

Addressing Sexuality in Bioenergetic Therapy



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Embodied sexuality can provide some of the best of what life has to offer including feelings of pleasure, connection and satisfaction. For many people, however, sexuality has led to some of life's worst experiences—violations, broken connections, and traumas that lead to feelings of shame and guilt. Sexual issues may underlie many mental health issues including depression, anxiety and PTSD. Culturally, we have confused sexuality with how our bodies look rather than how we feel. Helping people restore healthy sexuality, defined as a specific state of vitality in the body, is a central focus of Bioenergetic Therapy. From my many years of therapeutic work with clients I believe that healthy, embodied sexuality, including an orientation towards pleasure, vitality and joy is worth aiming for.

Historical Overview

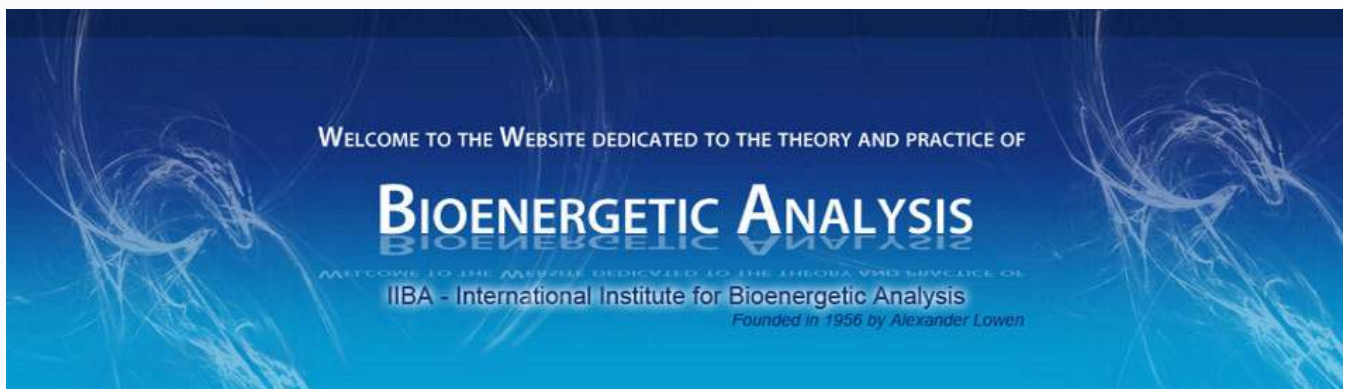
Sexuality has been a primary focus in Bioenergetic Therapy from the beginning. Wilhelm Reich, a contemporary of Freud and the grandfather of modern somatic therapies, believed that orgasmic potency — the ability of a person to build energetic charge and release it in orgasm— is central to the mental health of a person. He observed that his patients, both male and female, consistently did not experience genital satisfaction, including orgasm and states: “Those who are psychically ill need but one thing—complete and repeated genital gratification” (Reich, 1973). He describes orgasm as being a whole body experience, not simply ejaculation, and as serving the function of releasing excess energy of the organism, therefore leaving no energy available for neurotic process.

Alexander Lowen highlighted the importance of sexuality in his development of Bioenergetic Analysis in the 1950s; he added self-expression as a focus of his work. He learned from his own experience in therapy with Reich and from his experience with his patients that, while genital satisfaction and orgasmic potency are important ideals, they are not the only goals of Bioenergetic Therapy. Lowen thus shifted the focus from orgasmic potency to ego function and self-expression. In his 1983 article titled “*Sexuality: From Reich to the Present,*” he states: “The ability to fully express one’s self is the goal of bioenergetic analysis” (pp.3-8). He further states that while orgasmic potency is important in Bioenergetic Analysis, the development of

sexuality from a person’s childhood experience is the focus. “The character structure and the themes of self-expression and self-possession are still my main focus, not orgasmic potency. The focus, therefore, is on sexual issues, not sexual potency” (Lowen, 1993, pp.3-8).

Other Bioenergetic therapists have further refined this focus. Miki Frank, a student of Lowen’s states that orgasmic potency is not a reachable goal for all men or women, as Reich makes it appear. She notes that while she has experienced orgasmic potency at times in her life, orgasmic potency is not a permanent condition. She shifts the emphasis of therapy to a goal of wholeness and personal growth, with orgasmic potency as a bonus along the journey (Frank, 1993).

