



Caring for yourself while caring for others

By Merete Holm Brantbjerg 1995

What does it actually mean to care for oneself? Some of the first words that come to mind are personal integrity, to feel oneself and to listen to oneself.

One of the great gestalt therapists was once asked: Who was more important the client or the therapist? The answer was the therapist. It is a provocative way of seeing it, but the point is true. If the therapist does not see him/herself as the most important, it is not possible to help the client fully.

One of the deepest learning methods is mirroring. It is through mirroring that children learn from their parents, how to be human, for good or worse. As children we repeat - mirror - what the grown ups do, when they talk, eat, are angry, happy, etc. The same mechanisms are used when clients or students need help to change themselves, when being adults. They need new role models, new supporting people, authorities, parent-models to learn from. And yet, once again, the deepest part of the learning happens through mirroring.

Think about it. Think it through. The client learns from who you are, no matter what technique or method you use. The client learns from you, for better and for worse. To me, it was this thought that finally made me realize that my consideration for the clients was wrong/misunderstood. I realized that the clients chance of learning to be him/herself, feeling his/her boundaries, become familiar with feelings, find the center, find the grounding, all depended on my abilities in the same areas, together with my willingness to openly share them with the client, in a session.

The purpose of having a model

When I am myself, the client will learn nonverbally that the state of being oneself is a possibility in the world - something not everyone is aware of from their upbringing.

I have a practical example that illustrates this: One of my clients wanted to be able to come out more with her anger in relation to her partner and in relation to her friends. I worked with the client on this issue for six months. I used different therapeutical methods, from stimulating hypotense muscles to hitting pillows and talking to people as if they were there. We looked at patterns from the client's upbringing, concerning how to express anger and much more. It became easier for the client to feel the world, and also it became easier to figure out, what would be good to say, when actually being angry. But she did not start using it in daily life.

In the beginning I was patient and supporting. I was busy finding new methods to help with the problem. But, slowly I got irritated, irritated that she did not do it. My creativity

was exhausted. I could not think of any more "clever" methods. I confronted her. I spoke my anger aloud, I expressed my irritation and my demand that she start to act now, that I was tired of waiting. She became angry with me. She said she could not do it. I told her, it was not true, because I had seen her be angry in the therapy session. I knew she could do it. The session ended in anger.

When she came to the following session, she was afraid because of what had happened. She was concerned whether she could still be my client, she was afraid of the consequences. She discovered through our contact that the mutual connection was still there, and that I had not left her or intended to do so. After that she opened slowly to the possibility that anger can actually be part of contact and mutual connection. Later she told me that she had yelled at her partner, and that he had become angry, but also that things were better afterwards.

It is not always that easy, but this is a good example of how determining it can be for a client to see, feel or hear the possibility for action, that she is starting to reclaim, to see the possibility acted out the therapist. Not so that she can end up showing her anger like I did, but because she needs a role model to mirror or separate from, in order to get started.

In her family, during her upbringing, there was never any fighting. Anger was not shown openly, you withdrew from the contact instead. She had no model of what you actually do when you get angry, and even though she learned the methods in sessions, the methods remained separated from her, until she saw me become angry. She got a chance to learn, the same way children learn. The body does not believe in words alone. It only believes that something exists, when it has felt, seen, heard, smelt or tasted it.

The purpose of this case is to illustrate the basic view, presented in this article. Taking care of yourself as therapist - to work with your own well-being in the client session/treatment situation - is necessary to avoid stress and burn-out. It is also a therapeutic method and an important part of any successful treatment strategy.

The body supplies the most important tools

These tools are then possible to use when taking care of yourself in the therapist role. The answer in Bodydynamic Analysis is that the tools are within the body. It is within the body that I can find my centering. It is sensations in the body that tell me when my boundaries are crossed, or when they are respected. It is sensations in the body that tell me when to say STOP.

It is sensations in the body that tell me how good my grounding is, and it is with help from bodily and energetic tools that I can make it better.

The body is there when I sense my emotions. The stomach contracts when I am afraid. The jaws are tight when I am angry. It tickles up and down the front of the stomach and the chest when I am happy or curious. To take care of myself demands closeness. Without it, I do not sense the signals, with which the body tells me how I react to what is going on. I thereby lose the possibility to consciously relate to what is going on, and to choose for myself and for what.

