

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Theory in Counseling and Psychotherapy

## Bioenergetic Analysis

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Bioenergetic analysis is a psychodynamic psychotherapy that works with somatic (body), psychic, emotional, and interpersonal phenomena as part of a unitary whole. A therapist in this approach practices psychotherapy with a theory base and a repertoire of techniques that permit interventions to be made in each dimension—body, mind, and relationship. These interventions are made with a sophisticated understanding of body organization (including anatomy, physiology, and morphology) and of psychological processes (the formation of personality, emotion, and cognition), and the application of modern theories of self and relationship formation.

## Historical Context

The modern form of bioenergetic analysis developed out of the elaborations of psychoanalytic theory proposed by Wilhelm Reich, a student of Sigmund Freud. Reich, who emigrated to the United States in 1939, investigated the complex relationship between personality organization and somatic organization. This study led one of his students in New York, Alexander Lowen, to modernize Reich's ideas into a comprehensive method for correlating various developmental thrusts— separation and individuation dynamics, the emergence of self-structures, relationship patterns, and the development of self- and other representations, among others—with patterns of somatic organization. Examples of these somatic patterns include muscular tension systems, for example, chronic contractions or flaccidity of the musculature and habitual body postures that correspond to psychological positions, attitudes, interactional styles, and cognitive patterns. Together these organizations cohere into a character structure that while uniquely individual shows the effects of the dynamics present in each of these dimensions.

Reich took ideas inherent in psychoanalysis as propounded by Freud, such as self-determination and consciousness of self as an instrumental and responsible being, and added to them the insight that when people are in possession of their sexual selves, they have a tool for self-awareness and for self-expression that is inalienable, cannot be taken away by authorities, and is external to the self or even those internalized as part of the self.

This is a view of psychotherapy as a revolutionary activity. It views psychotherapy as a method of self-definition, of raising consciousness, and, where necessary, of liberation from oppressive external and internal forces. Pleasure is seen, in modern bioenergetic analysis, as the capacity for connection with the benevolence in the universe. When people have a visceral, developed, and experienced sense of that connection, it is hard to dominate their consciousness and tell them what reality is, what things mean, and whether their personal experience is valid.

Bioenergetic analysis, originally developed in the United States, is now practiced in many countries around the world. Most practitioners belong to local, geographically based societies and to the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis.

## Major Concepts

Modern bioenergetic analysis is a developmental theory of the embodied self. People are seen as having a thrust to maturation that has physical, psychic, emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and social dimensions. When the thrust to grow and develop along any of these dimensions is disrupted or impinged on in ways that an individual cannot manage successfully, the person develops psychological and somatic defensive operations to protect the self from further harm. Included in that protective defensive system are mechanisms to constrain self-expression, so that one does not express feelings or reactions that will result in continued reactions from others that cause the harm being inflicted. The impingement on development, or the harm being inflicted, can vary in strength and severity from the inevitable vicissitudes of everyday life, which all of us have to encounter and develop effective methods to manage, to massive soul-, mind-, and body-destroying abuses.

In the theory of modern bioenergetic analysis, a person's system of defenses is organized as a holistic interlocking system that is referred to as character organization. This defense system not only protects against the assault from other people in the environment but also conceals from others and from oneself the emotional and psychological reactions to the assault. Character [p. 114 ↓ ] structure is a durable, ongoing personality organization in which these defenses are habitual and reflexive and, to a large degree, at least before psychotherapeutic intervention, arise out of

awareness. The structures that make up character organization exist on somatic, psychological, and cognitive dimensions. For example, someone who has been profoundly and chronically terrified early in life and has withdrawn into a frozen self-protective space will show a body that is deeply contracted, with very limited capacity for expansion—in breathing, in mood, and in contact with others. That person will also have difficulty being flexible—physically, psychically, and inter-personally—and when encountering strong emotional or interpersonal stimulation, will be inclined to withdraw or feel overwhelmed.

It is a principle of bioenergetic analysis that human beings, being as adaptable and inherently flexible as we are, can grow around an underlying character organization. And so a bioenergetic therapist must learn to look at underlying structures and patterns beneath surface appearances. This includes an experiential and theoretical understanding of body processes such as breathing, vitality, flexibility, expansion and contraction, musculoskeletal and neuromuscular functioning and their relationship to energetic processes, and psychological and emotional functioning. The patterns of a person's character organization may become apparent in the therapy process, enabling both patient and therapist to observe them in action and begin to soften the habitual reactions and defensive maneuvers on a physical, psychological, and interpersonal level. Because each person's personality and character organization is unique and individual, the work of therapy can never be done exactly the same way across patients. It is the art of the therapist to respond to the unique and specific realities presented by the individual patient.

