



Therapeutic Insights into Infant Massage

By Shlomit Eliashar

An unfaithful womb

Like many parents, I fantasied about the mother I hoped to be. Unfortunately, as a young mother, I experienced the birth of a pre-term baby. The birthing process itself and the subsequent moments following are significant and prepare us to connect with the baby, but in the case of premature birth nothing is known, or expected. Nothing could prepare my daughter and me for the cognitive dissonance we experienced at her birth. I called my uterus the ‘unfaithful uterus’ that betrayed not only her, but also me. A plastic box and a medical team that undoubtedly saved her life were her external uterus.

I was forbidden for weeks to hold my daughter. The only touch my daughter experienced during her first two months of life, besides cold, unpleasant, and at times painful medical handling was when we laid two heavy palms on her back through the incubator's holes. In fact, these small holes only enabled me to complete a few small roles. Not knowing if I should prepare myself for separation from her or surrender to falling in love with her deeper and deeper every day, my heart longed for my baby daughter.





A month after her birth, I was allowed to hold her for ten minutes. In those brief moments, we became one entity. I smelled her, felt her breath on my hands, and heard the little sounds she made. We barely began to attune with one another when the medical staff tore her from my arms to return her to the beeping box with the slippery mattress. They thought it was safer there than in my arms. This confused my maternal instinct, which pushed me to hold and protect my vulnerable baby daughter without being able to do so. Though I understood the logic of this, I developed a deep sense of guilt that I felt for many years.

Stern, Brusweiler-Stern, and Freeland (1998) write that "of all obstacles that you encounter as a young mother, the understanding that your child is not perfectly healthy might be the most shocking." They also note, "you are losing not only your ideal baby, but also, and more importantly, your freedom to predict the future of your baby and your family . . . This is a trauma that usually stops the time in orbit . . . At that moment, your past, full of hopes and fantasies of pregnancy, are deleted and becomes too painful to recall it" (pp. 166-167). Today, it is more acceptable to allow

the mother to hold her premature baby via direct contact with her abdomen in a position called 'kangaroo'. It was discovered that skin-to-skin contact significantly increased the weight of the new-born and his chances of survival (Field, Diego, and Hernandez-Reif, 2010). But what about the emotional benefits of such touch for premature babies in their adult life? I wonder how much thought there is about this in the scientific community.

Healing touch, attunement, and regulation

Preterm birth is a different, unusual, and extreme story, but even alternative birthing processes such as a water birth affects the infant. The baby completes his formation process in the first three months after birth, a period called the fourth trimester. "In order to survive this extreme transition it requires a container- an embodied wider mind, which could regulate and contain it" (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, pp 82- 83), an outer uterus where he receives food and is wrapped in touch and love, which will create a sense of familiar, comforting continuation. As Leboyer (noted as the father of water birth), writes in his book, "Loving Hands" (1977) :

“Inside, the terrible ‘gnawing thing’ and remedy, the satisfaction . . . somewhere . . . outside. Inside and outside. Space is born. Inside, outside: two. That come together. Yes. But often so clumsily. Two . . . Forever. Oneness is lost” (p.13).

Following my daughter's discharge from the hospital and during her first year of life, a sense of happiness accompanied me, coupled with anxiety that she would stop breathing. Although I nestled her in my arms for hours each day and followed her developmental and medical progress, I didn't know about infant massage

and its importance in the mother-infant attachment relationship as well as the infant's health (benefits cited include relaxation, better sleep patterns, aids digesting and waste elimination, balanced respiration and more) (retrieved from <http://www.infantmassageusa.org/learn-to-massage-your-baby/benefits-of-infant-massage/>). Massaging the baby creates the opportunity for somatic memories of safety, contact, and love to be embedded in the baby's body and in his soul. If we offer the baby skin-to-skin touch, soul-to-soul, our hearts will touch each other and touch will become a means to a profound meeting that is beyond words, similar to the intrauterine conditions.

