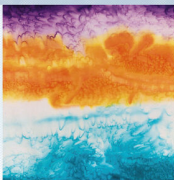


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Defensive Style in Bioenergetic Therapy

What it Means and Why it Matters

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Abstracts

The concept of defensive style provides a rich addition to the understanding of our clients and the factors which inhibit their joy in life and satisfaction in relationships. Defensive style differs from character structure. But, like character structure, it can be viewed through observations of a client's body in addition to memories of childhood relational experiences. This paper explores the lens of defensive style, explains how it differs from character structure, and includes bioenergetic methods to observe defensive style in a client. It includes the work of Len Carlino along with a diagnostic tool by Schroeter and Thomson. Case examples of using this understanding to help clients are sprinkled throughout. The paper ends with a tribute to Len Carlino, Ph.D, IIBA International Trainer, for his valuable reminder that working through defensive style and character structure require a life long commitment.

Keywords: defenses, defensive style, relational trauma, bioenergetics, contracted

Estilo de defesa na psicoterapia bioenergética (Portuguese)

O que significa e por que é importante

O conceito de estilo defensivo acrescenta um fator adicional à compreensão de nossos clientes e das questões que restringem sua alegria na vida e sua satisfação nos relacionamentos. O estilo defensivo difere da estrutura de caráter, mas, como esta, pode ser percebido através da observação do corpo do cliente, juntamente com as lembranças de experiências relacionais da infância. Este artigo explora as lentes do estilo defensivo, explica sua diferença da estrutura de caráter e inclui métodos bioenergéticos de observação desse aspecto.

Stile difensivo nella terapia bioenergetica (Italian)

Cosa significa e perché è importante

Il concetto di stile difensivo fornisce una ricca integrazione alla comprensione dei nostri clienti e dei fattori che inibiscono la loro gioia nella vita e la soddisfazione nelle relazioni. Lo stile difensivo differisce dalla struttura caratteriale. Ma, come la struttura del carattere, può essere visto attraverso l'osservazione del corpo del cliente oltre che dai ricordi delle esperienze relazionali dell'infanzia. Questo scritto esplora lo stile difensivo, spiega come differisce dalla struttura del carattere e include metodi bioenergetici per osservarlo nei clienti. Include il lavoro di Len Carlino insieme a uno strumento diagnostico di Schroeter e Thomson. Vengono riportati alcuni esempi di questa comprensione per aiutare i clienti. L'articolo si conclude con un omaggio a Len Carlino, Ph. D, IIBA International Trainer, per il suo prezioso insegnamento sul fatto che lavorare attraverso lo stile difensivo e la struttura del carattere richiede l'impegno di una vita intera.

Le style défensif dans la thérapie bioénergétique (French)

Ce que cela signifie et pourquoi c'est important

Le concept de style défensif fournit un apport riche à la compréhension de nos clients et des facteurs qui inhibent leur joie de vivre et leur satisfaction dans les relations. Le style défensif diffère de la structure du caractère. Mais, tout comme pour la structure du caractère, il peut être vu à travers les observations du corps des clients en plus des souvenirs des expériences relationnelles de leur enfance. Cet article explore le prisme du style défensif. Il explique en quoi il diffère de la structure du caractère et présente des méthodes bioénergétiques pour observer le style défensif chez un client. Il inclut le travail de Len Carlino ainsi qu'un outil diagnostique de Schroeter et Thomson. Des exemples de cas utilisant cette compréhension pour aider les clients sont parsemés tout au long de l'article. Enfin, il rend hommage à Len Carlino, Ph. D., formateur international de l'IIBA, pour avoir rappelé que le travail sur le style défensif et la structure du caractère exige un engagement à vie.

