, is a relatively fixed pattern of behavior. Although “character” is a hypothetical syndrome, and no one is a pure character type, what therapists look for is which character type is dominant and which other types may play a secondary role in the person’s dynamics.

The five character types recognized in the neo-Reichian school of bioenergetics are in a development sequence. The earliest type is the schizoid, then the oral, the psychopath, the masochist, and then the rigid types. If the etiological trauma is relatively early, the probability is that the person will have difficulty developing through the successive stages as well. This makes sense, in that some of the developmental tasks of the stage of the trauma will not be mastered, leaving the child to enter the next

developmental stage with a deficit. Therefore, the character types are in a descending order of complexity, as there is a partial adding of type to type, the earlier the initial trauma. In addition, as one moves higher in the developmental sequence of the character types, there is greater variety in the syndrome, since there has been more personality differentiation prior to the trauma.

Psychological issues having their etiology in a developmental stage prior to clear gender differentiation tend to manifest in quite similar ways in men and women. The several issues are the same for all children before the time they see themselves as boys and girls. The general themes are maternal rejection and schizoid character formation, maternal deprivation and oral character, parental overpowering and psychopathic character, the overbearing mother and submissive father (who stifle the child's spontaneity and leave him or her feeling pushed, nagged, and guilty) and masochistic character formation. As these characterological styles are set before children see themselves as boys or girls, the gender issue is of only secondary influence in the formation of the pathological patterns of the adult.

With the arrival of gender identity, one's "boyiness" or "girliness" becomes an integral factor in further character formation. The rigid female character, or histrionic character, is differentiated from the rigid male character even though the trauma is the same—rejection of love by the father. When the father rejects the child's love, he is rejecting an aspect of his daughter or his son. The girl is having her female love turned away by her opposite-sex parent. This means the father's rejection of her budding female sexuality, and sets the pattern for subsequent dealings with men. And so the histrionic sets upon a life-long quest for male affirmation of her childlike sexuality. This is her unfinished business, her incomplete gestalt creating tension for closure.

For the young boy, the rejection of his love is a statement that he is not good enough. Since he experiences himself as a boy, this means he is not a good enough male, as judged by his same-sex parent. His rejection is not sexualized, but is clearly "genderized." His unfinished business is to prove himself as a boy/man.

The key element in the rigid male is the father's rejection of the son's affection and the pushing away of the boy. By being pushed away the boy feels "not good enough." At the same time the father makes the expression of his love for his son, to whatever degree he feels such, contingent on the son's

performance. But, whatever his son does, it is never quite good enough. The boy never measures up to his father's standard. So, the boy grows up always believing that he has to perform. And, since his own love for his father was rejected, he gives up on reaching out with love in order not to feel frustrated and hurt anymore.

So, what is a boy to do? Residing in a man's body, and destined to live out the existential decisions come to in response to a father's rejection, how is one to live? The existential decisions become the guides. "Dad let me know that I am not good enough for him to love me. Therefore, *I must constantly try to prove myself.* 'I will!' is my call to action, my determined declaration. I am ambitious and competitive. Under stress I am prone to take action, attending to details. I work hard, even overwork, and will keep at the job until it is done, and done perfectly. Often, therefore, I will be seen as self-confident, perhaps even arrogant, and impressive in my penchant for action. In order to reach high levels of achievement and strive for perfection I demand structure. Some would call me obsessive or compulsive.

"Dad spurned my affection, my expressions of love for him. Therefore, *I must protect myself from hurt by never reaching out, never being soft or too warm.* So, I am hard and cold. I will not surrender to soft and tender feelings.

"Perhaps you recognize me by the way I hold back in my body. You may see that I am stiff with pride. My body reflects the rigidity that my inflexible existential choices demand. Sometimes, as I walk or otherwise move about, it becomes painfully obvious that I am all too literally 'tight-assed.'