In his book, *Sex and Self-Respect: The Quest for Personal Fulfillment,* Philip Helfaer (2007) contributes the idea that self-respect is central to personal fulfillment alongside sexuality. He states that sexuality and self-respect are interdependent within a healthy person. Therapy, therefore, involves helping the individual develop both healthy sexual expression and a deep sense of self-respect, rooted in body experience. He states: “In each individual’s very personal experience of their own sexuality, nothing is more important than to come to terms with the reality of the tension, ambiguity, ambivalence, guilt, and shame that so commonly infuses sexuality. This is done by freeing the body, learning and developing self-respect and a recognition of the body as self” (Helfaer, 1998).



Defining Sexuality

A valuable part in clarifying the role of sexuality in Bioenergetic Therapy is to define what we mean by sexuality and to distinguish two primary aspects of sexuality. There is the sexuality of a person, referring to state of aliveness in a person, and according to the dictionary definition: "an organism's preparedness for engaging in sexual activity" (retrieved from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sexuality>). The second aspect of sexuality is the act of sex, whether it is with one's self or with a partner, and relates to one's gender and one's sexual orientation. This is a big topic in and of itself, and for purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the sexuality of the individual.

Preparedness for engaging in sexual activity implies having the energy for sexual activity along with interest and desire. From a Bioenergetic perspective, sexuality is also defined as an energetic charge flowing through the body, rooted in the pelvis and genitals. This energy is naturally pleasurable, is heightened in passion and builds to energetic climax in orgasm. Sexual feelings develop naturally in the body, but most of us learn to cut off from our sexual excitement and energy in childhood through chronic muscle tensions, in reaction to negative responses from the environment. These responses can include physical violations as well as disapproval and negative messages. For example, when children are shamed for masturbating they learn that their desire for pleasure is bad and shut down these feelings in their body. Restoring healthy sexuality includes understanding what happened in our childhood experience to cut us off from our innate embodied sexuality, as well as working through the negative messages and tensions in the body.

Because we are describing sexuality as a whole body experience, including but not limited to genital response, Bioenergetically, we work with the whole body. We hold as a

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goal being solidly grounded in the feet and legs, with the belly soft from emotions expressed freely and appropriately, the pelvis relatively free of tension, ideally a heart open to love and being loved, eyes capable of making warm contact, arms ready to reach out for connection as well as to make a boundary when necessary, and a head relatively free of regrets from the past and worries about the future. People who are able to embody their sexuality in a healthy way are capable of being grounded, relaxed and open. They are generally relatively free of shame and guilt, with accompanying comfort with self-expression and living from a position of self-respect. Embodied sexuality includes having energy for sexual expression, with sufficient strength to build charge and being free enough of tensions to enjoy the pleasure of release.

Sexuality in an ideal way also involves an inner balance of the counter energetic forces, which can be described as assertive and receptive. These relate to different energies—attributes within the individual—available as needed. These attributes are found in both men and women. Assertive energy has a quality of being directed outward and can be fierce and protective when needed. In the act of procreation it correlates with the thrusting forward of the penis into the vagina propelling the sperm forward to swim hard in their mission to impregnate an egg. Receptive energy is tender, soft, and open to receive. This correlates with the warmth and wetness of the vagina—the body opening, inviting the sperm into the egg. Both energies are necessary for a person to be optimally sexual. Too much assertive energy, without internal receptive balance, creates a person capable of dominating others. Too much receptive energy without assertion leads to a passive person who is unable to protect themselves or their loved ones (Shapiro, 1993).

The metaphor of a flowering plant describes this embodied sexuality with a balancing of energies. Flowers can be viewed



as the expressions of sexuality of a plant. A plant can be alive and vital without producing flowers. Plants require certain conditions to create flowers. They require the base of a stem with leaves and roots in order to send up shoots that become flowers. The stem of the plant pushes through the soil reaching for water and nutrients, the leaves reach to the sun to receive light. Buds need warmth and light to open into flowers. Their beauty and color attract bees and butterflies to pollinate them. Embodied sexuality can be precursor for beauty, deep connection and sometimes reproduction.

Sexuality can link us to joy, to pleasure and to our vitality. I think Reich did not go far enough in his statements about the function of orgasm as physical release. Orgasm connects us to pleasure, in ourselves, sometimes to another person, and at its best, to the cosmos.

