

Embodied-Relational Therapy Metaskills

As therapists our most powerful resource is ourselves, and the very human qualities that we bring to our work. Being a therapist is not just about applying techniques and theory. We suggest that is more a **way of being**, a life practice, with parallels to meditation and enlightenment practices. In this handout we want to map out a little the attitude behind ERT which gives the work its particular flavour. Amy Mindell (*Metaskills : The Spiritual Art of Therapy*, New Falcon Press) uses the term 'metaskills' to describe the qualities of being which underpin the work done with clients. We will explore seven metaskills in our attempt to clarify what it means to be an ERT practitioner: Awareness, Trust, Contactfulness, Spontaneity, Spaciousness, Relaxation and Wild Mind.

In some senses this is an arbitrary method of dividing up and conceptualizing a way of being, attempting to describe the indescribable. The seven metaskills overlap with one another; they can be thought of as holographic, with each one reflected and contained within the others – for example, contactfulness, spontaneity, relaxation and spaciousness all depend on and also support trust, but none of them are possible without awareness; and wild mind describes the combined effect of all the other six. We are obviously not claiming ownership of any of these concepts! - Many therapists and therapies employ some or all of them. We are just organising them in a particular way which reflects the flavour of our style of working.

Awareness

Much of our work with clients is about listening, watching, following and supporting them. We use our awareness to continuously register what is happening to ourselves and the other. We are allowing a featherlight, floating awareness, tracking and being with a thousand sorts of information, ready to move in any direction in response to the slightest breath of wind. Our role is to witness and facilitate whatever is currently happening without imposing sense or meaning too quickly, but trusting in the power of awareness to bring change. As body psychotherapists we are fostering an *embodied* awareness, listening to our body's response as we sit with our clients; by naming some of what we register, we also encourage a widening and deepening of our clients' own awareness, empowering them to support their own process.

Trust

Awareness implies being open to whatever a client is presenting and wherever the work may go, trusting that this will ultimately be useful. As witness to our clients we do not need to be the expert, or to know what will happen next or where the piece of work will end up. Instead, in following the unconscious we stay open to the unexpected and unusual and support and encourage it; stay open to being touched by this person, not defended, but allowing ourselves to be used, moved around and intensely related to.

So we need to trust the process; and as part of that, to trust our own responses and impulses – not necessarily as accurate reflections of here and now reality, but as important sources of information about the overall situation. Often we need to share what is going on for us without knowing in advance where it will lead; and to encourage the client – sometimes by example - to do the same. We need to trust our and their *mistrustful* feelings when they arise, as a warning that something difficult has been aroused and needs attention.

Through all these sorts of trust, a mutual trust of *each other* develops between therapist and client, which allows the work to go still deeper. This trust is not something we can demand or even ask from the client; but it is something we can earn over time, through demonstrating our reliability and authenticity. If we are able to depend on the unfolding of process and on its ultimate healing power, then the client can learn to depend on us as a step towards depending on themselves.

Contactfulness

Working with clients we are always looking for ways to offer and receive contact with them. This requires us to meet each client where they are; many times, it means holding back, respecting their

unwillingness to get close right now, but staying warmly present at the boundary they have created. Coming too close is not contact! Sometimes it is only through our respectful approach that the client learns to make boundaries for themselves.

The quality we try to offer is compassionate, accepting, generous. Contact is about aiming to be with what is and not trying to change anything. Sometimes the contact can feel sticky, difficult, a struggle; the first step is always to keep coming back to being in contact with *ourselves*, using our awareness to continually track our own bodymind process and to disentangle the knots which form there in response to the relational quality arising between us and the client. Our aim is to find a place where we are open to loving contact. Offering such contact can be very stirring for our clients, and can be a lot of what the therapy is about.

Spontaneity

As therapists we are aiming to work in a spontaneous way, to trust and follow our impulses and our clients. Of course we need to do a lot of work to know ourselves and understand where our impulses are coming from: sometimes they can bring information about exactly what *not* to do. We're taking a playful, creative, flexible approach; offering suggestions in an open, light way so that it's easy for our clients to take them up or discard them. Spontaneity is what we are encouraging in our clients, and we are aiming to model it. When we can be spontaneous we are able to let go and trust in our bodily impulses, in our embodied selves. But being aware and spontaneous *at the same time* is very tricky, an edge around which we need to keep playing.

