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Letter to Human Givens: On the Body in Psychotherapy

By Michael Soth

A letter responding to material published in the Human Givens journal, contesting the claim that body psychotherapy is simply a collection of techniques for working with nervous system regulation. Soth argues that the relational and intersubjective dimensions of embodied therapeutic work cannot be reduced to technique, and that the 80-year history of body psychotherapy offers lessons that the Human Givens approach has not yet assimilated.

KEY THEMES

— Response to Human Givens on body psychotherapy
— Why body psychotherapy is not just technique
— The relational dimension of embodied work
— Learning from 80 years of body psychotherapy history
— Against reductive applications of neuroscience

What Human Givens Gets Right

The Human Givens approach deserves credit for its attempt to bring neuroscientific insights into practical psychotherapy — specifically the recognition that the nervous system's capacity for self-regulation is central to psychological wellbeing, and that different therapeutic approaches engage this capacity in different ways.

This is a genuine advance beyond approaches that treat psychological problems as purely cognitive or purely relational, ignoring the bodily substrate in which both cognition and relationship are rooted. The Human Givens emphasis on practical tools for nervous system regulation — breathing techniques, relaxation approaches, mindfulness-based methods — reflects a real clinical need.

Where the approach runs into difficulty is in treating these tools as if they are the whole of what 'working with the body' means, and as if 80 years of body psychotherapy has nothing to teach about the limits and dangers of applying these tools without attention to the relational field in which they are used.

What the History of Body Psychotherapy Teaches

The body psychotherapy tradition began in the 1930s with exactly the kind of confident, technique-oriented approach that the Human Givens method represents: the therapist knows what healthy functioning looks like, diagnoses the client's deviation from it, and applies the appropriate body-oriented technique to restore it. Reich's vegetotherapy was a sophisticated version of this approach.

What the subsequent 80 years of body psychotherapy's development taught — sometimes painfully — is that this approach has fundamental limitations. Techniques which are applied without attention to the relational context in which they occur can reproduce the very dynamics they are intended to address: the objectifying relationship in which the therapist knows better than the client what the client's body needs.

A therapist's own lack of embodiment within the therapeutic position far outweighs in its effect any positive benefits which derive from the use of body-oriented techniques. The most important bodily instrument in the therapy room is not the client's nervous system but the therapist's own embodied aliveness and relational presence.

Technique and Relationship

This is not an argument against technique. Breathing exercises, EMDR, mindfulness practices, somatic awareness techniques — all of these can be genuinely helpful, and

there are clients and moments for whom they are exactly what is needed. The argument is about primacy and context.

Technique that is offered within a genuinely embodied relational presence — where the therapist is genuinely attuned to the client's bodymind state, genuinely responsive to what is happening in the relational field, genuinely willing to be affected by the client's reality — is a very different thing from technique applied by a technically proficient expert to a nervous system that needs regulating.

The Human Givens approach, if it is to do justice to the full complexity of what working with the body means, needs to engage with the relational tradition of body psychotherapy — not just its technique library. The most relevant question is not 'what techniques should I use?' but 'what kind of person am I being as I use them?'

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