

HEALING TOUCH FOR ACA'S

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Mom's arms embrace baby welcoming him to the family. She and father gently count all the toes: "This little piggy went to market...". Soon a toddler, his bedtime usually means back rubs, and when his brow is fevered, he is soothed with soft strokes. Later, understanding hugs acknowledge his teenage successes or failures, and he and his family treat his rapidly maturing body with respect and love.

Nourishing families supply their members with touch that conveys assurance, pleasure, warmth, vitality and self-esteem. Nurturing touch is a natural part of a healthy, functioning family unit. The children of alcoholic and other dysfunctional families, however, often grow up experiencing primarily abusive touch such as violent beatings and sexual abuse or neglect, both physically and emotionally.

Adult Children of Alcoholics, ACA's, experienced a childhood environment of uncertainty, chaos, and pain. Abandonment, emotionally and sometimes physically, abuse, hurt, and shame characterized their family life. Many experienced one or a series of catastrophic events that were not resolved either physically or psychologically leaving them in a state of chronic shock.

While there probably were some good times, basically they survived by their own internal protection system. The child of a dysfunctional family must construct a physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual fortress as the only stronghold in the chaotic alcoholic landscape of her life. Within, the wounded child hides, usually continuing into adult life feeling increasingly alone, hollow, and aching and only able to temporarily numb herself with activities or substances.

This fortress is physically constructed of tight muscles, particularly in the neck, shoulders and lower back, sexual and gastro-intestinal dysfunction, and allergies. Its walls are emotionally reinforced by distrust, fear, anger, sadness, numbness, overly aggressive or overly passive behavior, and an inability to distinguish loving healthy touch from aggression and abuse. Within these protective walls, the individual is not only isolated from his dysfunctional family, but also becomes divorced from his own sense of Self. Connection with his own body and feelings is broken. Boundaries and limits within relationships are often ill-defined as well.

others and within the family. The rules of rigidity, silence and denial isolate the family as a unit from the community and its individuals one from the other. Therapeutic relationships with counselors, psychologists, and other group members in support and therapy groups can provide a protected environment for experimenting with intimacy. My body therapy clients and I are engaged in a therapeutic relationship that offers an opportunity to experiment with issues of trust, honesty, respect, physical contact, and empathy.

AN INTERACTIVE RECOVERY PROCESS

Recovery is always a process not simply a goal to be reached. It involves emotional discharge, cognitive reconstruction and behavioral action, all occurring interactively. Integrative body therapy and other touch therapies employed by massage therapists, movement awareness educators such as Feldenkrais practitioners, and other body therapists can be effective in these three areas of recovery, particularly in facilitating emotional discharge and behavioral action.

As Kritsberg states it: "In recovery... the anger and hurt lose their potency, and a true sense of happiness and joy can be experienced. This does not mean that recovery equals no problems or pain. What recovery does mean is that the ACA becomes much better at dealing with life's bumps and crunches in a way that is healthier and healthier... There is a sense of wonder and joy that goes hand in hand with recovery." And wonder and joy are experiences of the body, the emotions, the mind and the Soul.

About the author: Carole Osborne-Sheets, R.M.T., is in private practice in the San Diego area as a licensed holistic health practitioner specializing in integrative body therapies. Over her thirteen years of practice she has worked extensively with adults of dysfunctional families, including ACA's, recovering alcoholics, and women processing eating disorders and sexual abuse. She also specializes in bodywork for the childbearing year: pregnancy, postpartum and infant massage. She is co-founder of the Institute of Psycho-Structural Balancing, an international school of professional body therapy, where she continues to teach.