

*Garet Bedrosian*

# The «Energetics» of Couples Therapy



## **Bioenergetic Analysis**

25. Volume, No. 1, 2015, Page 73–93

Psychosozial-Verlag

DOI: [10.30820/0743-4804-2015-25-73](https://doi.org/10.30820/0743-4804-2015-25-73)



Bibliographic information of Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (The German Library)  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

2015 Psychosozial-Verlag, Gießen, Germany  
[info@psychosozial-verlag.de](mailto:info@psychosozial-verlag.de)  
[www.psychosozial-verlag.de](http://www.psychosozial-verlag.de)



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Cover design & layout based on drafts by Hanspeter Ludwig, Wetzlar

<https://doi.org/10.30820/0743-4804-2015-25>  
ISBN (PDF-E-Book) 978-3-8379-7256-6  
ISBN (Print) 978-3-8379-2481-7  
ISSN (Online) 2747-8882 · ISSN (Print) 0743-4804

# The “Energetics” of Couples Therapy

Garet Bedrosian

## Abstracts

### English

This paper addresses the energetic communication between couples that sometimes derails their connection. Through the integration of Bioenergetic Analysis (BA) and various relationship modalities such as Imago Relationship Theory (IRT) and Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT) I offer insights and interventions, which may address these nonverbal, energetic disruptions between couples. Examples of sessions with two couples are given using a combination of theories. The paper concludes with themed bodywork techniques for couples addressing issues such as power struggles, negativity, cooperation, connecting/containing and supporting/receiving.

*Key words:* Bioenergetics, Imago Relationship Theory, Energy, Bodywork Techniques for Couples

### German

Dieser Aufsatz befasst sich mit der energetischen Kommunikation zwischen Paaren, die manchmal entgleist. Durch die Integration der Bioenergetischen Analyse (BA) mit verschiedenen Beziehungstherapien wie die Imago Relationship Theory (IRT) und die Emotionsfokussierte Paartherapie (EFT) biete ich Einblicke und Interventionen, die diese nonverbalen, energetischen Störungen zwischen Paaren ansprechen.

Beispiele aus Sitzungen mit zwei Paaren verdeutlichen die Kombination dieser Theorien. Der Artikel schließt mit körperorientierten Paartechniken zu den Themen Machtkämpfe, Negativität, Kooperation, Verbinden/Halten und Unterstützen/Empfangen.

## French

Cet article traite de la communication énergétique des couples et de leurs relations pouvant parfois dérailler. En utilisant diverses approches intégrées à l'analyse bio-énergétique telles que la Thérapie Relationnelle Imago et la Thérapie de Couple Axée sur l'Emotion, je leur offre une certaine compréhension ainsi que des interventions centrées sur leurs perturbations énergétiques, non verbales. J'illustre ceci en donnant deux exemples de séances de travail avec deux couples combinant ces diverses approches. Puis, pour conclure, des techniques thématiques de travail corporel sont décrites, s'adressant aux couples et traitant des problématiques telles que les luttes de pouvoir, la négativité, la coopération, entrer en contact/contenir et donner du support/recevoir.

## Spanish

Este documento aborda la comunicación entre las parejas que a veces hace descarrilar la conexión energética. A través de la integración del análisis bioenergético (BA) y diversas modalidades de relación como la Teoría de Relación Imago (IRT) y la Terapia de Enfoque Emocional de Parejas (EFT), ofrezco conocimientos e intervenciones que abordan el tema de las interrupciones energéticas no verbales entre las parejas. También apporto ejemplos de sesiones con dos parejas en las que pongo en práctica una combinación de dichas teorías. El documento concluye con técnicas que centran en el cuerpo para parejas que presentan problemas relacionados con la lucha por el poder, negatividad, cooperación, y cómo conectar/contener y apoyar/recibir.

## Italian

Questo saggio affronta il tema della comunicazione energetica nelle coppie che a volte fa deragliare la relazione. Attraverso l'integrazione dell'Analisi Bioenergetica (BA) con varie modalità relazionali, come la Imago Relationship Theory (IRT) e la

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT) offre approfondimenti e interventi che possono affrontare tali rotture non verbali ed energetiche nelle coppie. Sono proposti esempi di sedute con due coppie, utilizzando una combinazione di teorie. L'articolo si conclude con tecniche corporee per le coppie che si confrontano con problemi di lotte di potere, negatività, di cooperazione, di collegamento/contenimento e di dare e ricevere sostegno.

## 1. Introduction

I am fascinated by the dynamics of romantic relationships. I'm interested in what attracts one person to another; what makes the relationship successful; what causes tension or frustration; why and how love dissolves; how conflict can inform or strengthen rather than weaken a connection; and how someone's history affects the success or failure of their love life.

Since working bioenergetically with couples was not an emphasis in my training I turned to the field of relationship therapy. The body of work on relationship therapy is immense.