"In my relationships I can offer several appealing qualities. I will get fairly close, and bring a lot of energy to a relationship. I will be strong and active, quite dependable, and one to rely on to solve external problems. But, be warned. I will not relate on an emotional level. In fact, I will actively oppose the expression of feelings. As I denigrate feelings, you may find me emotionally insensitive and unavailable. My pattern of overwork, and obsessive compulsive task orientation bespeak my subordination of personhood to the attainment of goals. You will find my beliefs, opinions, and values as inflexible and unyielding as the postural muscles of my body" (Smith, 1984, 1985).

What has been described is the man who is "too hard." This is the hyper-masculine man—active, forceful, arrogantly competitive, and unfeeling. If this man is "too hard," there must be a polar opposite

who is “too soft.”

The man who is “too soft” is interesting characterologically in that he represents a mixed type. Ironically, he too is rigid. However, that characterological rigidity is mixed with oral character structure. Therefore, he shows many of the characteristics that follow from pregenital oral deprivation. *The outstanding characteristic of the “too soft” male is his passive-receptive attitude.*

“Having a passive-receptive way of being in the world, how am I to behave? I lack aggressiveness, and find self-assertion very difficult. My tendency is to be gentle and humble, perhaps overly polite and considerate. I am fearful. Life is scary to me, so I avoid risks and conflicts. At times I am paralyzed with fear. Since my aggression is blocked, I often feel helpless and hopeless.

“My way of being in the world is clearly reflected in my body structure and bodily movements. My voice is soft and modulated, lacking in resonance and sharpness. Not only does my voice sound boyish, but I have a boyish look to my face. My face is soft, as is my whole body, on the surface. My hands are soft and have a weak quality about them. My muscles stay underdeveloped. My shoulders and hips are narrow. So, overall, I may remind you of a preadolescent boy. My movements are not brusque or forceful. Instead, my actions have a quality of caution and softness, perhaps even weakness. At times people label my movements and gestures as effeminate. What they don’t understand is that I am masculine, but passive, paralyzed with fear. My maternal deprivation is reflected in my underdeveloped, boyish body. Orally deprived, as I was, I carry the scar, and am terrified of abandonment. So, I must tread lightly and move softly. My deeper muscles are tense. This severe tension reflects my response to my father’s rejection, as surely as my surface softness reflects my mother’s unavailability. So, here I am, ‘undernourished’ and ‘not good enough.’

“Relating to women is difficult for me. I find myself being dependent and mothered when the woman is inclined toward such a role. At times I can play father to a younger woman. But, a man to woman peer relationship eludes me.”

In contrast to the hyper-masculine man described earlier, his opposite on the dimension of rigidity is the man who is “too soft.” The latter is overly sensitive, fearful, and passive, a caricature of what has traditionally been described as the hysterical woman. He has, indeed, been identified in the clinical

literature as the male hysteric.

In the idiom of the East, the too-soft male is too yin and too-hard male is too yang. The soft male embodies an excess of yin force and tends to lack a balancing yang energy. This leaves him vulnerable to being hurt through his overly sensitive nature. It also means he will shy away from much of life, lacking the healthy aggressiveness necessary to reach out and take hold of life. His opposite, the too-hard male, embodies an excess of yang force, and lacks the yin energy necessary for balance. Through his forcefulness and willfulness he may hurt others and be unfeeling. In addition, this rigid stance prevents him from an openness to receiving tenderness and finding the joy of soft emotions.

The Eastern symbol for unity, the T'ai gi, better known as the yin-yang, graphically illustrates the balanced composition of the yin and the yang forces. The circle is equally divided by a smoothly flowing "S" curve, forming a white half and black half. Within the white half is a dot of black, and within the black half is a dot of white. Unity, wholeness, balance. The marriage of yin and yang. This is not a blend, a mixing of black and white into a uniform gray. Rather it is black space and white space within the whole, each interpenetrated by its contrasting opposite.

