

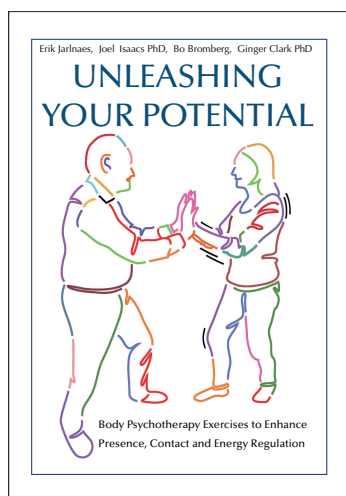
BOOK REVIEW

Unleashing Your Potential

Body Psychotherapy Exercises to Enhance Presence, Contact, and Energy Regulation

by Erik Jarlnaes, Joel Isaacs, Bo Bromberg, and Ginger Clark

Christina Bogdanova



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he British neuroscientist and engineer Daniel Wolpert, whose primary scientific and research interests gravitate around the brain's sensorimotor control of the body, emphasizes in his 2011 TED talk that we have a brain for one and only reason: to produce adaptable and complex movements. He states, "I believe that to understand movement is to understand the whole brain. And therefore, it's important to remember, when you are studying memory, cognition, sensory processing, they're there for a reason, and that reason is action." And though it might sound like a cliché, life is movement – for example, the heartbeat and blood circulation, the breath, balancing and standing up, self-expression and protection, and giving and taking are some examples. We exist and meet our needs, interact with others, and affect the world around us through movement, whether by moving to get food, connect with others, establish a home, or do anything else. Interconnectedness through movement is what makes us human. All communication, including speech, sign language, gestures, and writing, is mediated via the motor system.

"So, it's all about moving," in the words of the Dutch psychiatrist, author, post-traumatic stress researcher, and educator Bessel van der Kolk. But what does happen with movement when we live with high levels of chronic stress, adverse experiences, or trauma – either developmental, relational, or shock? We often lose control over ourselves

and our lives; we feel powerless and helpless. We stop being capable of energy regulation, staying present, or connecting with others. Then, quickly, we might become stuck, frozen, and immobilized. And although movement is compromised in these situations, it is also the tool for overcoming psychological, behavioral, and sometimes even physical restraints and diminished quality of life, as the work of van der Kolk and many others has shown. To regain a sense of control, power, and vital presence, we must relearn how to move and take action to meet our needs, connect with ourselves and with others, experience purpose and meaning, and feel joy from being alive and whole. This underscores the crucial role of movement in enhancing our quality of life.

Unleashing Your Potential: Body Psychotherapy Exercises to Enhance Presence, Contact, and Energy Regulation by Erik Jarlmaes et al. is a valuable guide to restoring the ability to move. The book includes a collection of physical exercises to improve psychological functioning, cultivate resiliency, and enhance well-being and joy. The exercises are grouped to address issues that frequently cause people to look for psychotherapeutic help, such as difficulties in dealing with hardships and overcoming their consequences, successfully managing external stressors and internal distress, and maintaining healthy relationships. They are organized and presented in an order that aims to develop or strengthen presence, energy regulation, and connection. Mastering the exercises provides people with embodied resources to face and grow from frustrating or traumatic experiences, and to bounce back from setbacks or conflicts in ways that strengthen their relationship to themselves and others, and enrich their lives with joy and meaning.

Although referred to as exercises, they might better be perceived as experiments, as the author suggests. The reason behind this is that the benefit from doing them comes when they are learned and experienced in a state of complete awareness and being present at each moment. It is not enough to do some movements mechanically and repeat them mindlessly. The substantive part is to notice our state of being before, during, and after completing the exercise, to be curious each time about its effect on our body and psyche, and to sense the change in our breathing as well as in our attitude towards ourselves and others. Thus, people's awareness of the underlying psychological function of the movements is enhanced. "Regardless of what we call the practice of these movements, experiments or exercises, our goal is to increase awareness and aliveness, and even a mindful curiosity that leads to discovery and, sometimes, even joy. We are strengthening the sense of our mind-body connection and developing our psychological resources for life quality," Jarlmaes emphasizes. (p. 13)