Some of the more popular theories in the US at this time each offer valuable insight into how to create successful relationships. I would like to name a few. John & Julie Gottman created The Gottman Institute, which is a laboratory for the study of and teaching about successful relationships. Gay and Kathleen Hendricks created The Hendricks Institute, which teaches Conscious Living and Loving. Sue Johnson's International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) also offers valuable information about attachment issues influencing adult relationships and how to enhance, repair and keep relationships healthy. PACT (A Psychological Approach to Couple Therapy) was developed by Stan Tatkin. Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt co-founded Imago Relationship Theory (IRT).

Bioenergetic Analysis (BA), Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) share a common theoretical tenet, which correlates childhood attachment and developmental experiences with adult character traits and relationship styles making them a natural fit (Lowen, 1975; Hendrix, 1988; Johnson, 2008; Scharff & Scharff, 1991). Not only do individuals store the wounds of their childhoods in the muscles and cells of their bodies as theorized by Bioenergetic Analysis, but they also develop an unconscious template of love that informs their partner selection and relational styles as espoused by Imago Relationship Theory and Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy. I will introduce each of these modalities in more detail in this section.

## 1.1. Bioenergetic Analysis

BA offers a unique understanding of the lifelong affects of early relational wounding and how those wounds affect the individual's ability to connect with the people and the world around them. BA facilitates a releasing of emotional, mental and somatic defensive patterns so one can be more heart-fully available to connect and love.

The “couplehood” connection in Bioenergetic Analysis happens between the client and therapist and through that relationship the client reclaims their ability to become vulnerable in relation to another. In his collection of papers called *Relational Somatic Psychotherapy*, Bob Hilton writes extensively about the relational healing which occurs when the client is able to emotionally and somatically break down and repair within the safe and consistent relationship with the therapist (Hilton, 2007).

I have experienced that tremendous healing in my therapeutic relationship with Bob Hilton and it has had a profound affect on my life and relationships. His grounded presence and astute ability to notice, support and challenge my relational wounds and defensive patterns has transformed me from a terrified, dissociated girl into a dynamic, relational woman yet, there is another dynamic that is triggered within a primary romantic relationship that confounds that healing.

I know I am not alone. Couples I know personally and professionally have shared that confounding experience. Romantic partnerships seem to trigger core wounds and defenses regardless of the depth of individual healing. Of course one's individual healing can inform and possibly ease those disruptions yet does not eliminate their presence in romantic relationships. Since I am trained in both modalities, combining BA with Relational Therapy made sense. Couples inevitably encounter unconscious, relational tensions and are more likely to find lasting resolution if they experience a shared energetic healing as offered through BA.

## 1.2. Relationship Theories

John Gottman writes extensively about successful relationships and says that even successful couples argue, disagree, get frustrated and hurt one another. Their success is determined by a five to one ratio of positive to negative incidences as well as to the degree of love and respect exchanged (Gottman, 1994). A couple's ability to maintain that ratio requires connection and trust. When each partner has experienced a grounded, embodied healing, remaining present to trust and connection are more likely.

According to the Imago theory, (Hendrix, 1988) partners are unconsciously chosen because they energetically match family of origin dynamics and create possibilities for

healing of the emotional wounds left by those dynamics. This unconscious template triggers an attraction to someone with similar developmental wounds but who defends themselves in a dissimilar way. For example, one may defend against early heartbreak or misattunement by becoming more aggressive while the other defends by withdrawing. The purpose of this union is to heal and reclaim energetic holes or missing parts, as they are called in Imago theory. These are the parts of one’s self which were suppressed to survive or be loved in one’s family.

In time these unconscious, energetic attractors trigger or threaten the blissful union.

Because they are unconscious and integrated so thoroughly into the body and ego structure, the threat can unknowingly get transferred onto the romantic partner. Making those dynamics known on a visceral level helps the couple develop more awareness and allows for more conscious choice in the ways they interact and connect.

### **1.3. Literature Review**

I am aware that there are many Bioenergetic therapists who work with couples but I reviewed the past 20 years of IIBA journals in researching for this paper and found no articles on this topic. Anne Evans (1995, vol 6) wrote about healing sexuality within a relationship and David Finlay (2010, vol 20) wrote about intimacy, but there were no other articles that I could find about how to apply BA to couples therapy. At the 2011 IIBA conference in San Diego, Barbara Davis, Vita and Jörg Clauer and I each presented workshops about working with couples but their work has not been published in English. I hope they will submit their articles to the journal so we may all learn from their work. In this paper, I would like to offer my perspective.

I am a certified Imago relationship therapist and workshop presenter so this is the theory about which I am most familiar and have experience integrating with Bioenergetic Analysis as an approach to working with couples. Therefore Imago will be more prevalent in this paper. The following is an introduction to clinicians in combining the three methods of BA, IRT, and EFT.

### **1.4. Why Combine the Three Methods: Introduction for Clinicians**

When you observe couples and watch them interact and react to some trigger you did not experience, you may wonder what you are missing as the dynamics build and change. The nonverbal energetic exchange between partners is akin to a siren song: alluring, irresistible, yet destructive. If you are not in the relationship it is likely that

you cannot hear it, but they hear it beckoning from an unconscious place. When they do, they become compelled to engage with one another as if they are fighting for their deepest desires or maybe even their lives.