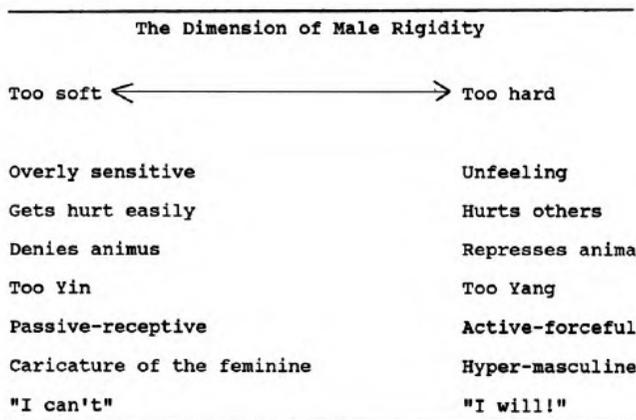
The T'ai gi is a suitable symbol to aid in the understanding of the problem and the resolution of the problem of the too-soft and too-hard male. The idea is to introduce yin energy or yang energy where it is deficient. This task is guided by an insight emphasized by Jung (1963). To shift now to the language of Jungian theory, the too-soft male is denying his animus, while the too-hard male is repressing his anima. Animus and anima, as masculine and feminine principles, respectively, can be allowed to manifest or not. The too-soft male denies his animus its manifestation, holding back with fear. The too-hard male represses his anima, allowing only the masculine principle to guide his thoughts and actions. But as Jung instructed us, the energy repressed is present in the unconscious, and will press for expression. Our therapeutic task, then, for the too-soft male is to support his expression of his latent masculine hardness. In the case of the too-hard male, our task is to facilitate the uncovering of his repressed anima or soft feminine principle.

In Figure 7.1 I have summarized the characteristics of the too-soft and the too-hard male. These form the two poles within the dimension of male rigidity.

The too-soft male and the too-hard male are incomplete in their manifest being. In both cases their way of being in the world is out of balance. Rather than creatively living in the intermediate zone of the “golden mean,” making mini-swings toward one pole at times, the other at times, each tends to stay at one pole. Therapy for each can be thought of as an Hegelian dialectical process. The pole at which the client is rigidly in place forms a manifestly lived “thesis,” the opposite pole the “antithesis.” By supporting the living of the antithesis the therapist may facilitate a creative “synthesis.”

Examining the specifics of the therapeutic task first, consider the too-soft male. The task is to toughen the man who is too soft. Since this client is fearful, he must not be pushed too fast, but rather he is to be given adequate support and encouragement in his movements toward toughness.

Since the too-soft male’s tendency is to be passive, shy, and quiet, emphasize with him experiencing in the therapy room what it is like to be active, bold, and loud. To this end, Smith (1985) suggested body postures, movements, and sounds. Such exercises allow a dramatic enactment of emotionally laden material. These exercises must be graded so that they match the growing edge of the client. In other words, if the exercise is not advanced enough for the client, little or nothing of value will be gained. If, on the other hand, the exercise is too advanced, the client will not feel safe enough to enter into it fully, and will again gain little or nothing. Worse still, he may scare himself, reinforcing his timid, passive style. This is the “boomerang effect” that occurs when the exercise is graded too high. *The idea is to provide a psychodramatic experience through which the client successfully transports himself beyond his previously assumed limits.* The too-soft male is living out a script that prohibits his masculine-assertive expression. Each time he is able to break his script he weakens its power and relaxes his rigid adherence to that way of being.



**Figure 7.1** The Dimension of Male Rigidity

A good way to move into the psychodramatic exercise is to listen to the client's story as he tells it. Watch and listen for manifestations of the "be soft" script. Notice the lack of animation, the cautious, inhibited gesture, the effeminate mannerism, the shy posture. Hear the guarded, soft voice, and hear the language designed to avoid confrontation. Any of these can be noted and pointed out to the client. Any characterological manifestation can be productively used in this way.

The therapist's two tools are "support" and "frustration." His job is one of supporting any of the client's honest attempts at expression of his best self, and frustrating the client's attempts to continue his characterological script. Pointing out characterological manifestations, as mentioned above, is a way of frustrating the client's unchallenged continuation of his script. In order to support his expressions of his best self, encouragement can be offered and acknowledgment given when such expression is in evidence. The psychodramatic exercise is an event, designed from the story material given by the client and for the purpose of giving him the opportunity to break from his script there in the counseling room. The consulting room is a safe place to experiment with new behavior.