I experienced this healing touch as an adult client, and it inspired me to become a biodynamic psychotherapist. Working with clients, I feel and hear the children they have all been. I feel and hear their longing for an attuned parental presence and a touch that also touches the soul. Is it unavoidable to become adults carrying painful wounds stemming from a lack of such parental presence? What if the parent is made aware of the importance of attuned touch at the right time?

From these wonderings, I also qualified as an infant massage teacher where I was introduced to one technique that was considered rewarding for the baby and his mother. The basic protocol I learned required the mother to make eye contact with her baby, who is lying at floor level, to stroke his whole body while fully clothed and to ask his permission with attention to his non-verbal cues, before undressing and massaging him. Oil is used and songs are sung to engage him. The baby's strong resistance is a contraindication.

The protocol emphasized gentle and respectful attitudes toward the baby and taught topics related to

feeding, sleeping, comforting, and important issues related to touch. While comprehensive in its approach, I think the training needed to offer a more attachment-based and emotion-driven learning process with emphasis on psycho-education.

Motherhood can be bliss, but there can also be elements of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and longing for other adults' company. I noticed that mothers enrolled in the infant massage course had unmet needs of their own, many stemming from their own infancy. During the training, mothers socialized with one another while massaging their infants. The essential element, awareness and attunement to the child, was missed. The process did not stress this enough.



Biodynamic Vaso-Motoric Emotional Cycle

Reinforcement for this idea can be found in the Emotional Cycle theory of Gerda Boyesen, who described every emotional event in a cycle consisting of three inseparable elements or levels happening simultaneously: the vegetative (involuntary system), the muscular (voluntary), and the psychological. When a stimulus occurs it creates an emotional charge in the sympathetic nervous system. Boyesen called the charge the upward phase of the cycle and red energy. This energy is produced in the stomach - the bottom end of the emotional canal - and surges up toward to the other end of it - the head. It is seeking expression through action or voice. As soon as this expression meets an empathetic object this emotional event can descend into the downward phase in the cycle and down-regulate through the parasympathetic nervous system toward digestion and homeostasis in the three levels of the emotional cycle simultaneously. Boyesen called it 'blue energy'.

Only when one feels safe and contained are they able to reach a state of equilibrium as should have been before the emotional event. Many of us find it difficult to complete the emotional cycle through all its levels, which results in emotional difficulties and physiological symptoms (Southwell, 1988).

Biodynamic massage is a great way to teach the body directly to obtain regulation in all of these levels; it helps eliminate waste materials resulting from stress and getting stuck in connective tissue, leading to a feeling of relaxation and well-being. With hearing and seeing compassionate touch we encounter the emotion or stress on the body and mind, and invite the recipient to let go without imposing anything on them. Messages not being received in the cognitive system may now be absorbed non-verbally or unconsciously and can create an opportunity for a different kind of dialogue.

I believe that considerable time and space should be devoted in meeting the mother's needs and teaching her self-regulation as well as dyadic regulation skills, which are essential elements in holding infants. Just as body psychotherapists are aiming to be completely attuned to their clients during a session, I think mothers who are attuned to their babies create positive experiences that will be imprinted into the consciousness of both the child and his mother.

Biodynamic psychotherapist Alice Jacobus (1995) describes the stages of child development by flow of libido (the creative component of the life energy and not necessarily sex drive) of different ages in her paper, "Phases of Libido Circulation Development". At each stage the life energy is more strongly present in a specific area of the body: beginning with intra-uterus, then moving on to ocular, oral, anal etc. as well as more spiritual phases of development. At each stage a different developmental task needs to be completed. When the task is not successfully completed as a result of the child not being properly contained, the flow of libido is weakened and impairs further stages of development. His physical and mental health is damaged.

According to these stages of development, in the weeks immediately after birth—the ocular phase—the life energy is concentrated around the eyes. The baby expects to receive loving eye contact from his mother, to feel accepted and loved by her. He is unaware that she is a separate person; they are one. The developmental task is to survive and to feel worthy of being.