Sue Johnson (2008) addressed this phenomenon in her book, *Hold Me Tight*,

“The powerful emotions that came up in my couples’ sessions were anything but irrational. They made perfect sense. Partners acted like they were fighting for their lives in therapy because they were doing just that. Isolation and potential loss of loving connection is coded by the human brain into a primal panic response” (p. 46).

IRT and EFT offer a structure as well as communication tools to help couples navigate those turbulent waters and consciously respond rather than unconsciously react to the siren call. Merging relationship therapies with BA is a unique approach to couples therapy. This integration is a perfect marriage--please excuse the intentional reference!

Bioenergetic therapists are trained to observe and help make conscious the nonverbal exchange of energy between partners. EFT therapists help couples articulate their attachment wounds, triggers and needs through topically focused conversations (Johnson, 2008). Imago relationship therapists are trained to facilitate intentional dialogues that are explicit communication styles within a safe relational container so that unconscious and sometimes threatening material can be discussed and healed non-reactively within the romantic relationship where it is more likely to be triggered (Hendrix, 1988).

## **2. Theoretical Constructs**

I will specifically focus on the following 3 theoretical constructs, which support the integration of these modalities:

- 2.1. Adult personalities and relationship styles are influenced by childhood experiences.
- 2.2. Healing occurs within the context of a relationship.
- 2.3. Unconscious transference and projections quickly derail connection.

### **2.1. Adult Personalities and Relationship Styles Are Influenced by Childhood Experiences**

BA, IRT and EFT are developmentally based theories and correlate the connection between childhood experiences with adult character traits and relationship styles.



One of the fundamental premises of BA is that people protect themselves from their childhood wounds on a somatic level as well as on a mental/emotional level. These defensive contractions restrict the life energy of the organism and compromise the connection with another. Since these wounds are embedded in the cells and muscles of the body, the developmental stage and chronicity of the wounding determine the characteristics of those contractions and adaptations as well as relational styles.

Alexander Lowen (1972) identifies the restriction of life energy on a somatic level as character armoring.

“Armoring refers to the total pattern of chronic muscular tensions in the body. They are defined as an armor because they serve to protect an individual against painful and threatening emotional experiences. They shield him from dangerous impulses within his own personality as well as from attacks by others” (p. 13).

Lowen named 5 character adaptations according to the stage of development in which the wounding occurred. They span from infancy to approximately 5 or 6 years of age. The 5 character types are Schizoid, Oral, Masochistic, Narcissistic and Rigid. Each has identifiable somatic, emotional and mental stances that need to be addressed and healed for the adult to be free enough to love on all levels. Until those armored stances are healed there are challenges to achieving connection encased in each character structure. I will not elaborate on each character structure in this paper except to say that the younger the wounding, the deeper the contractions and therefore reaching for contact can be more challenging. To learn more you can read Alexander Lowen’s book, *Bioenergetics*.

The IRT philosophy is also based on a developmental model. The premise is that each stage of development has specific relational needs, which affect a child’s ability to function fully in the world. If they are not adequately met or attuned to by their caretakers they become split off from themselves and create a lost or denied self with characteristic beliefs and patterns of behavior to protect themselves from harm or intrusion (Hendrix, 1988). According to Winnicott, if developmental needs are not met, emotional development stops, and those unmet needs cause a wounding that affects the person’s life and especially their relationships into adulthood (Greenberg, 1983).

Sue Johnson (2008) states that couples need to understand one another’s attachment wounds to understand the demands, criticisms and withdrawals in their relationships. She says,

“Attachment needs and the powerful emotions that accompany them often arise suddenly. They catapult the conversation from mundane matters to the issue of security and

survival. If we are feeling basically safe and connected to our partner, the key moment is just like a brief cool breeze on a sunny day. If we are not so sure of our connection, it starts a negative spiral of insecurity that chills the relationship. Bowlby gave us a general guide to when our attachment alarm goes off. It happens, he said when we feel suddenly uncertain or vulnerable in the world or when we perceive a negative shift in our sense of connection to a loved one, when we sense a threat or danger to the relationship. The threats we sense can come from the outside world and from our own inner cosmos. They can be true or imaginary. It's our perception that counts, not the reality" (p. 36).

There are effective Imago dialogues and EFT conversations designed to help couples navigate these negative spirals of unconscious insecurity. The conversations are structured to direct attention to unmet childhood needs rather than shaming, blaming or criticizing one's partner for a perceived offense. With more intentional conversations there is less likelihood of acting out and re-wounding one another and more possibility of getting those needs met. Incorporating full bodied awareness and energetic healing through BA experiential exercises helps partners understand how these developmental wounds have affected their emotions and beliefs about themselves and in relation to others. This can support the type of self-regulation needed through body awareness to remain present for that type of intentional communication.