There is much artistry that goes into the creation of the psychodramatic experiment. It is learned through practice and, most important, apprenticeship with a skilled practitioner. All that can be offered here are some guidelines. Once a characterological manifestation is noted and commented on, the client

can be invited to experiment with it, transforming it into a harder, more forceful, bolder expression. This may mean changing a constricted posture into a more open, expansive one. It may mean speaking more loudly and breathing more deeply. And it may mean to imagine someone is present and to speak directly to that person with clearly assertive language, rather than only to talk *about* her or him.

The idea is to recognize the “soft scenario” and invite the client to redo it as a “hard scenario.” It is these excursions into bold expression that bring forth the heretofore denied animus. On the way to these more active, forceful expressions, the client may get scared. It is as if the original authors of the “be soft” script (various parenting figures) come forth with their greatest force to stop the client from extricating himself from their life-long grip. When this happens, those voices are to be identified and confronted psychodramatically, with the therapist’s support.

Since the purpose is not to practice a performance that is to be presented at a later time but rather to facilitate a characterological shift, the expressions to be worked toward are extreme. Remember, the synthesis comes about only after the thesis is opposed by its anti-thesis. This is the law of the human dialectical process. Years of dwelling at one extreme requires many excursions to the other extreme before the golden mean can be recognized. So, in working with the too-soft male, we need to persist in the psychodrama of the “hard scenario” over time, session after session, until the client has grown comfortable with stomping his feet, waving his fists, kicking the cushions, screaming, laughing from his belly until the room echoes. He has known shyness; now he must know boldness.

In addition to this therapy work in the consulting room, carefully assigned homework is useful in working with the too-soft male. This falls into two categories. First, the client can be invited to practice more assertive, active, forceful ways of being in his social life. Sometimes specific anticipated events can be discussed and a particular course of action can be decided upon in the therapy session. The carrying out of that course of action is then the homework assignment. Just as the psychodramatic work done in the counseling room needs to be graded to the client’s level, so it is too with the homework to be carried out in the literal world.

The second type of homework involves some ongoing activity outside therapy that brings forth the expression of the animus energy. The therapist may suggest that the client find such an activity, but it is

usually better if the client himself shops around and chooses the particular one. Any martial art, outdoor survival training, or vigorous physical discipline will potentially be of value for the too-soft male in his growth toward freeing his animus. The key, once again, is in the activity's being graded to the client's progressing level. Unfortunately, many too-soft men have had their characterological position only reinforced when they have been discouraged or even humiliated by an activity beyond their level or an instructor who was "too hard."

Consider now the treatment of that instructor, or one of his cohorts in the Society of the Too Hard, assuming that he comes for therapy. And that is quite an assumption; as numerous as the "too hard" men are in our culture, they are among the least likely to approach psychotherapy willingly. They may be coerced or ordered into therapy with some frequency, but are not so frequent volunteers, and this makes sense. After all, the hyper-masculine image does not find peace with asking for help with one's life, let alone one's emotions. What is addressed here is the body-oriented psychotherapy of the too-hard male who has come to the point of voluntary participation. The task question, of course, is how does the therapist soften the male who is too hard?

Whereas the task of toughening the too-soft male is one of disinhibiting his pent-up animus energies, the task of softening the too-hard male is one of inviting out a repressed anima. In the former case the technique, as discussed above, is to exaggerate the shy animus expressions into their full-blown form. The technique is different in the case of bringing forth latent anima energy.

The too-hard male is likely to exhibit considerable muscular tension throughout his body. Stiff with pride, and ready for action, his back side, including hips, back, neck, and shoulders, may be tight and hard. At the same time, his front side, including chest and abdomen, will be tense in order to protect his vulnerability to soft feelings.

The major focus of body work with the too-hard male is on his front side, since this is the major body locus of tender emotion. This psychobiological fact is reflected in our lived language by such phrases as "letting your heart melt," being "broken hearted," being "love sick," which includes loss of appetite and "butterflies in my stomach," and feeling deep feelings in the "pit of my stomach." In the kinesic communication of some animals, submission is shown by the animal's exposing its "soft underbelly." In

yoga, the chest region is known as the “heart chakra,” and is associated with the experience of love.

