

Sexual Grounding Therapy®: Re-finding dignity by changing our belief system about sexuality

MAYA SCHRIER-KERSTAN

This article is about the influence of a healthy sexual education on the development of children, on family structures and society and the possibility of changing old disturbing patterns with the method of Sexual Grounding Therapy®.

Our very existence is directly connected to sex. If our parents had not had any sexual contact, we would probably not be here. Even in the case of assisted conception, most couples would have had sexual contact before embarking on this process.

On an intellectual level, we can understand this, but it is harder to connect to this reality at an emotional and body level. After years of suppression, we have internalized some shame and guilt about being sexual. This is often connected to emotional pain for many of us. It seems that we have lost the connection between our hearts and our genitals.

Despite the “sexual revolution” in the 1960s, when we achieved a degree of self-liberation, we have not really internalized sexual emancipation properly. It seems that we have only gone to the other extreme: everything must be permissible, without checking our internal boundaries. This causes a feeling of emptiness inside and an over-emphasis on the outside, where a diversity of industries can benefit from our needs.

Our children are often left isolated in their sexual development; they often learn about sex from movies, magazines and the Internet. Through these media, they can get a very distorted picture of sexuality and sexual acts. If we wish to see a reduction in the levels of confusion about sexuality, violence associated with it, and some of the side-effects: like sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancies, abortion and divorce rates, we must change both children’s and adults’ education in this field. It is therefore also necessary to change many of our belief systems about sexuality, and to learn how to regulate our sexual energy better.

Centuries of denying, distorting and suppressing our natural sexuality have left deep imprints in our brain. The resulting separation between activities in the brain, heart and genitals, which is the result of this denial and suppression, has also had an influence on our

ability to establish and maintain intimate relationships and live our sexuality in a self-expressive and regulated way. Sexual intimacy in relationships should be the nourishing ground for a mutual ‘flowering’ and for the bringing up of children.

The rising number of relational and sexual problems raises some questions for many therapists and educators: “What is happening here?” “How can we help our clients with these problems?” “How can we change our own imprints to become more stable and grounded in the work-setting, and at home, in our own relationships?” “How can we educate our children, so they can develop into self-confident and healthy sexual adults?”

It is very important that we, as workers in the field of health care, start to think differently: our sexual organs should have the same care and attention as our other organs. The same is true for psychological health care. In Sexual Grounding Therapy® (SGT), we see the genitals not only as reproductive organs but also as contact organs, connected to the heart and the brain. In society, notwithstanding the sexual revolution of the sixties, genitals are seen more or less as organs of lust. In the past, lust was largely separated from the act of reproduction under the influence of religion. With the possibility of birth control without appropriate sexual education accompanying its use, the split has become even bigger. In the process of this separation, an essential part of our nature was sent into the shadows. Here, it can assume truly perverted and sick forms. The irony here is that, in not trusting ourselves as human beings to regulate our own pleasure, we have split ourselves into an ‘upper’ (good, divine) and a ‘lower’ (bad, animal) part and have actually created the sort of unregulated sexuality that we were afraid of in the first place!

Sexuality is, and remains, a delicate, vulnerable area of human life experience. It is because of this that we, as health workers, need to act – honestly, responsibly and empathically with our clients. We need a professional understanding about what is natural and healthy sexual development; and we also need techniques and ways in which to support our clients with their problems.

In Sexual Grounding Therapy®, we have developed a clear framework for working with people’s sexual issues. We offer theory, exercises and process work designed to teach people how to accept and regulate their sex drive, and take responsibility for their actions and relationships.

Sexual Grounding Therapy® is a model of self-development introduced by the Dutch developmental psychologist and Body Psychotherapist, Willem Poppeliers. His motivation is to support people in their natural need for sexual healing, sexual expression and sexual relating. That includes developing more self-awareness; learning to regulate the own stream

of excitement and love; learning to take responsibility for their sexual energy; learning to recognize the male and female energies in themselves; a desire for fulfilment, autonomy and completeness; and to become grounded in their sexuality (including their genitals). In Sexual Grounding Therapy®, sex is seen as, not only a genital activity, but also an expression of body, soul and spirit. The therapy is based (in part) on the work of Freud, Kernberg, Kohut, Fairbairn, Reich, Lowen and Winnicott: also the influence of modern attachment theory plays an important role.

Sexual development

We mostly developed our belief systems and behavioural patterns about sex in the relational triangle between mother, father and child. We tend to repeat (or react to) these patterns in later relationships, perhaps in the hope of solving them, and we often experience a lot of frustration as a result.