## 2.2. Healing Occurs Within the Context of a Relationship

Choosing someone who cannot meet your needs sounds absurd but when understood through the lens of IRT it helps explain some of the relational struggles. After many years of study, husband and wife team Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, cofounders of Imago Relationship Theory, say in their newest book, *Making Marriage Simple* (2013), "Incompatibility is grounds for marriage" (p. 24). In this context marriage encompasses any committed partnership.

IRT states that individuals learn their unconscious templates of love in their families of origin. All the positive and negative experiences and characteristics of their parents or primary caretakers form their energetic love-map. Not only do they possess those traits but they will only choose and fall in love with someone who also possesses those traits. They choose their *Imago* or *mirror image* and, according to Hendrix and Hunt (1988), they will not fall in love with anyone else. In other words, if an adult experienced neglect in their childhood they would be attracted to someone who would trigger the experience of neglect and then they will unconsciously react to the threat.

In *Getting the Love You Want* (1988), Harville explains it this way,

“Our old brain ... is trying to re-create the environment of childhood ... You fell in love because your old brain had your partner confused with your parents. Your old brain believed that it had finally found the ideal candidate to make up for the psychological and emotional damage you experienced in childhood” (p. 14).

To heal childhood misattunements, wounds, and broken hearts, one needs to be with someone who is willing to stretch and grow their ability to provide what the other needs and vice versa. Hendrix believes that each partner possesses what the other needs to grow into their fullest, most alive self.

Being with someone who meets their needs too easily would either bore them because they are familiar with the energy of the power struggle or the opposite challenge occurs, which relates to feeling overwhelmed by intimacy. Many people say they want closeness and intimacy, but being vulnerable can be frightening so they consciously or unconsciously sabotage it. The beliefs, behaviors and bodily contractions created in childhood for protection against disappointment, overwhelm or pain typically resurface in the romantic relationships when an emotional threat is triggered.

Alexander Lowen wrote extensively about the emotional, mental and somatic wounding created by the child’s relationship with their primary caretakers. In *Love and Orgasm*, he wrote, “The love of an infant for his mother is the prototype of all later love relationships ...” (p. 66). Although his techniques were designed to heal that early wounding, his approach did not emphasize the healing potential of the therapeutic relationship. As BA has evolved in the last twenty plus years Bob Hilton and many others have integrated more relational models such as Object-Relations and Attachment theories into their philosophy of somatic healing.

Harville Hendrix has also acknowledged his reliance on Object-Relations Theory in creating IRT as a model for treating couples. Over the years I have heard both Bob (Hilton) and Harville say (Multiple Conference Lectures), “We are born into relationship. We are wounded in relationship. We need to heal in relationship.” In their paper, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, Stephen Mitchell and Jay Greenberg assimilate theories from Fairbairn, Winnicott, Guntrip and Kohut. They write that Object-Relations theory is generally based on the stance that from birth the infant has a core energetic drive toward contact and relationship with another. If that drive has been repressed the authentic and spontaneous self seeks full expression which can only be achieved through a safe relationship with another (Mitchell, Greenberg).

In his paper entitled, *The Importance of Relationship in Bioenergetic Analysis*, Bob Hilton talks about the client/therapist relationship as a relationship in which the client restores their ability to love.

“... one way of expressing love and through it allowing the client to release a narcissistic position is to surrender our agendas and theories and follow the client’s needs. In other words, we do not need to be right. Another way is the willingness on our part as therapists to allow ourselves to be moved by the clients experience. [...] When this kind of loving mutuality is achieved with our clients, a spontaneous bodily movement begins in them. This movement is the expression of the real body/self that is reaching back toward the environment for contact” (p. 98).

Sue Johnson (2008) writes that when she asks couples about their problems she hears blaming of the other. When she asks therapists what are the basic problems they think couples face she hears that the couples are caught in power struggles and need to learn how to better communicate, but she also believes:

“... couples have disconnected emotionally; they don’t feel emotionally safe with each other. What couples and therapists too often do not see is that most fights are really protests over emotional disconnection. ... The anger, the criticism, the demands, are really cries to their lovers, calls to stir their hearts, to draw their mates back in emotionally and re-establish a sense of safe connection” (p. 30).

As Bioenergetic therapists we can support and welcome that reach for connection through a number of physical interventions including touching and being touched. If the relationship is safe enough, the client can risk the terror they must face in allowing themselves to be vulnerable. We must also risk our vulnerability and face our desires and limitations to loving and being loved. As therapists we have hopefully worked through our own wounds and have enough support in our lives to remain clear and focused on our client’s needs and provide them with a healing experience. If we fail in some way, being available for the repair can also be healing.

Although BA is a relational therapy and despite the incredible healing possible in individual therapy, a partner in a loving relationship can still trigger a regression into those original childhood wounds. The regression may not be as consuming or detrimental as it would have been had the individual healing not occurred but there is still another level of healing that is necessary but sometimes thwarted between committed, romantic partners.

