

THE WAY OF TRAUMA



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THE WAY OF TRAUMA

Trusting the course of change

*A Biosynthetic Psychotherapy Approach to
the Therapeutic Work with Trauma*

Barbora Janeckova

Yvonna Lucká

Tatiana Neves

*To David Boadella,
who has touched and transformed our lives!*

*"I have been victimized.
I was in a fight that was not a fair fight.
I did not ask for the fight.
I lost.
There is no shame in losing such fights.
I have reached the stage of survivor and am no longer a
slave of victim status.
I look back with sadness rather than hate.
I look forward with hope rather than despair.
I may never forget, but I need not constantly remember.
I **was** a victim.
I **am** a survivor."
(Survivor Psalm)*

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Preface

Everything started with Wilhelm Reich, a psychiatrist of the second generation of Freudian analysts. His avant-garde vision of the body earned him the title of the 'father of body psychotherapy'. From then on, the world of psychotherapy has never been the same! Unfortunately, his ideas seemed to be too revolutionary for his time and it would take several years for the world to comprehend the designs of his mind. Luckily, however, his work was kept alive by those who could see its value.

Over time, new developments concerning the *psyche* and the body started to emerge and two distinct psychological approaches were established: the *post-Reichian approach*, a more purist perspective of the method which would follow its original teachings; and the *neo-Reichian approach*, which, as the name suggests, refers to a new vision of Reich's ideas in the light of the latest scientific discoveries. One of these 'neo' modalities was Biosynthesis, developed by David Boadella, a British psychotherapist who started his career as a teacher in Nottingham.

David was a pioneer and an *outstanding* man. His nomad spirit would take him to the four corners of the Earth to drink from the source and learn from the best. He underwent five years of analytic training with Reichian vegetotherapist

Ola Raknes in Norway, and dove into the transpersonal philosophies of Bob Moore in Denmark. By that time, David was already known worldwide for his groundbreaking ideas and theories. Impressed by his knowledge and dazzled by his wisdom, several therapists began to engage with and in his practices. And in 1975, Biosynthesis was finally founded and officially recognized as a method of body psychotherapy.

Later on, in October 1998, Biosynthesis was designated by the European Association for Psychotherapy (EAP) as one of the first accredited methods in the field of body psychotherapy. Several international institutes were established afterwards as training institutes for the method.

Biosynthesis is a somatic and psychodynamic-oriented psychotherapy, including aspects of pre- and perinatal psychology as well as transpersonal features of human development. It trusts in the individual's potential for healthy growth and healing through their very own internal and external resources. In fact, Biosynthesis is more than a method: it has become a way of life, a very particular and integrative way of looking at the world. Its embryological bases and its biophilic vision of the human being translates in detail the very spirit of its creator, David Boadella.

On the 19th of November 2021, David passed away at the age of 90 in the serenity of his home, in Heiden, Switzerland, leaving behind a universe of incomplete poems (yes, he was also a poet!) and a few unfinished books. One of those was about trauma.

In order to continue his life's work, the training institutes of Portugal, Spain, and the Czech Republic decided to put together this manuscript on the somatic perspective on

trauma inspired by his teachings. The book's content follows the foundations of Biosynthesis but goes beyond them.

In a heartfelt attempt to keep David's memory alive and prevent the fall of his legacy, we decided to expand his method by integrating the most recent discoveries in the fields of Neuroscience, Quantum Physics, and Human Sciences. Our goal is not only to bring forward the influential bases of Biosynthesis, but also to enrich it with contemporary affairs. We know the world is constantly changing and, along with it, the inner psychological and emotional requirements of the human soul.

To distinguish David's endowments and respect their authenticity and authorship, we decided to use them only as inspirational guidelines and grow our own ideas from there. So, the book comes as the first physical testimony for the 'neo' perspective on the Biosynthesis theory which we have decided to call Biosynthetic Psychotherapy.

We hope it does justice to his legacy and can in some way contribute to the continuing development of the field of body psychotherapy.

With Love,

Tatiana Neves, Barbora Janeckova, and Yvonna Lucká

The book is divided into two parts. The first part consists of the theoretical discussion of the concepts associated with trauma from a somatic point of view. Characteristics of traumatic events and their context are illustrated with case study examples drawn from our professional experience. To preserve confidentiality, all the names used are pseudonyms and some non-relevant details were omitted.

The second part proposes a set of approaches and proposals for working with trauma through the *soma*, as well as clinical examples and psychotherapeutic practices.

