

Body-Mind Psychotherapy : Principles, Techniques & Practical Applications: by Susan Aposhyan

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With the publication of [this book] Susan Aposhyan moves the field of body psychotherapy into the 21st century. De-emphasizing emotional release and touch, Aposhyan succeeds in her goal of weaving a somatic base into the fabric of general psychotherapy. This beautifully written and highly readable volume offers much that even the most body-skeptical psychotherapist will find appealing and useful. Social workers, marriage and family therapists, counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists will all find useful tools in these pages. It is a must for all who endeavor to integrate body and mind and, in so doing, maximize the benefits of psychotherapy.

(Babette Rothschild, from cover)

A truly remarkable book! In [this book] Susan has beautifully woven, in intricate patterns, the history and current research in psychophysiology. Based on her own in-depth awareness and compassionate understanding of the process of embodied presence. Susan has shown readers a dynamic and illuminating path leading toward profound emotional healing. This book definitely qualifies as a standard text for the field of body-oriented psychotherapy.

(Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, from cover)

A review by Courtenay Young

Whilst this book is primarily about Body-Mind Psychotherapy (BMP), which is what Aposhyan calls her particular method of Body-Oriented Psychotherapy, and this is based – in part – on the work of Bainbridge Cohen’s Body-Mind Centering (BMC) and – in part – on Aposhyan’s own Buddhist practice, she combines these influences with a deep knowledge and an excellent awareness of the field of psychotherapy, psychophysiology, and of somatic psychology. Like most modern Body Psychotherapists or Somatic Psychologists, Aposhyan sees the body and mind, the soma and psyche, as functionally inseparable. With the predominance of the false division of the two in our Western culture, and one that has dominated the mental health profession as well, is dealt with as a major theme throughout the first part of the book.

In the first chapter, the development and diversification of psychotherapy is outlined. The history, the principle theories, and some of the branches of Somatic Psychology are also well described, but the book starts to come into its own as Aposhyan leads us gently into her particular specialities of body-mind integration dealt with in her first excellent book: *Natural Intelligence*.¹

However it is also here that I find my first minor criticism. Much of Aposhyan’s work is based, as already mentioned, on BMC, though she takes the movement re-education and re-patterning of BMC much further and develops it into the professional realms of Somatic Psychology. There is a slight feeling of a gifted teacher-disciple relationship here between Bainbridge Cohen and Aposhyan, and a mention of the “mission” of BMC detracts a little from the otherwise excellent development and distinction between a body-movement therapy and a body-mind psychotherapy.

The practicalities of the second chapter, where some of the psychophysiology of the body-mind integration is examined, reassure the reader and this is where Aposhyan and this approach has great strength. The wealth of understanding, even down to the body’s functioning on the cellular level, is apparent and the concepts and development of the body’s intelligence (cellular, vascular and neurological) are very well explained. I long for more of this sort of material and my own book on

¹ Aposhyan S. (1999) *Natural Intelligence: Body-Mind Integration and Human Development*. Baltimore, MD: Williams & Wilkins.

psychobiology², hopefully to be published soon, has been enriched by many of Aposhyan's insights. The section on the development of the emotions is less well progressed, but there are good mentions of the functioning of the amygdala, Porges' 'Polyvagal' theory, and Schore's theory of interactive psycho-biological reaction. This is fairly cutting-edge stuff in the field of Somatic Psychology, where we are integrating long-held, effective and much loved theories and techniques with more recent mainstream scientific developments in psycho-neuro-physiology, affect regulation and human development theory.

Chapter 3, which concludes the first theoretical section, focuses on the basic principles of BMP: 'embodiment' by which is meant a reconnection with our bodies, the natural world. Topics dealt with here are: 'being in the present' through meditation or mindfulness; an 'acceptance' of reality, and a movement towards a state of non-aggression and compassion; a greater understanding of and trust in our own benign life energy; a slightly confusing and brief section on condition versus choice; a section of development which is dealt with more fully elsewhere; and a much better relationship with one's self, which synthesises all the above principles. These theories are nicely mixed in with the physiological, the emotional, the relational and the spiritual aspects of our personalities in a way that might sound confusing, but isn't.

The second section of another three chapters describes the tasks, the format, and the basic 'practice' of BMP. In the several case vignettes used, standard psychotherapeutic approaches are interwoven with deeper body-mind awareness. However that which might be seen normally as a neurosis to be eradicated or overcome, here is seen more as a developmental deficit that the client is now gently encouraged to find ways to fill, cognitively, emotionally and somatically. Trauma and dissociation are looked at, with the now more common warnings and contraindications against the 'normal' use of cathartic reaction in therapy, due to the better understanding that this can often be re-traumatizing. Instead a gentler approach is advocated, where the person is encouraged to stay constantly present, with a healing intention, and levels of intensity are negotiated to avoid 'neurological overwhelm'. Essentially the processing of the trauma is done within the person's somatic 'comfort zone', though this phrase comes from Pat Ogden and Bessel van der Kolk's hakomi-based work on trauma, which has influenced Aposhyan.