Typically, both partners are triggered into regression at the same time so they are often unable to create emotional safety for one another in the same way as in a therapeutic relationship. The couple’s therapist can create the safety in which to hold the relationship and support each partner as they risk and face their own terror while reaching for more contact and connection with their partner. Although IRT’s

Intentional Dialogue is a valuable communication tool, sometimes verbal communication cannot derail long held unconscious defenses. The body remains in high alert and somatically defended.

As mentioned earlier non-verbal BA interventions can accentuate an unconscious, sabotaging dynamic, create a safe container in which to express anger, hurt and disappointment as well as provide a physical experience of support and affection desperately desired. This type of visceral experience with a loving partner is profound. There is a primal connection and experience that touches into the core of the heartbreak and uncoils the cellular holding. Complementing the physical intervention with an Intentional Dialogue or an EFT conversation can then intellectually ground the experience.

To be healthy and happy, the individual must release the mental, emotional and somatic holding to allow energy to flow freely through them as well as between them and others. In these psychotherapeutic models the healing of developmental wounds in a safe relationship is essential to having an energetically dynamic life and connection.

### **2.3. Unconscious Transference and Projections Quickly Derail Connection**

I have heard many IRT therapists repeat this quip when referring to projections in relationships, “You will either pick them, provoke them or project onto them.” In other words, you will either pick someone to wound you in a similar way to the way you felt wounded in your family of origin, provoke them to wound you in that way or project that their behaviors are meant to wound you in the same way.

Romantic relationships often begin with an idealized experience of the other. That idealization consists of unconscious projections about the love object being the one who will love, appreciate, support and fulfill all needs ... finally and forever more!

When a transgression is perceived, infantile fears of abandonment or rejection trigger defensive reactions. That survival reaction might be aggressive, seductive or rejecting but it's intention is to get another to meet a real or perceived need and, a need that triggers this type of defense usually originates in childhood.

In a *Getting the Love You Want* workshop facilitator training, Maya Kollman, a master IRT trainer shared an Imago saying, “If it's hysterical, it's historical”. In other words, a reaction that carries big energy often has a historical root. The partner receiving the reaction experiences it as excessive, threatening and out of proportion to the incident so reacts from their reciprocal defensive style. Harville says our partners are wounded in a similar developmental phase but defended in an opposite way. Consequently neither is functioning within the present reality. Both

are regressed and reacting to a historical wound causing their adult connection to be derailed. When this becomes a chronic style of relating there is little room for love. Liz Greene, PhD in her article about projections in relationships wrote, “Sadly, once one or the other or both people become engaged in this dance of illusion, there is little room left for the real people to exist and enjoy authentic acceptance and love” (wealthyandloved.com, blog post).

This “dance” is often unconscious yet the threat feels very real in the moment. Romantic partners reflect both our wounded selves as well as our most loving selves. Harville Hendrix says that our romantic partners are our mirrors. Becoming conscious about our projections is a challenging, scary and painful process for most, so holding another responsible is a primitive defense against feeling that pain.

Sue Johnson has written about how childhood attachment wounds trigger this type of regressive response. She has developed a series of questions designed to make what has been unconscious more conscious thus enabling couples to frame their reactions more accurately. Hendrix has developed intentional dialogues with a specific structure that is designed to engage the cerebral cortex and frontal lobe and hold the couple in a safe, contained, conscious, mature place.

The Imago dialogue process creates safety and structure. Each person has the opportunity to talk about his or her experience in the relationship and how it resembles their childhood hurt and the defenses they adapted to protect themselves from that hurt. The partner repeats what they are hearing, empathizes with the pain their partner experienced in childhood and lets their partner know how defending against a similar pain in their relationship makes sense. When the speaker feels satisfied they switch roles.

The process is intended to eliminate projections because these projections quickly move from the triggering event to the childhood wound and to ways of defending that wound that ultimately sabotage their ability to give and receive love as an adult. As a result of this structured communication the speaker has the opportunity to become more vulnerable when they remove the projected beliefs and then they can trust that their partner is genuinely interested in listening. The listener has an opportunity to become more empathic and understanding of the other’s experiences in the relationship when they do not have to defend against an attack. Both EFT and IRT processes enable healing yet do not address the somatic resistance and holding.

Introducing BA to enhance individual body awareness strengthens the effectiveness of these interactions. Creating a relevant, experiential, sometimes non-verbal intervention enables them to embody the spiraling stuckness created by their own projections and transferential dynamics as well as enhance the somatic healing when they follow their energetic movements.

According to BA, family of origin wounds are absorbed into the body, emotions and mental beliefs at such a young age that distinguishing the armored self from the authentic self is difficult without intervention. Because the wounding happens so young some regressive beliefs and emotional triggers are to be expected until there is enough healing for someone to grasp what is happening in the moment and remain present and rational.