PART I
THEORETICAL APPROACH

I

INTRODUCTION

Trauma is an experience that goes beyond a person's ability to respond to stimuli and maintain normal functioning. In traumatic events, the effect of typically external triggers discards biological and psychological adaptative coping mechanisms. Therefore, a new and fruitful perspective is needed for further psychotherapeutic work. Biosynthetic Psychotherapy has an interest in the biological and vegetative components of traumatic shock, as well as the genetic prerequisites for survival and self-healing as a natural process of human evolution. It is important to embrace a perspective with a biophilic vision of hope to return to wholeness.

Trauma is part of a natural physiological response, which is unfinished. The human system is not 'corrupt', but it is in an imbalanced state, because it 'froze' during a state of high activation in a life-saving instinctive reaction. **The truth is that the body works for us and not against us!** And trauma can be seen as a natural mechanism of the system that would have followed its natural flow of resolution if the energy had not been crystallized in activation mode. This does not mean that trauma is an evolutionary state, but rather an adaptation for survival at a specific moment which is wrongly carried out

throughout a lifecycle (if not treated). At its limits, being traumatized is the end of the line. It's not an evolutionary acquisition since it doesn't promote interpersonal contact or commitment to grow. If we think about wildlife, it basically means 'death'; one stops functioning, left completely vulnerable to the hands of a predator. Nonetheless, all of it must be understood as the way the organism survives for the given moment, by becoming hypervigilant and by shutting itself down.

Usually, the nature of this crystallization is an acute stress reaction generating a large amount of energy, which is then abruptly stopped. So, our job is to help the system to harmoniously release such energy. A lot of times this liberation is done inappropriately or by force. In the Biosynthetic approach, we understand the importance of rhythm and pace for such liberation.

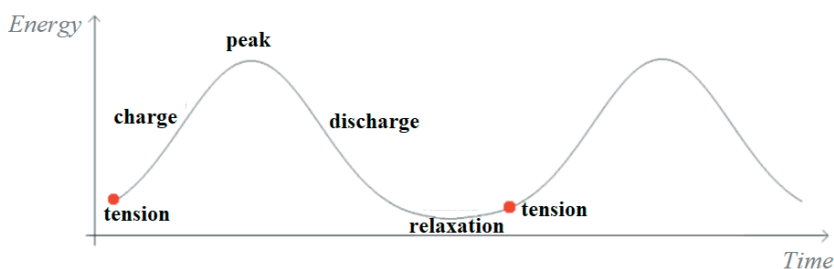
The Vital Flow (of Life)

Everything in life is encompassed by the cadence of a vital flow, of ups and downs, of peaks and tides, just like the sea increasing its force at the crest of the wave to soon after giving way to the foam at the shore. Everything has a unique pulsation. This is how everything vital and organic works: in cycles, between life and death. There is a sigh that dies so the air can get in. There is a cycle that ends so another can begin. And the same goes for energy.

*"In Nature, nothing is lost, nothing is created,
everything is transformed."*

(Lavoisier)

So, when the body is subjected to great stress, these energy levels rise to a peak and the consumption of glucose and oxygen skyrocket, taking the system into a state of imbalance. Like any living being, the organism will seek homeostasis (which is the primordial principle of survival). According to the *Laws of Nature*, this balance (homeostasis) is achieved by seeking the polarity of the current state – that is, if energy levels have increased too much, the body will try to lower them back down; if one’s blood pressure is too high, the next step is to bring it down... This is what we call ***the curve of energy (or vital flow)***.



This is a healthy curve, the one that the organism would execute after a shock if the vital flow was not interrupted or disturbed in some way. This is the curve that the Biosynthetic approach uses to explain all life processes that take place from birth to death.

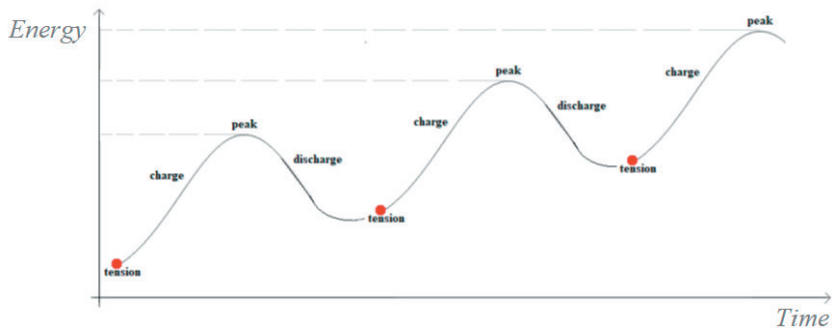
Every emotion is charged with energy which creates a natural tension, entailing a load at the level of the autonomic nervous system – namely the sympathetic portion – until it reaches its peak. It then seeks a discharge through some kind of emotional and/or physiological expression. As much as we try to contradict it, the vital curve has to fulfil itself. We can try to disrupt it, to squash it, or manipulate this process, especially when it comes to unpleasant sensations, but the curve

will always attempt to complete itself. It can be a curve with greater or lesser amplitude, greater or lesser length. It can be irregular, angular... it doesn't matter!

