

Don't go there! Somatic Experiencing

An amended version of the TAP Evening Talk Friday 20th May 2011

Anna Colgan

SE is an approach to trauma, which for me is part and parcel of how I work as a psychotherapist. Some people reading this will notice overlaps with many other ways of working, particularly in the field of body psychotherapy. The word '**Somatic**' is based on the word 'soma' (body) as opposed to 'psyche' (mind). Many of my fellow trainees on the SE training were not psychotherapists but were acupuncturists or cranio-sacral practitioners, etc. Each practitioner makes the training their own, and for me my training in SE does not contradict my belief that the relationship between client and therapist is supremely important, but the intention here is to focus specifically on the contribution I feel SE has made to my way of working.

I called my talk, **Don't go there!** referring to when someone does not want to talk about something. I see in my mind's eye the physical gestures that accompany this phrase: someone raising or hunching shoulders, stiffening fingers or tightening the jaw. If we are carrying the effects of trauma there will be constriction in the body, even if we are unaware of it. In contrast imagine someone being completely relaxed, and the question is how does SE work so that there is less constriction and so there can be more ease in the body? And the answer, to put it at its most simplistic, is by 'tracking the body'. To track the body is to pay attention to the body, and for that the compassion and imagination that the therapist brings to the process is vital, for the business of paying attention can be painful.

In 2006 when I was at the beginning of my SE training I returned from holiday to hear that a friend of mine had been attacked in the street. Although I was told at once that he was alright, my thoughts of course turned immediately to wondering if there would be lasting effects for him from this very unpleasant event. I was enormously relieved when I got to hear the story of what happened from the friend himself, and he concluded by saying that when he got home from Casualty he found himself bursting into tears. The story of how he was attacked, and his watch, phone and wallet taken, included a phrase about how *it all happened very quickly and he didn't know what hit him*. You might think that the mobilising of energies for flight and fight could not happen because there was no time. But the body mobilises its energies instantly, and, if there is no outlet, those energies get trapped in the body and can cause problems later. In this case the bursting into tears was the outlet for those energies. One of the mottos of SE is that 'the trauma is in the body, not in the event'. In other words we don't judge whether the event itself was traumatic or not: we are concerned to find out if that person is still carrying a traumatic legacy or not. If the tremendous energies required to deal with a threat are not discharged they will still be cycling in the body. Let's think for a minute of a threatening situation from childhood: an adult shouting at us. In this situation on a physical level there would be the impulse to run away or fight back, but we would not be able to give in to this impulse for very good reason. Flight or fight would almost certainly have got us into worse trouble. The energies of wanting to run or defend ourselves may still be cycling in the body, and may then be triggered in later life by feeling threatened by a boss or a person in authority. This is where SE can be useful to discharge old trauma, and release someone from the limiting tendency to react in a way that may not be helpful.

A car crash is another example of threat happening so quickly, and with so little we can do about it, that it may be strange to think in terms of the impulse towards fight or flight. But the body would have perceived the threat even in a split second, and the resultant energies trapped in the body can cause problems for decades to come, without the person having any realisation that the long ago car-crash may have had this effect.

The opposite of lasting traumatisation is *discharge*. Discharge can take different forms: in the case of my friend, above, the shedding of tears was discharge. In an SE session we look for signs of discharge: trembling in the limbs, a sensation of tingling, the client taking a spontaneous deep breath, warmth coming into the face and tears: these are just some of the signs of discharge.

The way of working in an SE session is known by the acronym, **ROSE: Resonance, Observation, Self-report and Education**. Often there is a *resonance* between client and therapist that the therapist learns to trust, and which may lead the therapist to ask the client to pay attention to a certain area of the body. *Observation* is of course very important, as the therapist may notice a warmth coming into the client's face, and can ask the client to pay attention to that. Self-report is a client sharing with the therapist that he or she can feel tingling, fluttering or warmth: body sensations which can be part of the discharge of trauma. The example of trembling is a case where *education* can help a client to understand that trembling is a healthy sign, and to encourage it, rather than try to suppress it as a sign of weakness.

We can't go through life avoiding trauma; trauma is a fact of life. Some of us may have been lucky enough to discharge the effects of a traumatic situation naturally, as in the case of my friend who just spontaneously burst into tears. But there are many reasons why this often does not happen and we carry the trauma about with us instead. Certain situations such as wartime experiences make for very clear and damaging examples of where we can be seriously affected, but a harsh or neglectful childhood can be similarly damaging. Hopefully SE, and many other forms of psychotherapy and counselling which are available today, can address these problems and lead to greater well-being.

To ask anything in connection with this talk, email annacolgan@hotmail.com
Or for more information visit my website www.annacolgan.co.uk