Until that time, partners need to be loved and accepted despite their regressions. So when couples cannot remain safe for one another the therapist can create a non-verbal, experiential intervention to support both partners to drop their intellectual defenses and somatically explore their energetic movements toward and away from one another. If the therapist can hold a safe frame during that visceral experience it can reveal primal as well as present needs and defenses and promote safe exploration toward a new, more authentic way of being that incorporates and heals the whole person including the body.

Our authentic nature is to be whole so when our projections are made conscious we can integrate them back into our sense of self. When one can re-own those parts that trigger shame, self-doubt or self-hatred and still experience love from another then there is a chance for sincere, full-bodied and whole-hearted love. In his article, *The Importance of Being Liked: The Therapist's Dilemma*, Bob Hilton writes, “Someone has to contact us in our shame in order to build a bridge back to our true self where we can thrive and be free” (p. 266). Integrating the theories of Bioenergetic Analysis and relational psychotherapies in my therapeutic practice has been amazing and rewarding. Here are some examples.

### **3. Case Example 1: Somatic Defense Breakthrough**

I worked with a highly intelligent, professional couple who were perpetually triggering one another. Sometimes they triggered each other through words or tone but at other times it was completely nonverbal. The eye rolls and crossed arms were easy to spot and address but sometimes their communication unconsciously triggered and drew them into the turbulent waters of the siren call.

They were in the midst of another conflict about who did what to whom when I noticed an almost imperceptible stiffening in his neck as the male partner ever so slightly lifted his chin and appeared to be looking down his nose at her. She, unconsciously and energetically transformed into a distraught little girl no longer able to compose herself.

I asked them to become quiet and physically still to create an awareness of what

was happening in the moment. Neither could identify their energetic or physical transformation. I then had them exaggerate any tensions or lack of energy they felt and to become curious about the exaggerated pose.

He surprisingly identified this “looking down his nose” stance as his father’s. This was the way his father expressed his disapproval toward him when he was a child. He hated it and had no idea he was using it with his wife. I asked her if she knew this look and through an outburst of tears she said that she knew it well as it triggered a “never good enough” feeling.

He very sincerely apologized and she melted into a tearful pool of relief, which she later identified as finally being seen and heard. He spontaneously reached out to hold her and she sank into his arms. His unconscious, defensive stance relaxed as he allowed his empathy to flow for his wife whom he realized was experiencing the same pain he (as a boy) knew so well. Not being good enough, of course was a belief and agony she carried with her from childhood and into which she was so easily triggered.

Neither of them felt good (adequate) enough for their parents but his pain was defended behind a “better than” stance while hers was expressed in longing that could never be met. They fell in love with one another to help heal these wounds of inadequacy. It’s the same wound expressed in an opposite way.

Each of them has to move more toward vulnerability and risk the fear of being rejected, which is the struggle all face in love to one degree or another. Defensive structures are insidious and surrendering to intimacy is challenging. *They were trapped in a verbal sparring match so exploring the somatic expressions of their primal defenses allowed them to drop into vulnerability.* When a romantic partner requires an authentic expression of love and empathy in order to heal, their partner also has the opportunity to become more fully alive.

#### **4. Case Example 2: Finding the Conflict in the Body**

Another couple with whom I worked was entangled in insecurities with one another. Each blamed the other and neither was able to claim their contribution to the danger zone. Their energies were pushing and pulling at the same time.

I asked that they stand with the palms of their hands flat against one another and to experiment with pushing and pulling. One would push and the other would resist or one would move their hands back and the other would follow.

I then had them experiment with not cooperating with one another’s movements. As one moved back, the other would either push harder or not follow at all or if



one moved forward the other would block the movement or move back without any contact.

Very quickly they went from laughing and enjoying the playfulness of this exercise to having a somatic experience of the emotional struggle in their relationship. Their bodies lost the vibrancy and spontaneity expressed in the first round of this experiment. It became more sobering and emotional for them. The embodiment of their relational dynamics took them to their painful loss of connection. This allowed a deeper awareness of their defensive patterns, which prevented them from attaining the intimacy they desire.

Each was able to take responsibility for their contribution to the conflict. Through her tears, the woman said that this is exactly what she feels in their relationship. The man immediately moved toward her in an expression of compassion and empathy. As he held her he was genuinely remorseful about his unconscious tendency to withdraw his energy from her. Of course she had tried to tell him but he couldn't hear it when her communication sounded critical, shaming or blaming. This exercise gave him a felt sense of his own struggle to remain in contact with himself as well as with his wife rather than protect himself by withdrawing. She was able to recognize how her anger and criticism was an attempt to protect her from heartbreak, but only served to push her husband away.

This somatic experience of a less defended and more vulnerable communication enabled the healing of childhood wounds thus creating the opportunity for a mature, adult loving relationship.

## 5. Clinical Summary

Experiencing the energetic transformation in couples work is completely satisfying. I witness it in my private practice and in the *Getting the Love You Want* couples workshops that I lead. Each partner discovers the mysteries and gifts of their relationship's frustration as the missing pieces fall into place. They understand how and why they chose one another and how the relational struggles are opportunities to heal and grow into a deeper love.