Defensiver Stil in der Bioenergetischen Therapie (German)

Was er bedeutet und warum er wichtig ist

Das Konzept des defensiven Stils ist eine Bereicherung des Verständnisses unserer Klienten und der Faktoren, die ihre Lebensfreude und Zufriedenheit in Beziehungen hemmen. Der defensive Stil unterscheidet sich von der Charakterstruktur. Aber wie die Charakterstruktur kann er im Körper gelesen werden zusätzlich zur Erhebung der Erinnerungen von Beziehungserfahrungen in der Kindheit. In diesem Beitrag wird der Begriff des defensiven Stils untersucht. Es wird erklärt, wie er sich von der Charakterstruktur unterscheidet, und es werden bioenergetische Methoden zur Beobachtung des defensiven Stils bei einem Klienten vorgestellt. Der Beitrag beinhaltet die Arbeit von Len Carlino sowie ein Dia-

gnoseinstrument von Schroeter und Thomson. Fallbeispiele über die Anwendung dieses Verständnisses zur Unterstützung von Klienten werden immer wieder eingestreut. Der Beitrag endet mit einer Würdigung von Len Carlino, Ph. D., IIBA International Trainer, für seine wertvolle Erinnerung daran, dass das Durcharbeiten des defensiven Stils und der Charakterstruktur ein lebenslanges Engagement erfordert.

Защитный стиль в биоэнергетической терапии (Russian)

Что это значит и почему это важно (Лаури Юрэ)

Концепция защитного стиля дает богатое дополнение к пониманию наших клиентов и факторов, которые препятствуют их радости в жизни и удовлетворенности в отношениях. Защитный стиль отличается от структуры характера. Но, как и структура характера, он может быть рассмотрен через наблюдения за телом клиента в дополнение к воспоминаниям о детском опыте отношений. В данной статье рассматривается понятие защитного стиля, объясняется, чем он отличается от структуры характера, и приводятся биоэнергетические методы наблюдения защитного стиля у клиента. Она включает работу Лена Карлино, а также диагностический инструмент Шретера и Томсона. Повсюду приводятся примеры использования этого понимания для помощи клиентам. Статья заканчивается благодарностью Лену Карлино, доктору философии, международному тренеру IIBA, за его ценное напоминание о том, что работа над защитным стилем и структурой характера требует приверженности на протяжении всей жизни.

躯体动力分析治疗的防御风格 (Chinese)

它意味着什么-为什么它很重要

防御风格的概念提供了一个理解我们的来访者和那些抑制他们生活的喜悦以及关系的满意度的丰富补充。防御风格不同于人格结构，但是，和人格结构相似，除了通过对童年关系体验的回忆，还可以通过观察来访者身体而发现。本文探索了防御风格的视角，解释它与人格结构的区别，包括用躯体动力分析的方式去观察一个来访者的防御风格。它包括Len Carlino的工作，以及Schroeter和Thomson的诊断工具。使用这些理解去帮助来访者是覆盖全部的。本文以IIBA国际培训师o博士的研究为结尾，因为他珍贵的贡献提醒我们，对修通防御风格和人格结构需要一个终生的承诺。

Introduction

At a workshop led by Len Carlino, Ph. D., IIBA International Faculty member, with the Massachusetts/Atlantic Canada trainees in April 2022, Len repeatedly referred to each person's "defensive style" as he worked with them. Len seemed

able to effortlessly, quickly, and masterfully identify these defensive styles in the therapeutic work. It gave him a lens by which to understand the person and guided him in how to help the person address their underlying issues most effectively. On the last day of the workshop, I asked him to talk about what he meant by defensive style, as I had not heard the term before. This paper reflects Len's comments, coupled with my thoughts on defensive style.

Advanced bioenergetic therapists likely have intuitive experience working with the defensive style of their clients. It forms a basis for our work, both from body observations and from analyzing a person's history. But for trainees and newer bioenergetic therapists, explaining this concept and describing how to incorporate it in therapy can offer insights into working effectively with clients.

What do we mean by defensive style?

Defensive style describes patterns of behavior that a person has adapted in order to avoid pain in childhood. It becomes a habitual way a person detaches from emotions and energy, along with needs, vulnerability, and helplessness, that were unacceptable to their parents/primary caregivers. It describes what a person learned to do to protect themselves from retribution and gain needed approval and acceptance. It also explains how people respond to their emotions, needs, desires, and energy in their present life. A person's defensive style often underlies their presenting problem. Since these patterns develop as an adaptation in childhood, the person generally lacks awareness of their defensive style.