Spaciousness

Timing is very important in any human activity, and especially so in therapy. We encourage a style of working that gives a lot of space to clients and values going slowly. When we don't jump in with our brilliant ideas, when we're not directing our clients, when we hold back from giving answers, a space can open up for the client to find their own experience in the moment. Getting busy can be a distraction for both therapist and client from what is actually happening, especially interpersonally. The relationship between therapist and client takes time and space to develop and to reach a place of trust. Offering spaciousness to our clients can feel very challenging for both parties, and can bring the relationship into central focus – they may feel that we are not giving them answers, which is of course true.

For the practitioner, going slowly can help us to avoid falling into our habitual counter transference patterns. We become aware of what we 'always do' with clients - for example taking care of them, fixing things. Allowing spaciousness also gives our clients the possibility of experimenting with different shapes and trying on different parts of themselves. When we can step back and not be so certain about what's good for our clients, they can find their own way, change their minds, and not be fixed in one place.

Our culture is moving ever more quickly, yet our bodies are still tuned to slower rhythms. Bodily we are often in discord with ourselves. Slowness and spaciousness have great therapeutic value, to try to unpick some of how we habitually miss ourselves. Offering spaciousness re-centres our work as a practice. We are simply sitting in our chair/on our cushion, being with ourselves and this other person, in the moment, with heart and eyes open. Bringing our courage and commitment to stay open and present with whatever arises.

Relaxation

Relaxing means not having goals, not having expectations or demands on where the therapy will go. This means letting go of our hopes for certain outcomes, and also not feeling we have to go along with our client's goals. Of course this can bring us into conflict with our clients. Usually people come to therapy because they want to get better, and hopefully their symptoms and their lives *will* ease. But our role isn't to *make* them better, our role is to witness and help facilitate their process, to assist in what ever movement towards wholeness is already happening. Quite often our clients' ideas about how they will get better and how they want us to help them actually reflect the 'problem' or stuckness in their lives. However letting go of goals in therapy is itself a goal, and hence impossible; relaxing about it all

feels the best way forward.

What we are trying to support in our clients is a radical relaxation into knowing that they are actually OK. Encouraging surrender to what is. Hence we ourselves need to relax into our work as much as we can – including sometimes relaxing into being tense or anxious or self-conscious. Dropping into realizing that who we are is OK and enough. We don't have to struggle, work hard, be the expert; we only have to keep returning to our flesh, to awareness, to following. Relaxing into the unfolding wisdom that is always present, holding and directing our client's process; also holding and directing us each moment of our lives.

Wild mind

Wild mind listens to the intelligence of all our embodied experience. It emerges from accepting identification with the body as an aspect or part of the whole system. Like an ecosystem, like our physiological functions, wild mind *happens of its own accord*, as the sum product of local reality: we do not have to bring purpose or intention to bear on the situation, as if from the outside – they arise as spontaneous expressions of the situational gestalt.

Wildness is, in a sense, the *tendency to connect*, to entangle, to network, to become more complex; it is innate in all living systems, including ourselves. It means giving weight and value to what we otherwise might think is irrational, crazy, unimportant: information found in such places as dreams, fantasies, aches and pains, emotions, body movements. When in the altered state of wild mind, we remember that we are animals; minds and bodies are integrated, relaxed but alert. Nothing controls the bodymind: everything just happens. Wild mind seeks constantly to communicate this reality to consciousness, as a rebalancing of our normal domesticated state, through dreams, visions, slips, symptoms, emotions, body movements, psychoses and sudden enlightenment.

To Conclude

If Embodied-Relational Therapy does have a goal, then it is to move in the direction of living more of the time from these metaskills. We are aiming to continually work from and offer these metaskills to our clients, and the times when we find ourselves unable to do so offer us useful information about what's happening in the relationship with the client. We are modeling for our clients and for ourselves what it means to be more open, more relaxed, more trusting, more free – because only by doing so can we do our job. So being a therapist does us good. Being the best therapist we can be is a deeply personal journey into becoming more ourselves. Relaxing into and trusting who we are.