Optimal sensation to another person is a great demand. Optimal closeness in my eyes means being 100 % present physically, emotionally, spiritually and in thoughts. No one can live up to that. But, we always have the possibility to relate to our own sensation and we can learn tools that will help improve it.

In this article I will focus on how you can increase your sensation physically/bodily, since in our opinion, this is basis for the others. The body ego is the first identity that the child develops: The young child actually thinks and experiences with the whole body. Body sensation is one with the sensation of existence, the sensation of being yourself. It is this basic bodily identity that is the foundation for the later ego development of the child. Literally speaking, the body is the shell, that contains the other levels of consciousness. Without the body, the emotions have no shell to be in or to be expressed from. A human with a weak contact to his/her body sensation will therefore more easily become overwhelmed by feelings and lose the ability to differentiate. Something similar goes for the thoughts. Mental energy is faster and can expand almost endlessly. To maintain your body sensation while thinking gives the thoughts grounding. Without body sensation to hold and keep the thoughts, there is a risk that you will get lost in your thoughts, cannot stop thinking, or can never bring them to life.

The spiritual side of us - our essence or our soul - exists, according to my belief, no matter whether the body is there or not. But without a body there is no possibility of surviving on earth; meaning no possibility to experience, live, learn and thereby develop the soul and expand its capacity or consciousness. So, also the soul needs the body; it needs us to accept our bodily closeness, with the unique possibility it gives us to sense every cell and the numerous possibilities of expressions that these cells give us.

What can you do to accept the possibilities of the body? Bodydynamic Analysis has, through the last 20 years, developed and refined a number of methods to work with the bodily closeness (the body sensation).

A general way is to ask about body sensation. It sounds simple. But, these are actually only very few people that have a developed language in which to express their sensations in the body; also because no one has heard anyone talk about it - and thereby given meaning to it - and no one has asked about what you sensed in the body. The language must therefore be rehabilitated. Or it must be learnt all over again, if it was not there when you were a child. Curiosity and interest in bodily sensations can be awakened, and thereby it is possible to develop an increased clarity about the importance of the sensations.

The individual method is then to start asking about the bodily sensations. What are you feeling at the moment? Ask yourself, ask others, ask the clients, and notice the answers. Keep asking until the answer actually describes the bodily sensation: My stomach contracts, I have warm hands, I am holding my breath, my neck muscles are tight and hurt and so on. (Most spontaneous answers, which are given to the question "What are you feeling at the moment in your body?" do not describe body sensations but emotions, imaginations, thoughts, act impulses, etc. For a deeper insight to this, it is recommended that you read the article "BodyKnot - The art of untying knots" by Eric Jarlnæs.

Besides asking generally about the body sensation, I will describe the three most important tools in the work with bodily closeness and personal integrity:

Centering or sensation of the core; Grounding or sensation of the connection to the ground; Boundaries or sensation of difference between one self and the surrounding world.

I would like to repeat: These are the three most important tools in relation to being able to take care of one self as a therapist.

To find one's own core

Centering is a concept that many others than Bodydynamic Analysis use. The techniques used within Eastern martial arts (tai chi, karate, jiu-jitsu and many others) all teach people how to make the force from the movements come from a point in the middle of the stomach, just below the navel, on the front side of the backbone. Meditative systems talk about the Hara-chakra placed in the same place.

Our approach to the concept is both concrete and more abstract. The concrete is that people have a point of gravity; a physical point of gravity or balance, which has it's place in the same spot as described before. It does not mean that people can always feel their point of gravity in their stomach. It can be pushed upwards or to the side. The energy can be spread out or blocked so that it can be difficult to feel anything. My experience after teaching several groups is that the imagination of something being a center - a core within the stomach, on the front side of the backbone - touches deep in everybody. In some it touches deep feelings of calmness, power, being oneself; to others a recognition that they are missing contact with something within themselves, that something is missing.