In her article titled "Somatopsychic Unconscious Processes and Their Involvement in Chronic Relational Trauma", bioenergetic therapist and IIBA trainer Elaine Tuccillo, Ph.D. describes the complexity of dynamics in family relationships, which are generally unconscious. She explains the impact of relational trauma inflicted on children by their parents and brilliantly explores how family relationships form the basis of a person's expectations in adult relationships. Defensive style relates to what she describes in the article as perceptions formed from childhood experience. In the article, she defines this as follows:

"[W]e have understood that unconscious psychic processes infuse present perception and feeling with historical-emotional memory to create distorted, often irrational, perceptions of present reality; yet these are hard-wired in the way we perceive and emotionally process everything and in the way we bond to others" (Tuccillo, 2013, p. 45).

Further, because a person's defensive style developed out of conscious awareness in response to expectations within relationships, it impacts how a person relates to others in their adult life. It describes how a person behaves in their relationships, including how they respond to others and how they expect others to treat them. While the defensive style helps a person adapt to expectations in childhood, it inhibits one's capacity for pleasure, fulfillment, and connection with others in adult life.

A person's defensive style will become apparent in therapy, especially within the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. It will often become more pronounced as the client moves towards change. Defensive style has components in both a person's body and personality. The patterns include beliefs about the self, relationships, and life.

How does defensive style relate to character structure?

Defensive patterns relate to the person's character type, but people can have widely different defensive styles within the same character structure. Character offers broad information about the context of a person's early developmental experience, while defensive style develops in response to the many variations of misattunements within family relationships. Defining incidents in a person's childhood can sometimes lead to a defensive style.

Character types fit into a finite number of identifiable categories, while defensive styles include a broader range of possibilities. Defensive style becomes a person's relational pattern. It affects how a person treats themselves and their responses in relationships with others. Defensive style describes the nuanced variety of what happened to a child in their childhood environment that impacted their aliveness and well-being, along with how they connect with others.

An example will illuminate the differences between character structure and defensive style. One person with primarily oral structure may cope with their unmet needs through isolating and withdrawing from contact with others, while another may cling to relationships to avoid the emptiness of being alone. These differences relate to variations within the family dynamics which led to differences in adaptive behaviors. For example, the child with an oral injury who withdraws may have been left alone more throughout their early life, with little possibility for contact, leaving them with a deep sense of hopelessness about satisfying contact with others. In contrast, the child who clings to relationships likely had some satisfying contact, leaving them hungry and wanting more.

How does understanding a person's defensive style inform therapeutic work?

A person's basic defensive style provides essential clues to what keeps them stuck in behaviors and relationship patterns they find unsatisfying. Understanding this style can help guide the therapist's interventions. It provides a road map to what will predictably emerge in the therapy process as this pattern will repeatedly occur in the therapeutic work. Knowledge about the style can help the therapist predict the resistance which will present itself as the client moves towards increased self-possession, vitality, and connectedness. In addition, it can guide the therapist in reflecting upon transference and counter-transference issues in the therapy.

Understanding a client's defensive style can also lead to greater empathy from the therapist. It provides information about the challenges the client faces in changing their behavior. This understanding can decrease the therapist's frustration with the client's resistance to changes which may seem obvious to someone without this depth of knowledge. In short, it offers a critical piece of clarifying why people can't, or won't, or don't, do things that would seem to help them.

To illustrate this point, one of my clients suffered significant deprivation as a child. Her mother frequently told her she wished she hadn't had children. My client reports that her mother resented feeding her and expected her to do strenuous tasks (painting the house in the heat of summer or making her shovel the driveway by herself in the winter). This client lives alone and has no close relatives and few friends. Her body shows the fear and disconnection that identify someone with a primarily schizoid character structure. Talking loudly and non-stop has become her defensive style, which keeps her from experiencing the fear of being vulnerable with her deep need for contact in the therapeutic relationship. A previous therapist who did not understand her defensive style and underlying fear demonstrated a damaging lack of empathy. This therapist became frustrated when the client didn't do what the therapist recommended, such as joining groups to make friends and be less socially isolated.