Blending these two fields of study, relational therapies and Bioenergetics Analysis, creates a fuller, richer picture of human development. When unable to trust the relationships with childhood caregivers, individuals characteristically defend their expressions of love as well as their receptivity to love. However, defending against authentic expression creates a multitude of physical, emotional and relational problems. Humans are born fully alive, joyful, and connected and want to reclaim that birthright. This disconnect from the true or authentic self can cause a tug-of-war within

relationships. Individuals long for the give and take of love, yet unconsciously defend against it due to the possibility of heartbreak. The unconscious energetic expression of that tug-of-war is fascinating. Accompanying someone through the obstacles to their unique life expression is honoring and humbling. Remaining grounded through the turbulent waters of the siren's call for a couple can stretch the therapist as well as the couple to a higher level of attunement.

## **6. Addendum: Body Interventions with Couples**

On the next few pages I would like to share couples exercises I created with Diana Guest, MFT, CBT. Together we presented a variation of this workshop at the International Bioenergetic Conference in Spain as well as at the United States Association of Body Psychotherapists Conference in Colorado. I have presented a different variation of this workshop at an International Imago Relationship Conference as well as at the IIBA conference in San Diego.

The following are examples of exercises we have used with couples. We would not recommend using all of these exercises with any one couple. One cannot just overlay these exercises on the couple. They may not be applicable in their original form. The intervention must be organic and relational for that couple. They must therapeutically address the dynamics for the couple present while also considering their personal and relational history. For example, you may not do some of these if there is a sexual abuse issue, domestic violence history, etc.

### **6.1. A Suggested Beginning to a Session**

Have the couple sit facing each other. Have them close their eyes and go inside, get grounded in themselves and then move their awareness to the relationship between them and instruct them to notice how they feel at that time. When they appear or report feeling present and grounded tell them to complete each of the following sentence stems silently with their eyes closed first. Then have them open their eyes and one person at a time share each sentence with their partner. The partner will repeat each sentence as they hear it.

1. As I enter the relationship space I am aware of experiencing ...
2. How I would like our relationship to be at the end of this session is ...
3. What I can do to help make that happen is ...
4. Something I appreciate about you is ...

After this initial ritual the couple can discuss an issue in their relationship. One of the following body interventions may enlighten them to *character structure, transference, and/or projections to illuminate* the unconscious dynamics in their relationship.

## 6.2. Power Struggle Interventions

- *Go away:* Have the couple stand and face one other. Partner A starts by doing a pushing movement with hands (with or without contact depending on the couple).
- *Relational Ambivalence:* This exercise begins as the previous exercise but as ambivalence is recognized or felt have the ambivalent partner move into pushing with one hand while saying, “go away” or “leave me alone” and alternately, with the other hand reaching and pulling their partner toward them while saying, “don’t leave me.” Have the other partner mirror these alternate expressions. (Example: A husband was ambivalent about intimacy and so he had a pattern of pushing his wife away. I had him physically experiment with the push/pull dynamic so he could embody his defensive pattern and make a more conscious decision about whether this is how he wanted to behave. In this example, he expressed empathy for what it might feel like for her, which allowed her to sink into her sorrow and to own her critical, defensive style and also make a different choice in her behavior.)
- *Towel Pull, My Way:* Have the couple play tug of war with a towel, each holding onto opposite ends, while expressing the different sides of their power struggle, which may just be saying, “My Way.” Couples often see the futility of this and drop into a more authentic place.
- *Turning Your Back:* Partners are face to face. As one begins to talk the other turns their back and walks away. Process feelings that arise.
- *Control Exercise:* Have partner A stand and face partner B. Partner A starts moving arms in various directions. Have Partner B try to control the arm movements of A. Then have partner A take the hands of partner B and say “move with me, I’ll keep you safe”. (example: A wife literally jumped up and wrapped her legs around her husband to try to control his arm movements. When we moved to the second part he took her hands and said, “move with me, I’ll keep you safe.” She said she could feel her body relax. He said he felt more like a partner and there was more room for him in the relationship) Then they began a dialogue about the experience. This exercise allowed them to experience an embodied sense of their power struggle.

- *Feet to Feet Push-Up*: (this provides a container for negativity) Have partners lie on the floor on their stomachs as if doing a push-up. The bottom of partner A's feet is in contact with the bottom of partner B's feet. As they move into a push-up while in this position, have them talk about a frustration.
- *Shoulder to Shoulder Push*: While on hands and knees have partners face each other. Partner A puts the soft part of their right shoulder against the soft part of partner B's right shoulder. You may also use left to left shoulder. Have them push against each other. Use your clinical judgment about whether to have the couple talk or make sound.

### 6.3. Negativity Interventions

(These exercises should be used prudently. Expressing negativity to a partner in this fashion may cause deeper wounding. Also be aware of previous abuse issues with each couple while using these exercises.)