In tandem and soon after, until about 18 months, the oral phase occurs. The baby who was grounded by the umbilical cord and contained by the walls of the uterus loses its ability to ground. The energy is concentrated around the mouth but also begins to establish itself around the anus for the next developmental stage. It moves between these two poles. The mother mediates between Earth and baby; she is the grounding and the regulating figure in his life through her presence and contact. Her attuned touch during feeding and playing helps these two poles to unite (Jacobus, 1995).

The infant grounds himself through the love of the one who gives him love through touch and holding (Boyesen, 1981). At this stage, he needs to feel supported, loved, and protected. Attuned touch plays a significant and vital role in a baby's life helping him gain resources for more optimal development and self-regulation. Jacobus (1995) writes, "The psychological and emotional qualities that the person gains from a satisfactorily oral development phase are optimism and trust" (p. 18).

During a massage, a large amount of oxytocin is released in the baby and his mother to enhance their attachment process. And, when the massage is given from a place of attunement, it can help the baby feel safe and calm at a time when touch is its main means of communication. Through daily massage, the attuned mother gets to know her baby and responds to it with greater speed and accuracy, which increases her confidence in her role.

"One should never forget how the baby's back had so much fun in the womb . . . This is why we must caress, we must rock babies. And, even better, massage their bodies that are so empty, so hungry 'outside'. Feeding babies with touches, giving food to their skins and their backs, is just as important as filling their stomachs. It makes *outside* happy. *Inside* and *outside* satisfied . . . No more two. Oneness again. And peace." (Leboyer, 1977, pp. 14-15)

During biodynamic massage, I touch the whole person—his experience of body, soul, energy and even history. I touch everything that makes up this marvellous entity called a person.

Leboyer writes about the thirst and hunger of the baby's body-mind and the embodied presence of his mother; his writings mirror the presence body psychotherapists hope to have at any session with every client. I would further say that body psychotherapists strive to be people with such presence in all areas of their lives as they bring this embodied presence to their personal life and any therapeutic setting. Therefore, to me, it seems important to emphasize the importance of an attuned, sensitive, and unconditionally loving presence when teaching infant massage.

In the biodynamic theory, there is a strong emphasis on respecting defences, on working with, as opposed to on the client, taking into consideration his wishes and mood. Identifying non-verbal cues is an important skill for body psychotherapists because it helps us feel the clients' moods, which resonate in our body. In a sense, there is not a big difference between an adult and a baby. Many clients refrain from expressing dissatisfaction with the way they have been touched either physically by their therapist if touch is part of the treatment protocol or via the therapeutic presence. They may even offer dishonest, flattering comments to the therapist for various reasons including fear of losing the relationship with the therapist. At the same time, they send non-verbal signals, sometimes hidden even from themselves. These signals may tell the truth about their feelings.

When working with infant massage, I want to teach mothers how to tune into themselves as well as their infants and how to track their infants' pleasure and connection and their distress and disconnect, and if necessary to stop the massage and hold the baby to contain him unconditionally, until he feels safe and calm.

As with adults, babies vary from one another; therefore, it is likely that each one might need a particular touch of certain intention to suit them. I have also learned from some mothers that they felt uncomfortable and intrusive touching their babies according to the infant massage protocol and would have preferred other forms of touch to suit them. Therefore, the idea of a single massage sequence offered in the infant massage course to all babies and mothers is puzzling to me. Biodynamic

massage offers various forms of touch, does not use oil thus can be done also over light clothing,

As a body psychotherapist, I apply my understanding of biodynamic psychotherapy within the infant massage protocol. My work with infants and their mothers promotes a sensitive approach that accepts unconditionally the difference between one person and another; I adjust my treatment accordingly.

During biodynamic massage, I touch the whole person—his experience of body, soul, energy and even history. I touch everything that makes up this marvellous entity called a person. I believe that biodynamic massage supports not only situations of stress and illness but also gives space for and promotes feelings of pleasure and joy of being alive and connected, as well as acceptance of our body with all its limitations and imperfections. I teach parents how to help their baby in his complex but basic, natural, and straightforward task to feel safe, wanted, and loved in the world, and allow him a space in which to connect with the joy and delight within.

