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The Body in Counselling

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An introduction to body-inclusive counselling for practitioners trained primarily in verbal approaches. Rather than arguing for the addition of body techniques to existing practice, this article makes the case for a shift in attention — towards the therapist's own bodymind aliveness and the non-verbal dimensions of the therapeutic encounter which are always already present.

KEY THEMES

— Why body awareness matters in any form of counselling

— The body as always already present in the room

— Somatic countertransference as clinical resource

— How to begin attending to bodily experience without new technique

— The costs of ignoring the somatic dimension

The Body is Already in the Room

In any counselling encounter, the body is already present — whether or not the counsellor has been trained to attend to it. The client's posture, breathing pattern, muscle tone, gestures and facial expressions are communicating information about their inner state which often has no verbal equivalent. The counsellor's own body — the subtle tightening of the chest, the sense of constriction in the throat, the drifting of attention — is equally communicative, both to the client's unconscious and as a potential source of clinical information.

The question is not whether to include the body, but whether to include it consciously. An unconscious relationship to the body in the counselling room is more problematic than a conscious one. When the counsellor ignores the somatic dimension, they are not achieving neutrality — they are making an implicit statement that the body does not matter, which is itself a significant relational act.

Somatic Countertransference

One of the most clinically significant ways in which the body enters the counselling room is through the counsellor's own somatic responses to the client. These responses — which I have called somatic countertransference — are not simply the counsellor's personal reactions but often carry precise information about the client's inner world.

When a counsellor notices a persistent heaviness in their shoulders that was not there before the session began, or finds their breathing becoming shallower in a particular moment, or experiences an inexplicable impulse to lean forward or pull back — these are not random events. They are the bodymind's way of registering what the verbal exchange may not yet have reached.

The skill lies not in acting on these somatic responses immediately, nor in suppressing or ignoring them, but in holding them in awareness — in gathering them as fragments of information which may eventually coalesce into understanding of what is happening in the relational field.

Beginning to Attend

For counsellors trained primarily in verbal approaches, beginning to attend to the somatic dimension does not require a new set of techniques. It requires a shift in attention — a willingness to include one's own bodily experience as part of the therapeutic process, and to notice the non-verbal communications which the client is

offering alongside, and sometimes instead of, their words.

The most important thing is to begin noticing: what is happening in your own body as you sit with this client, at this moment? Not as a distraction from listening, but as an additional channel of listening. The body often knows before the mind — and before the client — what is most alive and most unspoken in the room.

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