The book, written and prepared in close collaboration with Jarlmaes's colleagues Joel Isaacs, Bo Bromberg, and Ginger Clark is a helpful source for body psychotherapists to use in their individual or group work with clients and students, and for self-stabilization and growth. The authors provide detailed instructions and photos, explaining the intention of each exercise, when and why its use is appropriate, specifics in its implementation, how to begin or finish, and more. Several case examples illustrate the use of the exercises in connection with concrete psychological issues. Erik points out that a psychological problem or behavioral difficulty sometimes indicates which exercise to use. That's why it is so essential for the therapist to be proficient in doing the exercises themselves, and to have mastered "kinesthetic listening" to the somatic details presented by their clients. But it is also possible for exercises to activate psychological issues, or release psychological material from the body and mind during a session. Either approach might be a working entrance to help clients be present to what is happening to them in every moment. They might experience their typical unhealthy behaviors and their impact through their bodies, thus realizing what they no longer want, and become ready to change, and eventually begin to change. "When clients can sense their body, there is a

much better chance that the new action will become integrated and thereby be remembered and used,” writes Jarlmaes (p. 15).

Unleashing Your Potential: Body Psychotherapy Exercises to Enhance Presence, Contact, and Energy Regulation consists of ten foundational exercises with variations for a total of over fifty. Jarlmaes proposes these concrete exercises because they target psychological issues that need to be overcome to develop or strengthen presence, energy regulation, and connection. The problems include but don’t exhaust the options: freezing, giving up, staying silent, feeling bad, isolating, overloading, or acting out. The exercises aim to achieve or enhance the skills necessary to sense our center, express likes or dislikes, ground and stand up for ourselves, be flexible, dispose of burdens, stay present, contain emotions, express and constructively use anger when challenged or threatened, regulate tension levels, set, sense and keep boundaries, say “Stop!”, “Yes!”, and “No!” in relationships, and more.

Only true advocates of exercise and movement might create this book. It promotes how practicing or even playing with using the body freely and with enjoyment expands our limits and grows our abilities, thus attaining even unexpected results. The book doesn’t have much text – only a few pages of synthesized theory, as well as detailed instructions and more than 220 photos to illustrate the instructions, making them easy to follow. In Jarlmaes’ opinion, an important point is the focus on the actual body sensations – a crucial concept for body psychotherapists. He argues that the value of using body sensation questions such as “What do you sense right now?” or “Where do you sense it?” cannot be overemphasized, because body sensations are facts that don’t include thoughts, interpretations, emotions, or feelings, thus providing more precise information about the person’s experience.

I find it helpful that Jarlmaes suggests what to observe or hear that indicates the availability or absence of the skills needed for each exercise, thus using them as a diagnostic tool. There are instructions on how to do the exercises standing or sitting, alone, or in pairs or triads. When working with one or more people, it is essential to give and receive some resistance to “support the movement.” The right amount of resistance – “not too fast or hard” and “not too slow or weak” – helps people to experience their power, thus supporting their core energy and rights, such as the right to be and have needs, to say “No!”, or to use one’s voice. A substantial part of the process is sharing the experience with an attentive other. “Doing these exercises expands people’s movement options, their ‘body vocabulary’ so to speak, and increases their resilience and possibilities for growth. It becomes more likely that they will function well in difficult situations and beautifully in day-to-day situations,” recapitulates Jarlmaes, who continues: “As we help them move past their historical limitations and expand their resources, somatically and psychologically, they have more choices and a brighter future ahead. This choice-fulness and improved functioning will also impact their partners, friends, colleagues, work culture, and beyond” (p. 17).

The book beautifully digests Jarlmaes’ fifty-plus years of experience as a psychotherapist with specializations in Bioenergetics, Bodydynamics, Human Element, Energy work, and Gestalt/TA, as well as being an athlete and coach in running hurdles, European handball, table tennis, and rowing, and a martial artist. He states, “Exercise and movement have been the cornerstones of my life, both personally and professionally, giving my life meaning, purpose, and joy, and deepening my connection with myself and others – in short, enhancing my ‘life quality.’” (p. 11) The good news is that the authors plan to release another volume with more exercises that enhancing vitality and life quality.





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