Additional, Unexpected Therapeutic Spaces: A Case Study

Sarah is an orthodox, modern Jew, a busy and successful career woman, married with five children, including a three-month-old baby. A month ago, while crossing the road, a car hit her and her baby-buggy with great power that left her unconscious and with broken legs. Miraculously, the baby was unharmed; her eight-year-old daughter, who walked behind, survived and witnessed the whole ordeal.

Sarah, who was discharged from a lengthy hospitalization, was on sick leave at home for an indefinite amount of time. An au pair cared for the smiley, joyous baby and obviously loved her very much. I arrived at Sarah's house to teach her infant massage for four weekly sessions of two hours. Because she was confined to a wheelchair and in a cast, the massage took place on a table in the dining room and not at floor level as usual.

She asked for the au pair to not be present during the lessons, sharing feelings that the au pair was taking over the care of the baby and not leaving her a space in which to function as a mother. She refrained from confronting her because she understood that the au pair acted in kindness, but it was obvious to me that she longed for things to return to normal. We created an alliance. Sarah found a role that allowed her to set a schedule for a daily massage that became a period of time set for just the baby and her. She felt valuable, with parental authority and efficacy; she was able to reconnect with her infant daughter.

During another visit, she told me that her eight-year-old daughter clung to her and tried to massage her leg. Sarah resisted. She was strong and independent, impressive in her ability to deal with stress and crisis. It was important to her to be perceived as powerful enough to protect her family and receiving a massage from her daughter did not fit this image. I sensed that she felt disgust mixed with anxiety about being a patient of her daughter and dependent on her. Also, many orthodox Jews can have complex relationships with touch. The baby slept, and Sarah told me about a pain in her shoulders. I saw this as an invitation, and she was glad when I offered to massage her shoulders. A few minutes later she opened up even more and was able to be in contact with her need, small as it was, for support. Now she could connect to softer emotions, let go of some of the need to show it is business-as-usual and not be a hero for everyone.

We discussed the trauma her daughter experienced as a witness to such a dreadful accident. I wondered if watching her mother massage her baby sister she felt the suppressed need of her mother for care and reached out to her. Or perhaps she was asking her mother, non-verbally, to massage her, too? I raised the possibility that traces of this trauma were still there, and she felt compassion toward her daughter. She understood her daughter's need for contact. She has now opened up to the idea of co-regulating through touch and understands how touch and contact with her older daughter may heal their trauma.

Summary

Infant massage, from a biodynamic perspective, offers a means to create a deep and significant meeting, through which I can reach various, exciting, and unpredictable therapeutic spaces. Rewarding as it may be, the standard infant massage protocol does not distinguish between one baby and another and does not give enough space to process and psychologically educate the mother.

From my perspective, a biodynamic approach to infant massage emphasizes the idea of intention, attunement, regulation, and attachment, and it recognizes and supports well-being and developmental principles, and respects defenses. I believe there is a place to promote these important principles that will strengthen the relationship, connection, and understanding between parents and their baby. Such an approach gives me hope that children and their families will be able to acquire tools that will enable them a better and healthier new beginning.

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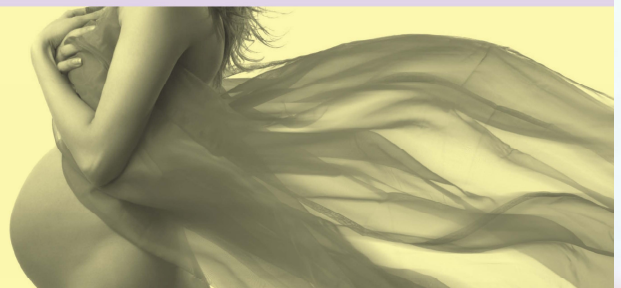
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