

# TRANSLATING THE BODY'S LANGUAGE

By Pat Ogden and Anne Peters

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For two weeks since his father died, Tom had consulted massage therapists, doctors, and chiropractors, finding no relief from the shooting pain in his shoulder. When he came to see me, the pain was so severe he was unable to sleep. In working with him, I helped him become sensitive to the tension and impulses in his shoulder, and listen to the message his shoulder was giving him. He discovered that the pain in his shoulder related to the anger he felt at the doctors who had insensitively attended his father's death; he wanted to just hit them! He had been holding back this anger and frustration by tightening his shoulder. The pain immediately released once the meaning became clear and he was able to express the anger. I use an approach to bodywork and therapy that emphasizes working through the body to find the meaning of the pain. Tom is one example of the effectiveness of this method.

When accurately translated, the body's language is a source of wisdom and knowledge, and can be a means to transformation. On a cellular level, our bodies hold patterns of our experience: the contraction of limiting childhood imprints and the expansion of all that is possible for us. This knowing in the body is revealed constantly through gesture, posture, breath, and the multitude of automatic and unconscious way we express through our bodies. The wealth of unconscious knowledge will remain unconscious, however, until, like Tom, we learn to translate the language of the body, and thus discover greater choice and freedom. In this article I'd like to share

some techniques and attitudes which can increase your ability to translate the body's language.

As trained bodyworkers, we must first help our clients become sensitive to the impulses, tensions, movement patterns and sensations in the body before we can translate its language. To facilitate sensitivity I usually ask my clients to stand, and become mindful of the body before we move to the table. Patterns and tensions are more obvious, and more easily felt, when the body is vertical in the field of gravity, rather than when lying on the table. I encourage clients to mindfully turn their awareness inward, and notice what they experience in the body.

There are various questions and suggestions that facilitate clients' sensitivity and help them find words for the physical experience. Here are some examples I've found to be useful.

Feel your body and sense what's going on. Maybe some places are tight, some more relaxed.

If you feel tension, exactly how is the tension pulling: up, down, diagonally, back, etc?

What are the qualities of the tension: tight, dull, achy, congested, thick, sharp?

Listen to your body - turn your ear inward. What sounds do you hear? Is it a cry, a scream, a laugh, a sob, weeping, yelling? What song is it singing, what instrument is it playing? Is the music fast, slow, happy; does the song have words?

Turn your eyes inward - what do you see? Colors? Tissue? Landscapes? What do you see in

different parts of your body?

A woman, Julie, came to me for therapy. She had no particular physical ailments. I had instructed her to listen to her body to hear whatever sound it was making. She began to hear a faint cry, very soft, which got louder as she listened inside. I asked her if the cry was coming from someplace in her body. She felt it in her heart. This cry eventually turned into the wail of a small child whose father had died. Julie had not been able as a child to express her grief, so held it in her heart, which had become protected and armoured. We were able to use bodywork around her heart to support the expression of her grief.

Once clients are mindful, or more sensitively aware of their bodily experience, you can use exaggeration, comparison and movement to elicit more information. Instructing clients to exaggerate slightly what they're experiencing in the body can increase their sensitivity. Here are examples of questions to ask:

Make that relaxation a little bigger, just imagine it growing, what is it like? What places in your body welcome this relaxation?

How does exaggerating the tension affect the rest of your body?

Do other parts of your body tighten, contract, loosen, etc?

Exaggerate this sensation in slow motion - what happens? Notice all the little details of what happens.

What impulses do you have as you exaggerate? What does your body want to do? These questions I asked Tom and as he exaggerated the tension in his shoulder, he found the impulse to strike out against the doctors.

Directing clients to compare various parts of the body supports them in becoming aware of differences:

Notice different parts of your body - how do they feel? Do they all feel alike?

Do your feet feel different from your stomach? Are some places hard, some soft; some alive-feeling, some dead; some open, some closed; some blocking, some fluid; etc.

Integrating movement is also useful:

Have your clients walk around the room with instructions to:

\* Exaggerate specific patterns and notice what happens.

\* Tighten jaw, pelvis, feet, or whatever.

\* Imagine walking with their father, lover, kid - what happens in the body?

\* Release observed patterns - relax your knees, your smile, drop your shoulders, and notice the difference in your feeling, and your body.

Once sensitivity is developed, you can invite your client to lie down on the bodywork table and begin to find the meaning of the body's experience and the bodywork process. There are three main steps to translating the body's unconscious process into conscious knowledge:

First, notice what is impactful, important or alive for your client. For example, your client may have noticed a great deal of tension in the belly while standing. Once on the table, you can touch the belly, and if your client flinches a little, you notice that, draw the client's awareness to it, and see if she is interested in exploring it further.

Next, deepen that experience by helping your client mindfully stay with it and explore it. You might repeat touching the belly, or have them exaggerate the tension. Asking for precise details like, "Do you flinch more on the right side or the left?" helps a client stay with and deepen the experience. Maintaining a precise touch, and assisting your client in staying with sensation in a felt, rather than abstract way, helps establish mindfulness, a state of awareness where one focuses on the present experience of the moment, thoughts and images that emerge spontaneously.

