

Dealing With The Emotions

By Ron Kurtz

The following is the text of a presentation by Ron Kurtz, the founder of the Hakomi Method. The European Rolfing Association had a highly successful workshop with Ron last year and at the suggestion of Robert Schleip, the following article is being printed to allow the membership of the Rolf Institute to share Ron's insights.

I am now going to cover some general theory and method concerning the emotions as they appear in body work. Then I'd like to go into the specifics of body structure, posture, and emotional issues; look at the types and techniques that go with each specific muscle mobilization pattern; and maybe get into some of the underlying history and metabolic biases that create those patterns.

My position on deep tissue work is that the structure you're reorganizing not only helps create self-image, but it is in some important ways dependent upon self-image as well. In the long run, what we're doing is trying to alter that image. Since body and image are intimately connected and both are shaped by experiences, in the process of working with the body, and especially in deep tissue work, you will evoke emotionally painful material. There's just no way to avoid that, as far as I can tell. You've got to ask yourself what do you do when ... let's say you've got your elbow in somebody's diaphragm,

and they start to access an emotional experience, that is, they start to be emotional. You have some options at that point, and I think the following principles apply.

I have four principles to offer you, the first of which is this: acknowledge the emotional issue. Often the person's self-image is fixated in some way because the emotions involved were not acknowledged. They were buried, avoided, run from. If you as a therapist also do that, if you don't acknowledge the person's feelings, if you try to go on without noticing, without commenting, your silence will be taken to mean that these feelings are unimportant, no good, or unacceptable, or that we can get around these feelings without dealing with them. I don't think you can. What happens when feelings are not acknowledged is that the person either buries them or tries to deal with them on their own, later, which is always difficult and sometimes impossible. When people bury issues and feelings, either the body structure drifts back towards the position it was taking before you worked

on it or the person compensates in some other way, psychologically or in behavior.

I have a case in mind in which a person became very manic and finally ended up in a hospital because of too much body work, too quickly. I take responsibility there; it was a patient of mine. I asked a Rolfer to work on someone and the Rolfer did two sessions in one week. The man just couldn't handle the results, began a manic episode and ended up in the hospital. The man I'm talking about is referred to in the book *The Body Reveals* as an example of a left/right split. He's so split that he's effectively two people. You can see it quite clearly in his photos. That's the guy who was worked on too fast.

The psychological approach to emotional issues, then, is a search for clarity. Helping a person understand his or her emotional issues is about the best thing you can do. The person can reorganize around that understanding. It's not that people can't handle these issues; it's rather that they habitually avoid the issues; which