Only through working slowly, gradually, and developing a trusting relationship over a significant period of years, has this client begun to feel safer with me and within herself. She has developed strength in speaking up for herself when she feels put down or disregarded by others. She needed this foundation before tolerating the risks of reaching out for other social connections. Still, her fear of contact – with herself and me – becomes stronger when I propose something she perceives as a threat. For instance, when I suggested she stay longer in going

backward over an exercise ball to open her breathing, she identified her fear of vulnerability in this position. We adapted the exercise by giving her a blanket to cover herself, which helped her feel safer.

How do we know a client's defensive style?

During the workshop in April 2022, Len Carlino demonstrated the skill of a master clinician as he identified each person's defensive style. After listening to each person's story, including their family history and current life challenges, and working briefly with them, he shared his observation of their defensive style with them and the group. For example, he noted with one person that her style included subtly engaging in a fight with the therapist. With another person, Len said that they defended against their fear of being present with them self through rapidly shifting emotional expressions.

Len demonstrated his use of himself as a therapist, which he discusses in his 1993 article titled: "The Therapist's Use of Self." Len talked with the group about how he softens his boundaries to imagine and explore what the client may feel and perceive. He uses this awareness to identify what they may need to deepen their feelings and to expand their connectedness in relationships.

Len (2022) describes this process as follows: "Understanding a patient's defensive style and character structure, as well as being able to make a more accurate therapeutic intervention, can be facilitated by increasing the therapist's energetic contact with the patient. This is done by the therapist softening their own character defenses and loosening their ego boundaries. Softening in this way enables the therapist to resonate with the patient's energetic self. When the therapist is in resonance with the patient, contact becomes an energetic phenomenon and not merely mechanical and intellectual. The therapist can then use their theoretical and intellectual knowledge to integrate with their resonating body experience. This facilitates the therapist to make a profound, accurate and grounded therapeutic intervention."

Since not everyone can observe the often subtle dynamic of a client's defensive style, bioenergetic tools can provide valuable clues. As bioenergetic therapists, we can gain information from reading a client's body language and listening to their story. For instance, observing a client in a bioenergetic bow can reveal information about their defensive style. In this position, the client may have a specific look in their eyes, their head may come more forward or be downcast, or their body may show distortions in alignment. Body observations can supplement in-

formation gained from their history, presenting problems, and reflections about their behavior in the therapeutic relationship.

For example, I recently began with a new client whose presenting problem focused on excessive anger with her boyfriend, to the point where he considered leaving her. In exploring her history, she told a story of a defining moment when as a young child, she had suffered a physical injury. She recalled that while her mother comforted her, her father told her to “stop crying and get over it.” When I encouraged her to do the bow, I could easily observe the hardened stance in her body. Her eyes expressed a look of defiance which I read as: “Don’t mess with me!” while her body became quite stiff and rigid. Her defensive style of meeting the world with anger served her in hardening against her father’s reproach in her childhood but did not serve her in her current relationships.

From observing the hardening in her body, I knew to predict that her fear of vulnerability and sadness lay beneath her angry exterior. Further, I had a clue to expect fear of being vulnerable with me to emerge in our relationship during the therapy.

How do we work with defensive style?

Sometimes naming a person’s defensive style with empathy and compassion for their experience helps to shift it. For instance, a client I have known for many years recently became more defensive when I returned after a vacation. She stood in the corner of my office and stated: “I’m fine, everything’s fine,” right after talking about her fear that she would break from emotional pain. I observed the hardened look in her eyes. I reflected this to her, stating that as a child, she survived, in part, by pretending everything was fine and by not letting her parents get to her. In response, she stated: “Yes, I won.” I affirmed how that position helped her to survive. I waited patiently, and a few minutes later, she asked if she could come to sit by me. She sat by me and cried deeply.

Asking the client to identify their defenses, including noting how it impacts them physically, often effectively addresses a person’s defensive style. Sometimes suggesting they exaggerate the posture leads to a shift in the pattern. When doing this, I encourage the client to explore the position, including what messages, feelings, or thoughts emerge.