To say that people have a core is also abstract, since we have not been able to identify a certain physical structure which would make up a core. We are still looking. Maybe our core is stored within a (fascia)center inside the stomach. Even if we cannot prove there is a physical anchoring, in any other way than with gravity, we still say that people have a core. In practice, it is very useful to learn to sense the area of the body in which it lives. The feedback from people sensing their core is very different: It can give peace. A point to return to within yourself. Grounding. Power, which can feel anxious or good, all depending on how you usually see yourself. Contact with deep feelings of sorrow, anger, happiness, wanting. A feeling of being me and the right to be me. Contact with the essence of who I am. Bodily grounding of the soul.

Concretely, it is a fact that movements with arms and legs will have increased power, if you feel the core and imagine that the movement start there. Try it: Push or pull another person who is giving you resistance. Does it make a difference if whether you feel the gravity or the core? I claim that no matter what you do with the rest of your body, that the action or movement will have more power without working harder and it will feel more integrated and whole, if you at the same time have a sense of your core. The claim is based on my own and my colleague's sensations and from watching and feedback from hundreds if not thousands of clients and students.

So, how can you use centering in relation to taking care of yourself as a therapist? A classical error amongst therapists is to forget themselves and get so busy understanding or helping the client that the attention moves to the other person. Centering is a tool to help break that pattern. To feel my core at the same time as I listen and watch the client is after 18 years as a therapist still part of my daily training. It helps me to stay within myself. It helps me stay separated from the client and be able to differentiate the different sensations coming from me and coming from the client. It helps also to sense myself in my role; to feel that I am there and that I am in some kind of mood, which has something to do with my life - no matter what the work I am doing at the moment is doing to me. It means that I am keeping contact with the stream that is me. It is important to be able to do that in a job where the focus is on the other person's process. It is important so that I do not disappear in myself. And it is important for the client. The client needs me to be there, with my core and everything else.

A concrete example of centering is to ask inside the core, how am I doing, how do I like what is happening now, can I like it or not. The answers that come from the core can be surprising, inspirational, difficult, provoking; but one thing is certain, they are honest. Body sensations never lie. What you feel in your body, here and now, is not to be discussed. It is. The kind of answers that this method gives are in my opinion a good ingredient to the decision making process as a therapist.

How do you learn to feel your core? How do you train centering? A concrete method is to focus on the body sensations of the physical structure around the core; it means to do movements or concentration exercises around the backbone, especially in the lower back, the deep stomach muscles (m. iliopsoas), (diaphragm, floor of the pelvis) and the outer stomach muscles. If the physical sensation of the space around the core becomes clear, it will, for most people, increase the possibility of feeling an energetic point, meaning the core.

Another part of the training is to find a language in which to describe the core. Many languages can be used. An energetic point can be described as a color, a picture, a form, a sound, a sense or a form of movement. To find a language that fits the sensation of the core, is a personal and to some an intimate process. The language is important. When we give language to something, we bring it within reach of the Ego. We seal it. The language is necessary in order for the centering to become a tool. One can ask oneself: How does my core feel today? Has it got a different color from yesterday? Is it smaller? Is it bigger?

Is it closed on one side? Is it open on the other? It is a way in which to follow oneself; sense your condition. And it demands a language.

Grounding makes it possible to contain

Another important tool in the work with bodily closeness is the sensation of grounding.

Sensing one's grounding has both a physical and an energetic side. The physical side is sensing one's feet and feeling the pressure against them while standing. I can then sense my physical weight, my 70 kg and they are carried by the surface of my body, no matter whether I stand or sit or lie down. Gravity works, and that is what we feel when we sense our grounding. We feel the force that keep us on the ground.

It sounds easy, but for many people it is a matter of fear, and anxiety and may be difficult. It demands a kind of surrendering. I must let myself fall energetically towards the ground, and trust that it will actually carry me. Many people avoid this sensation by "lifting themselves away" from the ground. Even when they are on the ground, they avoid feeling it by giving up sensing the feet, by keeping busy constantly, never standing still, or standing up as little as possible.

The avoidance comes because the sensation of grounding would wake memories - the historical paths of life - that have made it difficult or had an influence on the person's trust towards the surroundings. Literally spoken: The trust of the ground under me. Trust that it will hold me. Trust in the ground I am standing on. The willingness to sense the reality I am in. All this is created or denied during childhood, in relation to the people surrounding the child. The emotional contact, the mutual connection, is what creates the ground underneath us.