Orgasm requires presence in the moment, in one's body, and is about feeling expansive, even ecstatic. We are learning that orgasm causes the release of dopamine and oxytocin (Magon & Kalra, 2011) in the brain and stimulates our desire for

attachment. These are important elements of feeling loved and maintaining satisfying relationships. Orgasm happens as a surrender, within ourselves, to pleasure. Sexuality and orgasm are good for our bodies, our relationships and for our connection to the fundamental joy of being alive, whether experienced alone, or with a partner, whether we are male or female, and regardless of our sexual orientation.

Working with Sexuality in Bioenergetic Therapy

In my practice, I observe that few clients explicitly state sexuality as a presenting problem—they seek help for a variety of other issues and have varying degrees of pain. They seek relief and support to grow and ultimately to have more joy and pleasure in their lives. While they may not identify sexuality as a problem, I believe that it underlies common complaints and mental disorders. Helping clients increase their vitality and sexual aliveness, and encouraging orgasmic potency, gives clients the possibility of diminished pain—something worth living for! Toward this end, Bioenergetic therapists create a pathway, a series of steps for clients. This spiral of physical and emotional needs forms the path towards sexual vitality. It is not a linear process progressing from one step to the next, but rather a spiraling among these steps.

This spiral starts with safety. People need to develop a sense of safety with the therapist, in the world and in themselves. This includes safety from intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, anxieties and fears possibly based in the present but often stemming from past traumatic experiences. Grounding exercises with the feet and legs encourage a sense of

safety. Furthermore, people need to be able to have connection on their own terms. This involves setting boundaries clearly and strongly, and being able to reach out for connection on their own terms.

Another step in the spiral, is feeling the full range of emotions and expressing them appropriately, including anger, sadness and joy. Bioenergetic work includes exercises for opening one's emotions and expressing them physically. For example, laying over the stool or the ball to open the breathing and soft emotions, and hitting with the racket or kicking to express anger, protest and build strength. Self-respect and self-acceptance are critically important in the spiral of sexual vitality. We incorporate this focus in the therapeutic work through specific exercises for releasing guilt, shame and negative self-talk. Self-expression is another important step. This includes being able to express oneself with the courage to be different, as necessary, and to honor one's truth. Bioenergetic Therapy has an orientation toward pleasure and joy. In addition, we invite a focus on self-acceptance and self-respect related to gender, sexual orientation and relational preferences.





When a person is solid enough in the above areas, we can also work on their sexual issues directly. Understanding the response in their childhood environment to their natural sexuality is an important step in the process. Further, Bioenergetic Therapists use specific exercises for opening sexuality (i.e., bouncing the pelvis or a backwards arch) developed by Alexander Lowen (1977). We also incorporate bouncing the pelvis on the ball either by sitting on the ball or laying backwards over it. The ball is excellent for bouncing the pelvis as this opens the tensions in the pelvic area and helps to release the psoas muscle, which can become constricted in response to trauma (Berceli, 2006). This is particularly effective when combined with self-expressive statements about sexuality designed in the moment for the person and his/her situation. For example, statements such as "I have a right to feel good," or "it's my pleasure," or simply stating "no" or "yes" are effective. Combining releasing tensions in the body with positive statements counteracting past negative beliefs about their sexuality helps people to begin to reclaim their natural sexual feelings. We focus on helping people have sufficient energy in their body to tolerate building charge and desire, and sufficient

softness to surrender to vulnerability, in order to have the capacity for orgasm. This requires both physical and mental work to free the person from physical tensions and from mental constraints about experiencing sexuality, love, desire and pleasure.

Closing Summary

Almost everyone in our culture has some history of repression, shame, guilt, and negative feelings about themselves, often especially about their sexuality. Working with sexuality, both as part of one's own vitality and choosing how one wishes to express it, is key to restoring an orientation toward joy and pleasure in life. As body oriented therapists we have excellent tools for helping people free both mind and body, and enjoy their sexuality as a vital part of their aliveness. The work can be challenging and takes time; fortunately, we have the balls for it!

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workshops locally and internationally. She has a full time private practice in a lovely cottage in Gloucester, MA, surrounded by her gardens. She works primarily with adults. She has had the good fortune of being involved with Bioenergetics since 1987, when she was looking for a body oriented therapist and a path in life. She has taught at Salem State University.

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