Vincentia Schroeter and Barbara Thomson (2016) describe an excellent bioenergetic diagnostic tool to observe and learn about defensive body patterns. They call it the “Exaggerated Body Stance.” They use two primary ways of work-

ing with this – the exaggerated contracted posture, abbreviated to ECP, and the exaggerated reverse posture, abbreviated to ERP. They explain these exercises to use in exploring the body stances related to defensive styles.

Schroeter and Thomson label the defensive style as an “adaptive stance.” They discuss how this stance formed in childhood as the child’s best way to behave in response to their parents. It becomes molded into a protective adaptation which we can observe in the misalignments in a person’s body. They state:

“[T]he body maintains its protective adaptations even though the danger is no longer an active threat [...] Although no longer needed, due to the lack of actual threat, this contracted stance becomes the new way of being in the world” (Schroeter, & Thomson, 2016, p. 22).

In the exercises, the therapist first guides the client to stand in their natural way. Next, the therapist observes the body misalignments throughout the client’s body. These may include weight on one foot more than the other, the pelvis cocked forward or back, the chest protruded or collapsed, shoulders held up or twisted, or the head protruded forward or turned toward one side. The therapist then guides the client to exaggerate these contractions.

Schroeter and Thomson identify a variety of ways to work with this material. The therapist may, for example, imitate the exaggerated contractions in the client’s body. This very effective method helps the therapist feel what the client experiences as they move through the world in the adaptive body pattern. The therapist can ask the client what they think this stance says to the world. Some examples may include, “I’m afraid you will leave”, “don’t hurt me”, or “I am ready to fight”. Most importantly, the exercise heightens awareness of the client’s adaptive stance and provides information to both the client and the therapist about it.

Next, the exaggerated reverse posture defined by Schroeter and Thomson includes reversing each contracted posture by exaggerating the opposite position. For instance, they would look down if they were looking up, cock the pelvis forward if it was back, or collapse their chest if it was protruding. This exploration usually reveals additional information and awareness not previously available to the client. The client often feels some fear in this opposite pose as it often reveals the original movement (some type of reaching or authentic way of being) that they had to suppress as a child. In addition, it may present them with a path toward a freer, more alive way of being that they can recover if they work with their defensive aspects in therapy.

The ECP/ERP offers valuable diagnostic and assessment tools for bioenergetic therapists as they incorporate both body stance and mental awareness. They can increase the therapist's understanding of the client's defensive style and bring conscious awareness to the client. This awareness offers an excellent beginning for transformational change.

An example of an apparent defensive style

In some clients, the defensive style is relatively apparent on both a behavior and body level. For example, one of my clients suffered extreme abuse by her adoptive parents in every way possible – physically, sexually, verbally, and emotionally. Her body shows signs of an oral structure. She has a collapsed chest, is very thin, and her head juts forward from her body.

Her parents damaged her by being angry at her frequently. As a result, she expects me to be mad at her regularly. She asks if I'm angry at her and becomes very frightened if she has done something minor, such as getting tears on the mattress in my office. Even after many years of therapy, she still regularly checks to see if I am angry, expecting this to change at any time.

In her childhood, her parents tolerated no emotional expression. She learned to disconnect from pain by telling herself, "I'm fine, everything's fine," even when unimaginably horrible things had happened. She also survived through an unspoken message to her parents: "you won't get to me." Through this, she believes she won the battle for the survival of her soul.

Further, because her parents could not tolerate her expressing sadness, they punished her if she cried. Recently (after over ten years of therapy), she told me that her mother said if she cried, she would go crazy and go to a mental hospital for the rest of her life. She innocently asked me if this was true. As a result, she learned to block her emotions by holding her breath, dissociating and repeatedly telling herself: "I'm fine, everything's fine," even when she/it wasn't.

In the therapy, I witness her do these behaviors regularly. We now sometimes joke about it when she says, "I'm fine, everything's fine," when clearly it is not. Often when tears emerge in response to something which makes her sad, she holds her breath. I've witnessed her repeatedly dissociate when this happens. The pattern is so strong that I've learned to wait rather than intervene. I allow her to hold her breath as she dissociates for as long as she can hold her breath. Once she gasps for breath and returns to the room, I encourage her to breathe, offer support, and remind her that her feelings are okay now.