A healthy curve has its ups and downs; we cannot expect to always be on the rise or on the fall. We must go all the way! However, this is not always a possibility. Sometimes the fuse is shorter than we expect and we end up losing control, too fast, too soon. Other times, it's too difficult to sustain the peak of the tension and the descent is made abruptly, out of time and out of place.

If we look at the *bell shape* of a healthy (vital flow) curve, we can see that it resembles a wave in the sea. Joan Rosenberg, a distinguished American psychologist and university professor at Pepperdine, made exactly the same analogy when describing the biochemical charge-discharge process of emotional tension in the body: *"By surfing the wave of the emotion until it subsides, we will build our self-awareness and self-confidence."* The end of the curve would represent its closure, the moment of relaxation. In fact, this is the realization that we haven't died, that we have lived through it and have emerged on the other side – this experience of overcoming reinforces our self-esteem and self-trust. And that's exactly what we try to do as psychotherapists: help the client to surf the wave!

However, in trauma things are a little bit different: the descent is never fully completed, and the body is unable to surf the wave to its end, because it has no end. The charge continues to increase, overloading the body's systems and draining energy without actually discharging it. In trauma, the body never really rests, as there is residual tension remaining.



If the system gets stuck in the prior stages of hyper-arousal and activation, it will never witness the end of the line and the event will never really come to a close at the somatic and biological levels. Not only has the organism not learned to survive, but it also has no way of knowing that that is a possibility; here starts the neurotic behaviours associated with trauma. In other words, our system does not know what comes next – it could very well be death – thus it does its best not to find out, avoiding the (final) discharge at all costs (even though, paradoxically, it aims for it).

Metaphorically speaking, the fear of completion is the fear of dying, so we'll do anything to keep the wave going (although every cell of our body is begging for it to end). The fatigue and the amount of energy expended and necessary for an organism to linger in activation mode is too demanding for any human being, therefore traumatized people are among those who most frequently develop psychosomatic diseases. They come to our appointments with recurring complaints of fatigue and tiredness and they just don't understand why. It's absolutely exhausting for the body and mind!

Meanwhile, the part of the brain that helps us realize 'it's over' gets stuck. So, we become fixated on past sensations

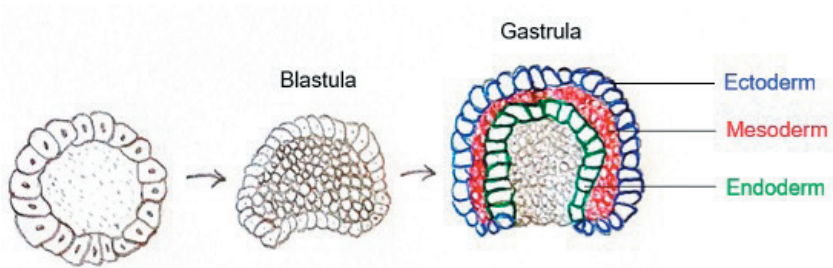
or emotional inputs that cause us to physiologically behave and feel exactly as we did under the traumatic stress. It's like reliving the trauma over and over again in our physiology.

So, our job is to help the person to move through the traumatic event and bring it to an end, in the *here* and *now*. This perspective also helps us to understand that trauma is a reversible state by creating conditions for the completion of the vital flow that was somehow interrupted, a 'stopped action' that must be set in motion by supporting the hope to return to normal functioning in life.

In Biosynthetic Psychotherapy, we believe the body's system has an inner wisdom that just needs to be made accessible to the person again in order to fulfil its purpose. The body knows what to do; sometimes it just needs a little push and a small dose of care to (re)discover its way. We must trust in its designs and in the process of change.