Despite the problems connected to that, it is possible to revive good grounding. Fortunately. The body provides such a possibility, no matter what baggage you carry along (physical handicaps give special problems, which I will not comment on here). You are standing on your feet when standing. Gravity works. Your weight is carried by the surface. Energy can float through your body, the legs, the feet, down in the ground below you. At the same time, energy can flow upward from the ground. The postural muscles can work in your lower legs, your thighs and your back and keep you standing. A beautiful cooperation between downwards and upwards energy. It feels like this when the grounding is in balance, and is neither held or released, given up or controlled. When it is just there.

What is the point of that? What can a sensation of grounding give us? It might be easiest to understand when explaining what happens when it is missing. If for example a person gets really frightened and cannot feel the grounding, then it is impossible to contain their fear. It is not possible to hold such a strong feeling without the sensation of grounding. The person must either suppress the emotion or be overwhelmed, "destroyed" by it, or lost in it. None of these positions contain closeness and none of these positions allows contact.

It is different if you can keep the grounding. The sensation of the grounding, the concrete sensation of the feet against the ground - that my legs and back are carrying me, even though it feels like I am going to pieces - the sensation of the ground is there (I disregard situations with earthquakes and alike), so that I can see the ground and my feet can feel the pressure, all these sensations make it possible to hold the, or any other strong emotion, if you have to live it out.

What does the grounding offer? It gives balance, ground under your feet, a possibility to stand, possibility to contain life, a possibility to be able to differ, a possibility to stay - in reality - on earth, also when things get hard or are very powerful.

And in relation to being a therapist and taking care of oneself? To me it is obvious that good grounding is a great advantage for yourself as a therapist as well as for the treatment and for the client. As therapists we are constantly introduced to human problems, the shadow side of life, either as physical illness' /weakness' or as psychological difficulties. We listen to people's problems from their past and present. We agree to see the part of reality that many people normally hide. We are there for many things. To cope with that we need our own grounding, to feel the ground; feel that it carries and supports from below. I do not have to carry the load by myself, the ground is under me and allows me to feel my feet, the legs and the back. This also helps to contain the reality that the client represents and to know that it is not my reality. So, I am standing here feeling my grounding and over there is the client feeling his/her body and reality. To feel the grounding is like feeling centered, a tool to help being within yourself.

I have until now, to make things easier, described grounding only from the standing position with the feet on the ground, standing up straight. But of course, it is not only when you stand that you have grounding.

Gravity works no matter which position you are in. We always have a supporting surface that our weight rests upon. When we sit, the weight is transmitted through the sitting muscles and back of the thighs to the chair and through the chair to the surface. We find grounding through the parts of the body that rest against the surface.

Depending on how our history has left traces in our body, it can be harder or easier to sense our grounding in certain positions. Some people do not feel comfortable grounding when standing, but have no trouble when sitting, or the other way around.

As a therapist it can provide you with a good tool to stay connected, if you learn your preferred grounding positions. At the same time you learn which positions to avoid. A personal example: If I sit too long in a chair, I have a tendency to start hanging, whereby I loose my sensation, both the up going and the down going energy. I give up or become relaxed and it is not the same as "falling", being conscious about the movement. I loose my sensation of my grounding.

If I do not break this bodily pattern - if I remain sitting, then I become tired. I am not thinking clearly, and I loose control of the therapy session. The way I break the pattern is

to get up and walk around the room a bit, feel my legs and recapture my grounding when standing and walking.

What do you do to train grounding? Our methods are many. I will not mention specific exercises, but describe the principals that we focus on in the training. Firstly, we try to communicate how the optimal grounding functions bodily. But at the same time we make clear that you have to respect the bodily defence that humans contain, and that can not be changed solely by grounding exercises.

Balancing leads to focusing on how the individual can obtain the best sensation of the grounding, rather than focusing on whether or not the grounding is "correct".