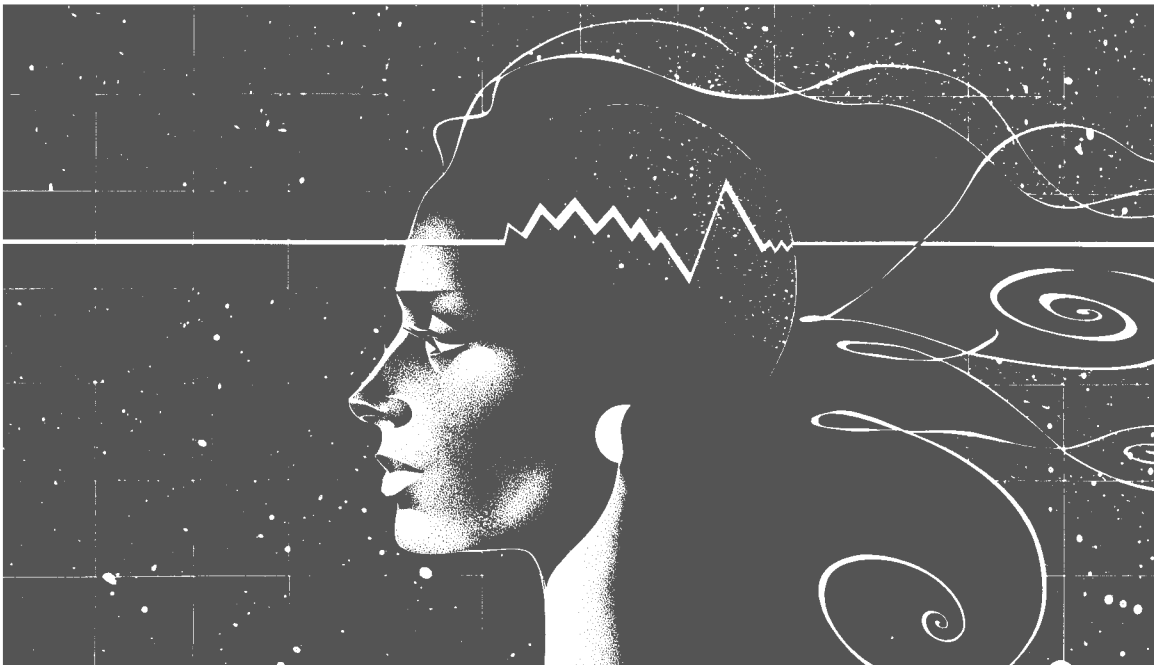
Dealing With The Emotions

remain unclear. These avoidance habits develop when we're children or youngsters, at a time when we probably couldn't handle these things any other way. We couldn't leave home or whatever. But, as adults, we are better able to handle emotional material, given support, and thus we can be helped to understand and change the habits involved.

So, your first task as therapist is to accept the feelings that emerge. Don't ignore the obvious. When a person starts crying, all you have to say to acknowledge that is "Sad, huh?" Just that kind of a contact statement, which doesn't analyze or interpret, which

don't know if it's all right to express their feelings. There's a little wetness in the eyes, a little redness around the nose, a little catch in the voice. Just these small signs. That's when you have to acknowledge it. If you don't catch it then, these people may decide that feelings are not okay and shut them off. People make that decision in the first few moments that they feel something. You have to be there early. Your being present that way establishes trust in your perception. Because you're noticing very small increments of feeling, they feel safer, they know you know. Once in a while, somebody will feel that their privacy

also. You're working a particular area and suddenly the tissue balks. You can feel that. Or maybe you hear a sigh or see a sudden fear. It's not just touch; it's sounds and sights. You have to be tracking with all your senses. When I work, I'm almost always looking at the person's face. I know you can't do that, but you could every once in a while. Check in. Certainly, you can be listening. With some little practice you'll be very accurate. It's a matter of your "state of being." If you're in a state that permits you to be receptive in an intuitive way, if you're calm enough and clear enough and open enough, little sounds will



simply notices and acknowledges that you accept what's going on. That, in itself, is a significant part of the therapy. Noticing and accepting makes people feel safe and maybe even a little better about themselves. With safety and acknowledgment, the process can continue. Often, feelings emerge only in very small ways. It's as if certain people

is being invaded, just because you're watching so closely—a rare happening, in my experience.

As mentioned, the first objective is detection and acknowledgment of feelings. It involves more than just touching. Though you should be able to detect feelings just with touch sometimes, you'll need to watch and listen

have a lot of meaning for you. The tone of voice can tell you who a person is, just the tone of voice. Somebody comes in and says, "Hello, I had a good day." If you're in the right state, you can hear things about that person's whole being.

Now for the second general attitude, or principle, and the most sig-

Dealing With The Emotions

nificant. Feelings aren't problems to be solved. Thank God, it's not our job to solve problems on a feeling level. I don't know how you treat the examination of the body for structural imbalances; there may be problems to solve on that level and that's fine. But when you deal with feelings—well, feelings are just simply to be understood. If you're all set to solve problems, you're already going off in the wrong direction, in fact, the same direction in which defense mechanisms tend. That is, the feeling is defended against because it is considered to be a problem and the defense is the solution. The feeling is not accepted; it is "handled", or "dealt with" in some way. If you get into solving problems, if you get on that defensive trip with someone, you'll get caught up in too active a role and you're going to lose the capacity to hear and see clearly. A problem-solving attitude can block the intuitive kind of listening that would allow you to understand the other person's feelings. And certainly, if you understand, you can better help the other to understand. I can't emphasize that too much. The mobilization of consciousness that goes into problem-solving is detrimental to the kind of openness you need to be accepting and understanding.