Embryological Model

Another fundamental concept in Biosynthetic Psychotherapy when working with trauma concerns human development, particularly embryological analysis. One theory that aptly describes human development – the functioning of the human system as a whole and its disorders – is based in embryology. The fertilized egg, which merges with the sperm, already contains all the information of the upcoming embryo. This first cell is the totality of our being that will multiply, replicating itself into billions of cells that will form the entire organism. The fertilized egg develops very fast and differentiates into three germ layers: the ***endoderm***, the ***mesoderm***, and the ***ectoderm***.



- *The endoderm* provides the foundation for the visceral organs, which are involved in digestion and nutrient receptivity. It is associated with the 'enteric brain' and creates the basis for body-related emotional receptivity. **The endoderm is linked to emotions and feelings.**
- *The mesoderm* differentiates into the organs associated with movement and with the capacity to 'handle' difficult situations and withstand them. It is related to the ability to distribute tonus and strength, and it is a prerequisite for physical action. It will develop into the organs of the musculoskeletal system. **The mesoderm is linked to actions and movement.**
- *The ectoderm* originates in the brain and general nervous system. It includes the five senses that allow us to perceive stimuli in the environment, sort them out, and put them in context. It also reflects the consciousness which organizes and gives structure and coherence to our inner space. **The ectoderm is linked to thoughts and sensations.**

These three embryonic layers are involved in everything we are and how we react to every incident in our lives. In fact, it is the interaction between them that determines our physical, emotional, and psychological health.

The Biosynthetic approach pays particular attention to developmental (ir)regularities during prenatal development and assigns the term 'healthy functioning' to the quality of appropriate interplay between these germ layers. The way they interconnect, mutually support each other's growth, and share common cellular pulsation is the key to a vigorous organism.

From the first moment, at the time of gastrulation (a stage in early embryonic development during which a single-layered hollow sphere of cells is reorganized into a multilayered structure), these cells establish communication and interaction that will be perpetuated for life. The ectoderm forms the neural crest that constitutes our primitive nervous system which receives signals from its surroundings. The endoderm feeds us by forming the yolk sac which constitutes the first form of inner nutrition before the formation of the umbilical cord. Finally, the mesoderm occupies the empty space between the first and the second layers to give structure to the organs that will later take form. Hence, it is necessary that these three layers learn to communicate and to pulsate together so that the organism can work well. If there is too much motion but too little nutrition, the system will collapse; if, on the other hand, there is too much nutrition and a supporting structure is lacking, the system will also collapse, and so on. It is therefore important that the three layers communicate and flow in the same direction.

It has been known for a long time that the human being is a living organism, that our body and our system of organs work as one, that everything happening in a cell influences neighbouring cells, and that nothing is isolated. Our health depends on the integrity of this cellular communication and

the quality of our life is influenced by the way in which individual aspects of our being connect to each other and contribute to the experience of wholeness.

This idea of *wholeness* as health and well-being goes back to ancient philosophies. In African traditional religion and medicine, the meaning of *health* and *wholeness* are intertwined, offering a bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of health which treats the human person as an integral and harmonious whole in perpetual relationship with the sacred, the human community, and the environment.

Moreover, etymologically, the word *health* is derived from the old English (or Anglo-Saxon) word 'hal' or 'hael' which means 'healthiness', 'whole', and 'holy'. The perceived idea of wholeness' normality and appropriateness is still present in expressions such as 'to get a hold of oneself' or 'to keep it together' whereas the opposite experience is described as 'to break down', 'to break into pieces' or 'to collapse' – which is exactly what happens when one experiences trauma. A sense of wholeness and integrity is lost in traumatized people.

If one is facing a stimulus which is subjectively perceived as overwhelming our adaptative mechanisms, it leads to fragmentation, breaking into pieces; some layers may go into shock, they do not cooperate and lose access to the rest – that is, cell communication is lost. Thoughts, actions, and feelings fail to run their course. We want to move but we feel paralyzed; we want to scream but the words seem trapped in our throat, and our thoughts are foggy and confusing. **Energy tends to be distributed unevenly: somewhere it is lacking, somewhere else it is abundant!** This is also expressed at the vegetative level, which is a typical symptom of traumatic experience.

In the somatic approach, we try to reach the vegetative level by working with the embryonic layers. For example, if a client is immersed in the endodermal layer, overwhelmed with emotions, there is no point in trying to make them think about the situation, they won't be able to. They will weep and moan. Trying to direct them into the mesodermal pathway – *“You have to pull yourself up again and handle the situation. You must do something about it...”* – that won't work either. At this moment, what matters is to stay with their emotions and gently encourage them with our presence and peace of mind. The point is to find the layer that stores most of the energy and help it to express itself. There is no point in trying to take the client somewhere they cannot go.