A last comment on grounding. My description of the concept has focused on the fact that we actually have ground under our feet; that we have a solid ground to stand on. But what if you are in a boat on the water, or in a plane. Does that mean that the grounding disappears? No, you can also feel gravity work when there is water or air around you and the postural muscles are still working to keep you up. Try to sense it, next time you are in a plane: You are still connected to the planet, while the engines of the plane carry you in space. As long as we are on earth or close to it, the force, we sense as grounding, will work. The planet is below us and carries us. So, it would actually be sensible to call it "planet-connection".

Good boundaries give clear contact

The last tool in working with the bodily sensation that I will mention here is sensation of boundaries. Boundary setting is developed throughout several stages as we are growing up. I will shortly mention the stages that Bodydynamic Analysis uses in it's theory about boundary setting. The earliest boundary setting is bodily/physically. It is sensed in the skin, on the body surface. It is stimulated from the time when the embryo starts touching the side of the womb, and is stimulated a lot during birth, and is nurtured through touch in the first years of living. It is a basic type of boundary setting that tells me where my body ends and the surrounding world begins.

The second phase in boundary setting is the development of the energetic boundary, or what we also call the making of "personal space". It is the air around me that belongs to me, and which I have a right to control. This boundary is made during the first few years of living. A number of psychologists, amongst them Margaret Mahler, have described the development from symbiosis to a gradual separation, through the (rapprochement phase) to the actual separation.

If this process develops normally, the child will have a sensation of its personal space, and therefore can sense an energetic separation from the mother and other closely connected adults.

The sensation of the energetic boundary setting takes place both in the physical body and with the energy. I feel in my body what is happening with my energy, whether it is

respected, bothered, invaded or met by other people. For example, heartbeat, sweaty palms, a held breath, an impulse to push with your arms or similar sensations tell me that another person is too close to me at the moment; that my personal space is being pressured or invaded. Or a warm flow in the chest, a clear sensation of my feet against the floor, calmness in the stomach or other things alike tell me that the physical distance I have to the one I am talking to is good. Said in other words, my personal space is large enough for the moment.

The third and fourth phases in boundary setting, I will only mention shortly. The third phase is the development of the territorial setting, where the child learns to mark its place, its home or geographical area. This process begins when the child is around 3 years old. The social setting is the fourth and last phase in the boundary setting in a child. This kind of limitation is about knowing who I belong to, which "we" I am part of and how I let people know. This process runs from about 7 years and up.

In relation to taking care of oneself as a therapist, meaning taking care of oneself in fairly close proximity to another person, it is the bodily and the energetic limitation that will be most relevant.

Every person has a body and a personal space and the right to control it. It sounds simple. Unfortunately it is not natural for all people. We are all affected by our history of patterns of relating in the family and by single traumas, which have left holes or weakness in our boundary setting, physically and energetically.

Just like with grounding, it is the body that holds the original capacity. It is hidden in muscles and tissue which have forgotten, held back or given up. But underneath these defence reactions the original impulses are still there. The impulse to say STOP when I do not want to continue; the impulse to move away; impulses to state what I want; impulses in the arms to push away and pull toward, say no and yes; the impulse to state the physical distance I want to have from another person; the impulse to fill up my body and my personal space with me.

It is training of these and similar skills that lead to a better energetic containment and thereby an increased ability to be present with the client in a clear "I-you contact". A contact in which it is clear which emotions, sensations, thoughts are mine, and which are yours; a contact that is based upon the respect that you have your space and I have mine - each having our soul energy and our own history with which to fill out the space.

Training in body sensation is important in working with physical and energetically boundaries. A focus on the sensation of the skin and the sensation of the surface of the body increases the physical limitation. Adults can not always feel their skin. With some it is forgotten or neglected, and needs to be rediscovered through touch, massage, nurturing with creams, rolling movements on a carpet, etc.

Training in sensing and tightening a specific group of muscles helps clarify the energetic boundary. An example of an exercise is tightening of the outer muscles in the thighs and

arms. By sensing the outer limitations of the physical body more clearly, the energy around will also get clearer or more concentrated.

Taken together, centering, grounding and boundaries are what we call the fundamental skills for contact - and therefore they are also fundamental skills that a therapist must have. They are all connected to sensations in the body. They are all extremely good tools in the project, which in my opinion must be the project of the therapist: To take care of oneself as a person, while taking care of your clients.

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