You have to drop any problem-oriented way of thinking when you start working with people's feelings. You may be thinking that way while you're working with the tissue, but when there's suddenly some sadness, don't jump into "What can we do about it?" Just hang on, help the person feel safer, help him or her feel comfortable, help the process unfold as it "seems to want to." I'll tell you how I like to do this. Help people process their emotions in such a way that they come to an understanding; that is, they come to recognize some meaning in the experience. That's what you do about it. And it doesn't re-

quire that you solve problems. The way to do this is simple and technical, actually. You just perform certain actions and follow certain rules which I'll get into later.

So, let's see what the third principle is all about. This is the most important general rule for processing feelings: support spontaneous behavior. That's it. That's what you have to do to help the process unfold as it needs to. That particular notion, that particular approach. You're not solving problems now. You're just watching. You're keeping track of spontaneous behavior and finding ways to support it. Of course, you have to be able to determine what's spontaneous and what isn't. You have to develop an ear for that and an eye for that. You notice spontaneous reactions to feeling and you support them. That's the rule.

Let me give you a simple example. If somebody starts crying on the table, she will either want to roll over away from you, so the head will start to turn away, or she'll start to manage the flow of feeling by tightening certain muscles. The shoulders will come forward and up, and the diaphragm and abdomen will tighten. The person may try to close her knees. Well, all—you have to do is to take that over; that is, help her do what she's doing. And since you're only one person and can take over only a few functions, you might, for instance, put some towels under her shoulders. Take the effort—out of any tightening she's getting into, even if it's defensive. We're not going against the defense system at all. We're just offering the person the kind of support she spontaneously seems to need. If she wants to turn away, you just roll her over in the intended direction.

If you make the decision that you're going to help a person process feelings, then the way you do it is to support spontaneous behavior. The

usual outcome of this general approach is this: since the behavior is defensive, since it is attempting to manage the flow of feelings and emotional expression, the person feels safer when this behavior is supported; he feels that you're on his side, that his feelings are okay. Then the defense system relaxes a little, and the experience and the emotional release deepen almost immediately. The moment the person relaxes the muscles involved in managing emotional expression, the feelings become more intense. And it's in this deeper experience that the meaning of the process can be found. Note, as an example, the tendency to slump forward with sadness. This puts the weight of the head on the back muscles and tends to restrict breathing in the upper chest. As soon as you take the weight of the head in your hands, the breathing deepens. With you holding the head, the back muscles can relax, and if and when they do, the breathing deepens, more feeling comes into consciousness and the sadness is more clearly felt. All this happens quite naturally. Since the defensive responses are part of avoiding feelings and experiences, the relaxation of defenses yields feeling and experience. And, when you support spontaneous behavior, defenses usually relax. When you help deepen the experience, you're helping the person get more information. You're helping him get closer to what that feeling process is about. More precisely, you're helping him come to understand it. That's what the next rule, the last one, is about.

In short, the last general rule is this: go for meaning. Okay. We're looking for understanding and insight and clarity. I don't think it's a matter of quantity of feeling, that, say, there's 40 gallons of tears in there and we gotta get 'em all out. That's nonsense to me. Mine is not an hydraulic model. I prefer an information model. For me

Dealing With The Emotions

it's a matter of how people organize their experience, how they organize the flow of emotional experience. I want to help people change the way they organize experience by helping them stay with it long enough to examine where it comes from and what it means. I think if we look at this experience and understand it, we can give up defending against it. We can find some other things to do about it. Sometimes, not always, the experience involves something that happened to the child, something beyond the understanding of the child. If it's buried, the adult, who could understand it, never gets to. If you never look at it, you don't get to discover that, in many ways, it was different from what you then believed it was, and so were you. The emotional process may involve experiences that happened over and over again to the child; these, in turn, may have led the child to mobilize a particular self-image and to use the muscle system to express and maintain that self-image. The way to meaning is, first, deep experience and, second, a questioning of that experience. "What are you saying with your body when you tighten your chest and feel sad?" Questions like that. "My chest says, 'big boys don't cry!'"

