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CORE ENERGETICS

Core Energetics is a body-oriented psychotherapy that draws from developmental, evolutionary, and character theory. This approach posits the unity of human energy and consciousness and views each individual as having a center of energetic wholeness (the Core), whose vital energy is meant to inform and flow freely through the body, emotions, mind, will, and spirit. Core Energetics interventions restore energy flow that has been disrupted through the experience of developmental deficits that engender protective responses within the personality, known as character defenses, and within the body as energy blocks. Various techniques are used to liberate energy from constricted regions of the body, making suppressed material available to consciousness. The result is an expansion of clients' capacity to express and contain emotion and use their energy toward creative rather than defensive purposes.

Historical Context

Core Energetics emerged from the Reichian tradition of body-centered psychotherapy. Alexander Lowen and John Pierrakos cofounded bioenergetic analysis, and in 1978, Pierrakos founded the Institute for Core Energetics. Pierrakos maintained that a spiritual dimension was a crucial but

missing component of Reichian and bioenergetic theories of body-centered psychology. During the 1970s, Pierrakos incorporated the lectures of the spiritual medium Eva Broch (whom he married) into his clinical perspective. These lectures, called *The Pathwork*, became an integral aspect of Core Energetics with their emphasis on psychospiritual development. Pierrakos asserted that we not only seek to heal from historical emotional injuries but also strive to reach our highest potential. Thus, he came to refer to Core Energetics as an “evolutionary process” rather than a therapy. As such, Core Energetics is both a body-centered approach and a transpersonal model.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Character theory posits that as children we develop adaptations related to our early familial environment. These adaptations are not only fixed ideas about the world and others (images) but also structured in the body as muscular and fascial tensions (blocks) that alter the body’s growth and shape. Analysis of physical character informs the therapist of the deficits to primary needs (e.g., safety, loving touch, nourishment, and autonomy) at key developmental periods. Core Energetics recognizes five major character structures, each recognizable by its pattern of blocks, which repress the frustration, pain, and memory of early circumstances. However, these blocks also decrease the ability to experience pleasure and affect all aspects of personality, including emotional repertoire, experience of embodiment, behavior, and cognition.

Transpersonal theory in Core Energetics views each character as having particular core qualities, which emerge as energy is freed and consciousness grows. The work evolves over four stages:

(1) recognizing the idealized or defensive components of the personality (Mask); (2) identifying and taking responsibility for destructive and separative components of the personality (Lower Self) to transform them; (3) opening the heart to free expression of authenticity and creativity (Higher Self); and (4) in the final stage (Life Plan), clients bringing gifts as their unique contribution to the world from a deep knowing of themselves as an integral part and expression of the whole of life. Core Energetics also builds on other treatment modalities and theories, including developmental psychoanalytic theory, object relations, attachment theory, and self psychology.

Major Concepts

Several Core Energetics concepts are consistent with Reichian theory and bioenergetic analysis, and some are particular to the Pierrakos model. The fundamental concepts include armoring, charge and discharge, character structures, grounding, and higher self, lower self, and mask.

Armoring

Armoring is the process by which the human body adapts to protect itself from pain and the restrictions and frustrations to the spontaneous movement of energy and emotion that children are born with. Not only the mind but also the body's muscles, tissues, and organs learn to adapt to the surrounding environment. Armoring results from a constriction of energy in the seven main segments of the body: (1) ocular, (2) oral, (3) cervical, (4) thoracic, (5) diaphragmatic, (6) abdominal, and (7) pelvic. The result of armoring is that both mind and body develop limited and

habitual patterns of responding to the outer world.

Charge and Discharge

The principle of charge and discharge is based on the ongoing condition of tension buildup and tension release, excitation and relaxation, sympathetic arousal and parasympathetic rest. Evident in orgasm and multiple life processes, recent research in trauma work validates the body's basic need to discharge the energy to release trauma.

Character Structure

During the formative years, the human body–mind forms in response to familial conditions. Ongoing experiences of danger, rejection, neglect, invasion, overcontrol, betrayal, and conditional love form one of five primary character structures: (1) schizoid, (2) oral, (3) masochist, (4) psychopath, and (5) rigid.

Grounding

Being grounded means containing energy in the body and remaining present to sensation, feelings, and awareness of self in relation to one's surroundings and to others.

Higher Self, Lower Self, and Mask

Three layers of personality characterize the human body–mind. The higher self expresses the universal qualities of love, empathy, generosity, and wisdom, as well as each person’s unique core qualities, such as intelligence, integrity, or charisma. The lower self is the destructive aspect of the self and includes the impulse to be cruel, humiliating, or punishing. The mask is the social self, which hides both lower and higher self energy and exiles unwanted emotions and vulnerabilities.

Techniques

In Core Energetics, use of techniques is determined by several factors, including client ego strength, the strength of the therapeutic alliance, the client’s character structure, and the ability of the client to tolerate and contain energy.

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation involves educating clients about the theory behind Core Energetics, the use of physical interventions, and the concepts of mask, lower self, and higher self.

Body and Energy Reading

In body and energy reading, information is garnered through observation and discussion of the client’s body.

Grounding

Grounding is a technique whereby postural and stance adjustments, breath, and awareness are used to support greater connection to sensations in the body and to feelings, and to enhance mindfulness of the present moment.

Breath Techniques

Breathing retraining through various breath techniques supports the release of chronic tensions in the body that inhibit physical and emotional spontaneity.

Active Expressive Techniques

Active expressive techniques are used to support the flow of energy to regions of the body where energy is needed and to bring consciousness to disowned feelings. These techniques are targeted to activate (charge) and support the release (discharge) of chronic muscular and emotional holding.

Hands-On and Soft Techniques

Hands-on techniques are used with prior consent, caution, and clarity of purpose to bring

awareness to regions of holding in the body, to encourage the release of energy in blocked areas, or to lend support to areas of the body. Soft techniques include gentle movement, mindfulness, and work with the chakra system.

Embodied Relational Dynamics

Core Energetics goes beyond identifying transferential and countertransferential enactments that emerge in the relationship with the therapist by supporting the expression of emotions and energy evoked by these experiences.

Therapeutic Process

In early Core Energetics sessions, a therapeutic alliance is forged. This includes identifying the client's primary concerns, introducing simple techniques to support mindfulness and body awareness, and grounding and physical interventions. The work serves to dismantle clients' character armor while at the same time supporting healthy ego strength and trust in the spontaneous movements of the Core. As the process continues, clients see how their mask generates unsatisfying relationships, and energy work exposes the impulses that originate in the lower self. Clients begin to experience the reserve of untapped energy previously held in the unconscious lower self, which, when exposed and owned, becomes transformed into higher self creative energy. This increase of energy and consciousness is brought to bear on life issues as clients become self-empowered as agents of their own transformation. Core Energetics can be used for limited and specific issues wherein the work takes place over the course of several

months or as a longer program of healing, empowerment, and self-development.

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See also Attachment Theory and Attachment Therapies; Bioenergetic Analysis; Body-Oriented Therapies: Overview; Orgonomy; Self Psychology

Further Readings

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