- Before beginning this exercise have the couple determine a safety word such as "red." This means stop the exercise immediately. The person receiving determines the intensity of the contact. Have partner A hang over in a forward bend. Using the side of their fists have partner B rhythmically hit A's back, legs, and buttocks. (Instruct them not to hit A's spine or kidney area.)
- Put a tall cube between the couple and have partner A hit it with a tennis racket or hands while looking at partner B. Partner B holds a pillow as a protective barrier and also imagines a safe place before beginning this exercise. (Explain to the couple before they begin the 90/10% rule: This means the frustrations being expressed are 90% about the person expressing and 10% about the person witnessing or receiving.)
- Partner A twists a towel while letting anger come through their eyes, sounds or words directed toward Partner B.

### 6.4. Cooperative Exercises

(Verbal communication is very important in these exercises)

- *Tree pose (as in yoga)*: Partners stand side by side facing the same direction with inside arms around each other's waist. Each does the same tree pose by bending their outside leg and putting their foot on the inside of their straight leg, leaning out with the knee and forming a triangle with this leg. Then they take their out-

side arms up over their head and clasp the hand of the other or place their palms together with their partner. Take a minute to breathe together in this position.

- *Back to back:* Partners sit back to back with knees bent and feet on the floor in front of them. They sit as erect as they can and with their buttocks pressing toward one another. They interlock arms at the elbow. Now with each applying pressure toward the other’s back, have them stand using only their legs. This exercise is to demonstrate interdependency.
- *Face to face:* Partners stand face to face and grab each other’s wrists. With feet hip width apart, move feet closer to partner and lean back. Now bend knees and go down to sitting position on floor. Now reverse movement to standing position.

## 6.5. Connecting/Containing Exercises

- *Breathing:* Sit face to face with partner A mirroring partner B’s breathing for 1–3 minutes. Do this exercise with eyes open and/or with eyes closed (depending on the couple). Reverse and have B mirror A.
- *Spoon tuning:* Partner A lies on his/her side with knees bent. Partner B lies behind partner A, fitting the front of their body against A’s backside. B puts arm around A (Spoonng position). Partner B mirrors A’s breathing. (Reverse.)
- *Writing Love Messages on Partner’s Back:* Partner A draws individual letters to spell a message on Partner B’s back. Partner B receives and verifies the message.

## 6.6. Supportive/Receiving Exercises

- *Giving and Taking Directions of Support:* Partner A sits comfortably on the floor and partner B sits between A’s legs with his/her back to A’s front. Partner B then instructs A how s/he would like to be supported or held.
- *Human Barrel exercise:* Partner A is on his/her hands and knees in the crawling position. Partner B stands at the feet of A and bends backwards, slowly lowering him/herself so that B’s lower back is supported by A’s buttocks. B may place his/her hands on A’s back for support as he/she continues to bend backwards until they are back to back. Depending on the couple’s physical capabilities, A can move into the convex and concave (“cat/cow”) movement. To get out of this exercise, A slowly sits back onto his/her feet using his/her arms as support, thereby lifting B. They end the exercise by sitting back to back. This exercise requires continual dialogue between the couple to be sure they are each safe and supported.

- *Forearm support:* A extends his/her forearms forward, palms facing down, elbows slightly bent. B faces A and in a gentle hold supports A's arms by placing his/her forearms under A's forearms with palms up.
- *Holding Exercise:* (So the holding partner can remain emotionally warm, do not use exercise to discuss the relationship. Because of the regressive potential inform couples that this exercise should never lead to a sexual experience.) Partner A as the holder, sits with back support against a wall, sofa, etc. Partner B stands facing A on their right side. B then sits on their feet or cross-legged beside A, right hip to right hip. With arms folded on their chest, B lies on his/her side across the front of A, head nestled with an ear to A's heart. A is to support the full weight of B's body. This is to replicate an infantile position for B. B may then speak about childhood memories, while A listens. A may mirror but does not ask questions. A's hands need to remain still. There is no patting or rubbing.

## 7. Conclusion

I hope this paper inspires others in their work. As a Bioenergetic therapist my hope is that it inspires other Bioenergetic therapists to use what we already know about working with individuals and apply it to working with couples, while also adding the structured dialogical component. I also hope it inspires other Bioenergetic therapists working with couples to share their knowledge with the broader community.

I also offer workshops on the energetics of relationships to the Imago community and am always rewarded with interest and fascination on the somatic elements, so my intention is to develop other workshops and learning opportunities about Bioenergetics for that group.

Being trained in both Imago Relationship Therapy and Bioenergetic Analysis has allowed me to experience and facilitate a deeper level of discovery about romantic relationships. I trust the process and believe the authentic and energetic need to love and be loved will lead to healing, vulnerability and intimacy.

In order to have intimacy one has to have safety and as David Finlay (2010) says,

“(Intimacy) is a state where we can feel understood, safe, physically strong and capable, able to empathize and help others. Through intimacy our fears can be tamed. Intimacy as a way of harmony may be our best chance of finding our way home on levels ranging from the cellular to the soul, personally and interpersonally, perhaps even nationally and internationally” (p. 31).

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