Okay, I think I've gotten through the general stuff. I'll just review the four main points:

(1) *Avoid problem-solving.* That's a matter of set, attitude, consciousness. Picture sitting on the mall and dreamily watching people go by, as if each was a haunting mystery that drifts through your consciousness. Not trying to solve anybody's problems, not looking for problems to solve. Just sending, feeling the mystery. That gives you a wider focus. That takes you out of an active, forceful, sympathetic mobilization into a more relaxed state. Things from the periphery come into

awareness, things that wouldn't emerge if you were rigidly concentrated. So, avoid problem-solving. It's one of the toughest things I have to teach my students. They want to solve problems. They want to help. Well, there are levels of helping.

(2) *Acknowledge and accept emotional expression.* Now, you may have to do a little processing of your own in order to be okay with other people's feelings. You must accept feelings of all kinds. Hatred. Terror. Whatever. You must be there for all of them. So, make contact. Deliver some statement that lets the other person know that you're following and that you understand what's going on. And remember, catch 'em early! That's the second rule: acknowledge and accept.

(3) *Support spontaneous behavior.* If you support spontaneous behavior, you'll never violate the defense system. And if you never violate the defense system, you won't create resistance. Creating resistance and fighting your way through it is nice if you like to sweat and if you like drama, but it doesn't make a lot of sense if you're trying to get the job done. Why rouse the demons? Why wake up the tigers at the gate if you can just slip through, get it done, and get out with a minimum of effort and pain? The easier, more effective path is grounded in tracking and supporting spontaneous behavior.

(4) *Go for meaning.* The object is to understand. You're not going for meaning for yourself. You're going for the meaning pertinent to the person you're working with. You don't have to know everything that's going on. You just have to create a situation such that the client knows what's going on. I'll give you some examples of that. Say you've got your fingers in some muscles and suddenly you feel

something and you see a little sadness and the person's shoulders come up and you put a hand or a towel under there and support those muscles and the person cries and after a while she calms down a little, though she's still kind of sad, and when there's a space for it, you ask her "What does my hand seem to be saying to you?" Go across this "mind/ body interface" constantly. Ask for the meaning of mobilizations of tissue. Ask for the meaning of felt touch. That's the kind of meaning you go for. The meaning is in feelings and bodily reactions. It is grounded in bodily experience. Your questions aren't invitations to speculate. They direct the search for information about present experience. Even if the client doesn't answer you, she may still realize something. Often, there's a breakthrough on information about present experience—a breakthrough at the point where you

go for meaning. The client goes deeper and cries more freely and completely. And though it's painful, that crying feels good. It expresses a truth finally acknowledged. Sometimes there's a great sigh of relief as understanding comes; the tissue just lets go. Going for meaning is just another way to deepen the experience, to gather yet more information. It all has to do with what a person does with her pain, whether she runs from it or stops and experiences it. The only way to do anything healthy about it is to understand it. If she runs from it, she blocks off the area with tensions, the blood flow changes, the tissue gets tougher, and loses sensation; awareness is lost, as is function, as is a piece of the self-image. Acknowledging, experiencing, understanding, expressing and completing are the healthy options here.

Four points to remember, then: *acknowledge and accept emotional ex-*

pression, avoid problem-solving, support spontaneous behavior, and go for meaning.

Finally, I want to say that there's something spiritual here—namely, a faith in the other's power to heal. With such faith, you can support spontaneous behavior. You can let the client's responses run the process. You don't have to solve problems. All that is based on accepting the organism's healing power. That faith gives you room to breathe. The internally guided process completes itself in a healthy way. It comes to a healthy conclusion by itself. You husband the process, you mid-wife it. Your support and faith and caring create a space for that natural unfolding. When you support the person, when you provide that person courage and strength and nourishment, that person just naturally changes. In the last synthesis, it is this faith that changes both the healer and the healed. □