

The Work of Peter M. Bernstein, PhD
and
The Bernstein Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy

At the Bernstein Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy in Petaluma, California, Dr. Peter Bernstein and his staff combine elements of Reichian psychotherapy and myofascial release physical therapy to help patients heal pain and trauma. Dr. Bernstein began practice as a Reichian psychotherapist 31 years ago and works with individuals, couples, families and children. He started incorporating myofascial release into his work about four years ago. “I am always looking for new ways to improve the effectiveness of the therapy I can provide for my patients,” he says. “When I became aware of the myofascial release work of John Barnes, PT, I felt there was a real potential that Reichian bodywork and myofascial release therapy could be combined to produce a powerful new modality.” Dr. Bernstein began training with Barnes, incorporating the new techniques he learned into his practice. The results, he felt, were impressive and gratifying. “Combining the two types of body therapy creates results that are exponentially greater than either therapy when used by itself,” he believes, and his patients agree.

Reichian psychotherapy, as developed by Wilhelm Reich, is based on the belief that people store unconscious, unexpressed emotions in the body. Painful, traumatic emotions, when unexpressed, are stored or repressed in recognizable patterns called armoring. Armoring takes two forms: character armoring, when the repressed emotions are reflected in attitudinal behavior, and muscular armoring, when the repressed emotions manifest in bodily tension. Effective Reichian psychotherapy addresses both types of armoring and Reich was one of the first researchers to fully appreciate the mind/body connection.

Myofascial release therapy has been developed and refined over the last thirty years by a number of innovative physical therapists. The goal of myofascial release is to relieve physical pain by reducing fascial restrictions. Fascia is the connective tissue which sheathes and supports all the organs, muscles and bones of the body. Fascial restrictions develop due to acute or long-term, repetitive trauma. When Dr. Bernstein became aware of the practice of myofascial release, he postulated that fascial restrictions might be very similar to muscular armoring.

Dr. Bernstein had also long recognized the value of massage in healing, having obtained a massage therapy license as part of his Reichian bodywork training. “Touch is a powerful, therapeutic tool,” he believes. “The crucial role of nurturing touch in infant survival, growth and development is well-documented. The role of touch in emotional healing is equally vital in importance.”

As Dr. Bernstein began incorporating myofascial release techniques into his practice, it became clear to him that the muscular armoring of his Reichian work and fascial restrictions were strongly related. The use of both types of bodywork together accelerated the progress of his patients. “I’ve been in Reichian therapy for many years,” expresses one patient. “Though its benefits have made a substantial improvement in the quality of my life, I was astounded at the profound additional release from both physical and emotional pain I received after Dr. Bernstein began combining myofascial release with Reichian techniques.” Another patient shares, “My therapy has changed dramatically. There are areas I don’t think would have been touched without the addition of myofascial release. It brings hope to the process and the future.”

The addition of myofascial release work proved so effective, Dr. Bernstein decided to try something else he encountered in the myofascial release world – team treatment. At John Barnes’ training seminars, Dr. Bernstein was able to observe a method of group physical therapy involving several practitioners working together with one client to provide more comprehensive treatment. When a patient with severe physical restrictions due to multiple sclerosis and emotional trauma due to an abusive childhood started coming to Dr. Bernstein for treatment, he thought the situation was ideal to try creating a team of his own.

“I started with a group consisting of myself and two massage therapists, and quickly added a third,” he says. “I could have included either myofascial release therapists or massage therapists, and I choose to include three massage therapists who were familiar with my work. Aside from their bodywork techniques, they had the personal qualities I felt were necessary. They had great sensitivity and compassion for both the physical and emotional pain of my patient.” “I am so grateful for this therapy,” his patient with MS reports. “I wish I could tell everyone with MS how much it has helped me physically and emotionally.”