Before entering into this body work designed to melt the body armor of the chest and abdomen, it is usually necessary to do some cognitive framing for the client. The too-hard male is a “thinking type,” in contrast with a “feeling type,” to use a distinction from Jung. This means that he leads with his thinking, and wants to understand. Once the client has committed himself to therapy and understands the rationale for this body work, it can be undertaken.

The specific procedure is to have the client lie on his back. If he is not too threatened by this, it is preferable for him to be unclothed from the waist up. The skin to skin contact is more powerful. Then offer the following instructions:

Relax as much as you can. I want you to breathe deeply, through your mouth, and make an “aaahhh” sound as you exhale. I am going to place my hand on your chest and leave it there for a while. Let whatever wants to happen, happen. Allow any body sensations, memories, or emotions that want to come, come. Let me know when something important happens.

Maintain this static contact for up to 10 or 15 minutes, unless something important happens sooner. Break the silence only to restate part of the instructions, if needed, or ask what he is aware of, if you see something happen (a tear, a change in posture, a tremble, or such) and he does not speak of it within a reasonable amount of time.

Over a series of therapy sessions one might try hand placements on the client’s upper chest, along the sternum, upper abdomen (between rib cage and navel), and lower abdomen (between navel and pubic bone). One might work in this way to invite a softening or letting go of the muscular tension by which the client binds his tender feelings. As he allows his armor to melt, he will begin to get in touch with his softer emotions. As he allows the therapist *to touch* his tender parts, the touch invites him *to get in touch* with his tender feelings. (Demonstration and supervised practice are strongly advised before undertaking hands-on body work.)

As memories and feelings emerge, that material can then be processed using a variety of therapeutic procedures. One particular way of processing this body-accessed material is to set up a dramatic enactment, the basics of which were presented earlier while discussing the treatment of the too-soft man. In the case of the too-hard man, the emphasis will be on his psychodramatic expression of his

tender feelings—sadness, hurt, disappointment, love, caring. From his feelings and memories brought forward by the body work, a scenario can be envisioned that can then be acted out in the here-and-now context, allowing the client to express fully his feelings to the imagined appropriate target.

When this work is far enough along and when the client has reached a point of significantly reduced armoring in his chest and abdomen, work on his back armoring can begin. If the work on his back is undertaken prior to the chest and abdominal softening, the client will resist mightily, presenting a concrete-like back, almost impermeable to any touch.

When the client is ready for body work on his back, two procedures can be used—soft technique and hard technique (Smith, 1985). Soft technique has been described, the only change now being that the therapist would place his hands on various points of the back, wherever he can find tension or where the client reports tension. The instructions are the same as before, but obviously the client needs to be lying face down. A variation in the work is to have the client lie on his back while the therapist simultaneously contacts a point on the client's front and back. This usually works best if the touch is applied to points directly opposite each other on the chest or abdomen and the back. An exception is the holding of the nape of the neck and some chest or abdominal point.

Some of the hard techniques absolutely require demonstration and supervised practice, so they will not be described here. A hard technique is deep muscle massage on the back. Instructions similar to those used with the soft technique can be used, substituting "I am going to massage the muscles of your back," where appropriate. Again, emergent feelings and memories can then be processed through a mutually created psychodrama.

Difficult as it is to capture the richness of psychotherapy by writing about it, it is even more difficult when part of the therapeutic technique is nonverbal. Body work needs to be studied experientially in order to get a real feel for it. This chapter describes the basics of working with too-soft and too-hard men. It provides information for recognizing the too-soft and the too-hard male, understanding their core dynamics, and understanding some of the basic guidelines of a body-oriented psychotherapeutic treatment. Elaboration of this material can be found in *The Body in Psychotherapy* (Smith, 1985). So, in either case, therapy seeks attainment of a dynamic balance for the client. The more extreme the client's

skew toward too soft or too hard, the more extreme his experience of the opposite needs to be. The more extreme the poles, the more powerful their synthesis. The more powerful the synthesis, the more powerfully whole the man.

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