## Techniques

One of the central principles of modern bioenergetic analysis is that the underlying content of any organized pattern in each of these dimensions can be accessed through the recruitment of intense emotional experience. *Intense*, here, is a relative term referring to the strength of subjective experience within the range of tolerance and usefulness for the individual. Strongly experienced and expressed emotion is not seen as a primitive event or as a cathartic discharge of built-up charge or energy. Rather, the experience and expression of strongly felt emotion in a grounded, contained, and relational manner is understood to be a method for accessing and developing

a tolerance for deep emotional life. It is a tenet of the belief system in modern bioenergetic analysis that the experience and expression of powerful and meaningful emotion is a means of knowing reality, and living one's personal reality, and that the expression of deeply and strongly felt emotion is a skill that with practice and refinement becomes a sophisticated tool for communication with oneself and with others.

The techniques in bioenergetic analysis support this view of emotion and self-representation. Much of what goes on in bioenergetic therapy, allowing for the stylistic differences between therapists, looks like what transpires in any psychodynamic psychotherapy. Bioenergetic therapists strive to create a therapeutic alliance with a patient that will act as a supportive medium for the establishment of an attachment that will withstand the arousal and expression of painful and difficult feelings. Both the patient and the therapist participate in the construction of the relationship that will carry the therapeutic process forward. Bioenergetic therapists use techniques derived from an eclectic selection of theoretical systems to make interventions that support people in becoming more self-determining, more autonomous, more open and available for contact, more alive, and more skilled at following their own process to meaning and pleasure. In addition to those therapeutic technical skills, bioenergetic therapists are constantly attentive to corresponding physical processes that can be addressed in a technical way to advance the therapeutic project the individual patient brings. These technical perspectives allow for the use of breathing patterns; positions that strain muscular holding patterns beyond their usual capacity to hold rigidity; contact, including touch, that can act to bring awareness to a part of the body, to support, to open holding patterns, or to help build boundaries; and expressive movement, by the patient alone or along with the therapist or members of a therapy group. The philosophy of [p. 115 ↓ ] technique in bioenergetic analysis allows and supports creative, attuned, empathically derived interventions.

## Therapeutic Process

Bioenergetic therapists maintain an ongoing interest in and discussion of developments in theory and research. This includes new ways of understanding the development of personality and self, as well as self in relationship; the contribution of neurosciences in illuminating the degree to which human beings are evolutionarily adapted for attachment

and empathic attunement to each other; and the investigation of the nature and healing properties of the therapeutic relationship. Recently, psychological and emotional trauma has swung back into the foreground of study and discourse about the causal elements in human suffering. Such study has highlighted the importance of understanding the ways in which trauma has an enduring effect on basic body processes. Although newly in focus, trauma plays a central role in the theories that first gave rise to the bioenergetic approach as conceived by Lowen and as derived from the work of Reich and Freud.

Bioenergetic therapists approach the therapeutic relationship from a number of perspectives. Generally agreed on is the concept that the therapeutic process is a laboratory for the exploration of the forming, deforming, and injurious effects of relationships. The patterns of relationship to self and others that emerge from early formative experiences are repeated in the therapeutic relationship and can be examined and modified in a relationship that does not require the usual constraints and inhibitions of conventional social relationships. Many bioenergetic therapists subscribe to the ideas derived from feminist theory that relationships can be egalitarian and cocreated. That is, the therapist and the patient together create a unique and specific relationship, an intersubjective one, between two subjects, with the aim of creating a living space in which the patient can be real, authentic, and self-expressive to the extent and as fully as she or he wishes and is able. Bioenergetic therapists bring to this vision of relationship a set of interventional skills that allow for a wide range of physical and emotional expression and a tolerance for strongly felt and strongly expressed emotion. This treatment philosophy is coupled with a strong conviction about the healing properties of relationships and a strong belief in the calling in each of us to seek meaning in life and connect with and experience pleasure through relationships with one another and the environment in all its dimensions.

**See also** [Integrative Body Psychotherapy](#); [Orgonomy](#) [Psychodrama](#); [Sensorimotor Psychotherapy](#); [Therapeutic Touch](#)

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Further Readings

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