One of the things that I missed generally was a slightly more specific acknowledgement of the body's own self-regulatory and healing processes: Aposhyan focuses slightly too much on supporting continued development, yet this view has a flavour of the "conceit of hindsight" or a therapeutic overview: most people's experience is of present day, immediate struggle. Much is ascribed (rightly) to the very benign therapeutic interactions, but so much more happens naturally all the time from within and without any assistance or intervention when this is encouraged through the perspective of empowerment. There is thus a deep professional issue: how can the therapist more clearly and efficiently connect with and amplify this internal force and power?

The cycle of interaction and what happens within a BMP session is broken down into 4 phases: embodiment, desire, awareness & feed-back, and process. The process and need for the therapist's own embodiment is nicely described, followed by the client's embodiment. Once this is established, the client's desires can be properly attended to, supported, clarified and amplified. This is described as "fleshing out the desire". In the awareness and feed-back stage, the client's awareness of their body is amplified and the finer points of reaction to their desires and a hierarchy of feed-back is offered.

Interestingly, traditional interpretation as a question is last in this list. A couple of exercises and a case example 'ground' the theory in the last part of this description of supporting the client's process. The 'endpoints' of the body are paid attention to, which is fairly rare, and developmental edges are considered. I would have liked a little more emphasis on integration, whether in the last phase, or as another separate 5th phase, but the point was well made with three good and varied

² Young C., Seckler L., & Battermann A. *Under the Skin: A Handbook of Psychophysiology for Body Psychotherapists and Body Workers*. (unpublished)

examples, as well as that these interactive cycles often need to be repeated in different ways. The last chapter in this 2nd section, “Cultivating Body Awareness” starts off nicely with an adaptation of a quote that: all experiences are physical, all problems psychological, and all solutions spiritual. This is developed by focussing initially on the body’s role in thinking, feeling and doing, in insight, relationship and experience. The further development of body awareness involves paying attention to internal dynamics such as listening, expression, movement, centering, grounding and then developing these into an internalised embodiment practice.

BMP practice is deepened in the third section of this book by a more intricate look at the various systems within the body: the body is often described as having a nervous system, a muscular system, a skeletal system, a visceral system, various fluid systems, and hormonal and endocrine systems, etc. However these all interplay with, and augment, each other and thus a study of static anatomical differentiations is almost as useless in understanding how a body works integrally and dynamically, as studying the different systems of a motor bike (electrical, power unit, suspension, brakes, etc.) informs you how actually to ride it and the experience of so doing (my analogy after Pirsig³, rather than hers). She touches on various of the client’s bodily systems, using attention, hypotheses, and the resonance of the therapist’s own body, whilst realising that these are all partial aspects of a larger, whole or holistic, bodymind.

Again, my own interest in physiology perks up and wants more, as there is so much potential richness here, but this book has natural introductory limitations and these are generally well-kept to, whetting the reader’s appetite for more. The concept of the body’s ‘hard-wired’ neurological nervous system is expanded (appropriately) to include the recently discovered, chemically based, neuropeptide system of emotional messengers (Pert⁴), as well as the expected inclusion of the autonomic nervous system of arousal and relaxation.

A little bit of “interactive psychobiological regulation” satisfies some of the earlier criticism about a lack of emphasis on self-regulation, but this topic still treated from the perspective that it is initially dependent on the therapist’s presence. But there may be some sort of a trans-cultural critical element working here, with my personal European (Yank-ophobic) reaction to the current predominance of “managed care” in the health systems in the America.

In the last chapter in this section, Aposhyan looks at some of the less avowed systems and processes within the body and demonstrates the breadth and depth of her therapeutic work. The skin (often using self-touch), fluids, fat, the viscera and the endocrine system are all woven in to the BMP awareness and practice with some very nice and somewhat radical case-examples. If you thought you knew what body-psychotherapy was, you may need to think again, after this chapter.

In the 4th and final part: “Anchoring Change in the Body” that starts with a chapter on ‘Energetic Development’, Aposhyan reverts a little again to the work of Bainbridge Cohen. She examines how human motor development is related to animal & reptile evolution and she traces the basic human neurological actions, well illustrated with two substantial case histories, however I felt that this chapter was slightly incomplete and it did not seem to go anywhere. It is important, but perhaps this is in the wrong place, or the chapter’s topic is not dealt with as well as it might have been: I experienced a very slight anti-climax here. However, the next chapter “The Possibility of Transformation: Accessing Cellular Change” was much more significant, and the last chapter: ‘Specific Clinical Issues’ is also good, even though it starts with a recounting of some of the BMP principles, it progresses into dealing with birth and death issues, with early development, intimacy and sexuality, and trauma. I missed possibly a little more depth when relating to chronic illness – something that we are seeing more and more in our work, and which body psychotherapy often has a very good perspective on. However, this is an introductory book and maybe I am just being greedy.

Aposhyan draws on a wide variety of sources: Bainbridge Cohen, Demasio, Keleman, Levine, Lowen, the Mindells, Ogden, Panksepp, van der Kolk, and others. The case vignettes are

³ Pirsig, R.M. (1974) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. London, Collins

⁴ Pert, C. (1997) *Molecules of Emotion*. New York, Schribner

well-chosen and generally deal with a wide range of issues that any psychotherapist can easily relate to. There is a good glossary and index, and masses and masses of references that delight a bibliographer like myself. All in all this is an excellent book, and one that I can heartily recommend.