On a more subtle level, her father would not tolerate her protesting on any level. She recalls him punishing her or an animal she loved if she protested his abuse. Her defensive style in this arena includes allowing people to treat her in however they wish. Despite significant work on her not allowing people to use or abuse her, this continues to challenge her. For example, a friend had encouraged her to spend time with a man she did not like. The friend believed the man cared about her. My client allowed herself to be hurt by this man rather than defy her friend.

Her fear of protesting also becomes challenging in therapy, as she won't say when she is upset about anything, such as me changing the schedule. She also cannot come to my door and waits for me to wave her into the office every time. Despite my encouragement, she feels she does not deserve to go to my office door unless I invite her.

An example of a less apparent defensive style

A male client presents with a deep need to please others. His body exhibits a primarily rigid character structure with some orality. His body shows a split between his heart and pelvis, a tense back, and a somewhat collapsed chest. We learned that his mother firmly expected him to please her and be present for her emotional needs. His father was emotionally distant in his childhood and largely stayed in the background behind his mother's more substantial presence.

This client's defensive style is to please others. He learned to suppress his own needs, desires, feelings, expression, and sexuality in order to be what others wanted him to be. This pattern shows up repeatedly in the issues he brings to therapy. His need to please others arises in interactions as simple as asking to go to the bathroom before the session. I have helped him become aware of his behavior by teasing him about asking which allows him to pause and, instead, stand up for himself.

As the therapist, I have to be careful not to put my expectations or needs on him. Instead, I identify my role as repeatedly leading him back to what he feels, what he wants, and helping him own his sexuality.

"Bioenergetic prayers"

In closing, I thank Len Carlino for the vital message he gave us at the workshop with the trainees in April 2022 to say our "bioenergetic prayers." He reminded

us that bioenergetics does not offer us a way out of our defensive style, character structure, or the pain we each suffered in our childhood. Instead, bioenergetic work provides a path to embrace being fully alive.

Len expressed this in the following statements:

“Since our character defenses and muscular armoring are never fully dissolved in therapy, we must learn to work with ourselves for the rest of our lives, after formal therapy has terminated [...] we need to kick in order to reclaim our fear of grounded aggression and we need to cry over the stool to reclaim our sadness and to heal our broken hearts. Whatever feelings that are unique to our character defenses, need to be revisited [...] This is not an easy prescription for life. All the reality we need for life lies within us, but it takes a lifetime of hard work to re-claim the unconscious and to re-claim the full self” (Carlino, 2022, pp. 4–5).

This path necessarily includes regularly facing and feeling the depth of our vulnerability, pain, suffering, and loss, which lay beneath our learned defenses. It includes tolerating the harsh and sometimes cruel realities of life. In addition, understanding the defensive style and character structure of ourselves and our clients does not mean we overcome them. Instead, we can greet these adaptations with recognition, love, and acceptance as they manifest repeatedly and regularly. Through this, we have the capacity also to experience the full-bodied joy of life.

Conclusion

Understanding a client’s defensive style provides a valuable addition to the tools used by bioenergetic therapists. Initially, it can guide the work, including offering important information about what will likely emerge in the change process. Finally, it can provide clues to the therapist about transference and countertransference.

Body-based tools, including the bow and the ECP/ERP, described by Vincentia Schroeter and Barbara Thomson, offer practical ways of learning about a person’s defensive style. Using these tools, bioenergetic therapists can help clients move through their resistance more effectively.

Len Carlino (2022) states: “Working with a patient’s defensive style is related to a larger issue of character analysis which is one of Wilhelm Reich’s major contributions to the field of psychotherapy. It also forms the basis for making accurate bioenergetic therapeutic interventions. The better the therapist’s skill with

character analysis, the better they will be at identifying a patient's defensive style and vice versa. Alexander Lowen said that doing skilled character analysis (and by extension, identifying a patient's defensive style) is the most difficult task for a therapist to master. It requires a lot of therapeutic experience as well personal life experiences.”

As Len reminds us, this work takes a lifetime!

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