Third, when the client is deeply in the experience, you can ask for meaning. You want to allow the meaning to emerge from the experience, rather than intellectualizing about it. You can actively direct the client to evoke the meaning while staying in the experience ("stay with that tension and let it talk to you; find out what it wants, what it's doing here...").

Struggling in search for meaning will make getting the meaning more difficult. You want to allow the words to come easily, without effort to find them. As soon as a client exerts, additional tension is created. Don't make it a goal to get meaning, but stay with what's easy.

Meaning can be derived from the following phenomena in the body, and in the bodywork process:

*Tension:* The first step is to get the details of the tension - how it's pulling (front to back,

side to side, etc.) what direction it's tightening in, how strong is the tension, what are its boundaries (how far up or down or in it goes). You may have the client exaggerate it very slightly so she can feel it more. Exaggerating too dramatically causes the relevance to the original tension to be lost and overrides information that might have been available. Ask questions like, "If this tension could talk, what would it say?", "If your body could speak instead of tighten, what would it be saying?", "Let the words come from the tension itself", and "Stay with that tension and allow it to talk to you".

For example, a client found a tension and tightness in her womb. In going into the tension, and exaggerating it, she found that she had resolved not to be like her mother, and that she hated being a woman.

*Relaxation or opening in the body:* Often we bypass the pleasurable sensations and stay with the painful ones. The meaning behind a hurtful experience can yield powerful insights, but we don't want to miss the opportunities to get meaning from the body when it lets go, opens, or relaxes. Finding meaning here can access as well as ground new ways of being in the body. This is especially useful in bodywork. After an area has loosened up through the bodywork, finding the words for that opening helps to emphasize options available. For example, a client discovers that the words corresponding to the opening in her shoulder are, "its OK to reach out to others." Now if she notices a tightness happening in her shoulder she can check to see whether she is automatically suppressing a desire to approach someone. She could choose then to give herself permission to reach out.

*Breath:* A client may have a certain habitual breathing pattern, such as tightening during the inhalation, breathing into the belly but not the chest, or not breathing laterally. Or, a client's breathing may change during a session by constricting in some way, opening up, or changing pattern. Helping them stay with the breath's experience, and allowing the words to come will give you the meaning.

*Posture:* When a client has a habitual posture (blown up chest, caved in chest, tucked rear-end, protruding belly, and so on), studying

these patterns and finding the corresponding words can frequently lead to insights. Our posture reflects habitual ways of being that we are usually not aware of. Again, allowing the words to come mindfully from the experience will be most effective.

*Gesture:* A client may have a gesture that seems important, like covering the eyes. Sometimes repeating the movement a few times, or repeating it in slow motion elicits the meaning. For example, a client ( a successful businessman) had, in a session, the unconscious habit of covering his heart with his hands. I had him mindfully repeat this gesture and asked him, "If your hand could talk to your heart, what would it be saying?" This led to the insight for him that he was protecting a vulnerable little boy inside his heart. He thus discovered a forgotten tender and soft side of himself.

*Movement:* Movement patterns such as a lumbering walk, leaning more toward one side or the other, swinging the arms very little, walking with an emphasis on putting the weight down heavily on the heels - all these habitual ways of moving are revealing. Draw awareness to the pattern, have the client do it mindfully, perhaps exaggerate it slightly. Search for the words for what the body is saying. If the words do not come, have your client do the opposite movement pattern, then go back to the natural or original pattern. The contrast that alternating the patterns provides often reveals more information.

*Response in the tissue:* When you are working physically, the tissue itself may respond in some way that is meaningful. It may subtly resist, open, retreat, deflect your touch - any number of responses are possible. You can ask in such a way that the meaning comes from the experience itself rather than from the client's idea of it: "Feel how your body's responding to my touch...let that response talk to you...what's it saying?"

*Bodywork:* Any kind of touch may be explored for meaning - a still touch, light message, deep bodywork stroke, energy work. First, study the reaction and then find the words. Connecting the touch with what happened may facilitate the emergence of words: "When I work on your shoulder, what might my hands be saying

that makes you tighten up, get sad, hold your breath, or whatever?" Sometimes, meaning will come just from making contact, like, "So you're getting some message from my hands that allows you to relax." Your client may respond, "Yes, your hands are telling me, it's not your fault."

I once worked with a client who felt tension in her diaphragm. As I began working there, I directed her awareness into her solar plexus to notice what happened. She felt herself spontaneously push back physically against my hands as I touched her. As I asked her to listen to what my hands were saying to her that made her push back, she realized they said, "I want something from you." As the meaning became clear, memories emerged, previously unconscious, of early sexual abuse. Recognizing and expressing her feelings about this abuse were crucial in helping her relax and open her diaphragm.

Ask questions that will help the client find the meaning from the experience rather than from thoughts: "If my hands could talk instead of touch, what would they say?" "Let the words come from my hands." "What message are you getting from my hands?"

Learning to speak any new language takes time and practice. Translating the body's language, from nonverbal and unconscious to the verbal and conscious, leads to greater integration of the body and mind. When translating this hidden language, we find not that the mind influences the body but that the mind and body concurrently experience and process information. Your clients can discover valuable insights and find greater freedom as they experience the body's language speaking ever more clearly.

As we develop our sensitivity to the body's language, we can discover its meaning. Knowing the meaning of this language leads to greater integration of the mind and body, which in turn increases our sensitivity.