Dr. Bernstein was so excited and encouraged by the success of this new treatment modality that he decided to establish the Bernstein Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy, making team treatment foundational to his practice. The three original massage therapists are still with him, and he is in the process of adding to his staff. “I find emotional release work extremely rewarding,” says Hilloah Levy, CMT. “I love facilitating positive change in all areas of a patient’s life, something I could not do on my own as a massage therapist. The relationships I have with other team members are very rewarding to me as well.” Raul Martinez, CMT, expresses a feeling many bodyworkers share. “I get great satisfaction from helping other people. Also, I want to heal myself. This job gives me both those opportunities on a deeper level.” Massage therapists who work with Dr. Bernstein train in myofascial techniques, and also receive instruction in principles of psychology such as defenses and transferences, and Reichian armoring. Bernstein has created an Intensive Training Seminar for massage therapists and myofascial physical therapists interested in his work. The seminar begins with an opportunity for the enrolled therapist to experience Reichian-Myofascial Release therapy, because Dr. Bernstein is firmly convinced of the necessity for practitioners to go through the process themselves. “Patients can tell whether the people who work with me are addressing their own pain,” he says. “The team members’ willingness to grow emotionally is vital to the integrity of the therapeutic process.”

When a new patient comes to the Bernstein Institute, Dr. Bernstein conducts an intake interview which thoroughly explores the prospective patient’s physical,

medical, and emotional history. He likes to have staff members present to meet the patient, familiarize themselves with the patient's history, and contribute feedback and observations. The presence of female staff members can be particularly supportive for new female patients. Dr. Bernstein and his staff review any medications the patient might be taking, the present life circumstances that bring them to the Institute, and their goals for therapy. Based on the intake interview, Dr. Bernstein creates a treatment plan that can include individual therapy with bodywork, couples or family counseling, myofascial release bodywork, acupuncture and chiropractic care. He also refers patients to a consulting internist if they desire to reduce their psychotropic medication levels. "Patients who take advantage of a wide spectrum of the Institute's treatment options can in time often eliminate their dependence on psychotropic medications altogether," Dr. Bernstein says. Staff practitioners assist Dr. Bernstein at every step of the treatment process. "The bodywork we do can be so much more effective with more than one person working," Dr. Bernstein states. "And beyond their important physical skills, staff members often contribute valuable insights from their own life experiences. During a treatment session, I am always in the lead, but I appreciate how my staff can generously and appropriately share their own struggles and pain for the benefit of the client. The result is that healing takes place – primarily for the patient, but also, on another level, for the staff members as well."

A typical psychotherapy appointment begins with the patient reviewing the events in their life since their last appointment. Problems or successes in key areas such as their marriage, family, other significant relationships, or their job are shared with the goal of transparency and gaining perspective. The emotional charge that a patient feels coming into a session can make it hard for them to take in feedback or direction at first. As the bodywork portion of the session starts, Dr. Bernstein and his staff use combinations of techniques to help the patient surrender and soften their physical armoring, releasing whatever emotion is present that day. During the session, the patient has the opportunity to relive and resolve past trauma which has been stored unconsciously as armoring or fascial restrictions. Bernstein is very careful not to program this portion of the

session. “I visually and intuitively follow the flow of energy in the patient’s body and see where it stops,” he says. “This tells me where to work next, and is by far the most effective way to work. Through my years of experience I have gained a better and better understanding of the patterns of emotional ‘holding’ people use, and greater sensitivities to how to release those blocks.” As the team works, Dr. Bernstein unobtrusively explains what he is seeing in the patient’s body to the staff to help train them to read emotional energy blockages. He sometimes directs them into specific techniques, but loves it when they are able to follow their own intuitions based on their increasing awareness of the patient’s needs. A session can conclude with a few minutes of gentle massage or with an acupuncture treatment, which comforts the patient and helps them integrate the experience. Patients then have the opportunity to talk about the feelings and memories, if any, that came up during the bodywork. They may have either actual or symbolic memories to share about the trauma they re-experienced that day. At this point, the patient is usually most open to the helpful direction and perspective they need to bring about the change they long for in their lives.