The person's actual sexual development, from conception to death is, to a large extent, based on hormonal changes. In our bodies, there is a biological program running that induces changes to the body and to our sexual drive. In the womb, hormones are released to develop amorphous foetal genitals that then either change into male organs or develop as female organs. Babies often get quite a lot of pleasure from touching their genitals, if they are allowed to. Around the age of 4, children become very curious about their genitalia, and it looks like that they can now feel more conscious arousal in their genitals. The child naturally looks to their parents for mirroring, just like with all other body sensations. Any further development depends very much on how the parents (or care-givers) react to this first innocent exposures of sexuality. Stress, distress and disturbances in these early years, can also influence our adult sexuality. A child will thus experience different phases in which certain physical and emotional needs occur. Nature (and thus the inner knowing of the child) will show what is necessary for a healthy development.

The child's core requirements are:

- A need for safety, holding and appropriate physical touch;
- A need for food and love;
- A need for self-determination, self-expression and freedom;
- A need for support, positive mirroring and recognition.

Body Psychotherapists will probably recognize the aetiology or development of the main different (Reichian – Lowen) character styles here, as deficits in the above areas are said to start to create the defence mechanisms (or survival strategies) in the child.

What can go wrong in different developmental stages?

- When a child grows up with too little body contact and too much stress, and/or in fearful circumstances, it will find it hard to relax and connect with its body. Their energy is ‘pushed’ to the head – as a survival mechanism, i.e. often the child is day-dreaming in order to avoid the stressful environment.
- If there is poor tuning into the needs of the child for food, and also for love, a child cannot learn to build up his energy, as it will later collapse in stressful situations. It will therefore learn to hold back its own needs and longings, and/or learn to focus more on satisfying the needs of others.
- If the child’s parents or educators have overly high expectations and it therefore receives a lot of criticisms or demands, the child will try to fit in. Therefore, it needs to make itself bigger or/and built up a thick skin to handle this pressure of expectations. By doing this, the child loses contact with its own gentler inner feelings and impulses. It does not learn to put proper boundaries in place.
- When a child is rejected as a result of its natural, innocent expression of “erotic” feelings and curiosity, it will close its heart and mistrust its sexual feelings. It will learn to split off from these feelings and, either hold them back, or look for attention in an excessive way.

The results of an inadequate sexual education:

Physiological sexual development starts in the womb, but the foundation for the psychological sexual development is placed in the first 5 years. When distortions occur, for whatever reason, energetic blocks can develop, the nature and location of which depend at what age this happened, the circumstances, and the intensity of the experience.

Very early distortions can lead to a fragmented body experience and existential fears with the tendency to fantasise. Later on, a person with these blocks might have difficulties getting involved in intimate body contact and may escape easily into addictions, such as internet pornography.

When the sexual needs of a child are not respected, it may have difficulties later on with sexual arousal and standing up for his/her sexual needs and desires. If the child did not experience freedom and self-determination, it may, as an adult, have fears of expressing its sexual impulses and/or getting involved in a situation where there is strong sexual attraction. In the case of a rejection of an innocent expression of “erotic” feelings in childhood, a person can find it difficult, as an adult, to surrender into a full sexual relationship with a steady partner. These are just some of the distortions and possible consequences.

What do children need for their sexual development?

Feelings of pleasure are slowly moving down in the developing body of the young child, starting with the exploration of the pleasure in the mouth from suckling (the oral phase) to the

pleasure of discovering the use of muscles in the anus (anal phase), to the pleasure experienced from genital excitement (genital phase), the child becomes more and more conscious about its body.

In these phases, children are very busy with their corresponding body openings, they are very curious, and want to find out everything about them. They experience pleasure and excitement, and look for necessary confirmation from their parents. Generally, they get a more or less adequate mirroring of their explorations of their mouths and anuses ('nice' and 'nasty'), but when it comes to their explorations of genital pleasure, parents react mostly with criticism, shame, withdrawal or even abuse. The child cannot understand that because its inner drive want to follow feelings of lust. It was good for the body and the development until now. But here, it learns that there must be something "charged", something special about their genitals. If the child is not adequately mirrored in his or her body sensations or impulses, he/she will start to doubt his/her own inner experiences or truth. The child will eventually think: *there must be something wrong with me!* The next step is to look for compensation, because the young child, as a primary need, wants to be accepted, to be 'good', to receive love and attention, and to belong to the family group.

In this way we learn to withdraw from our own experience, our body as the source of our inner truth, from our self-worth and we cannot develop a personality that meets our core needs. We learn to adapt to outside expectations. Stress and eventually illness is the price we pay for this.

Around the age of about 4, in the genital phase, the heart starts pumping more blood into the genitals. Children experience this as a pleasant excitement, and they also get curious about their genitals and about the differences between girls' and boys' genitals. The girl will try to look for recognition of her feelings and turns especially to her father – or a surrogate – to practice a form of relationship with the other sex. The boy is normally more attracted to the mother – or a surrogate – for his recognition. Children see intimate behaviour around them and they want to copy this, but at their own developmental level. Perhaps they see kissing on TV, and then they want to kiss Daddy or Mummy in the same way. Often, parents are startled by this and don't know what to do. But if they could only remember their own childhood, they would see that it is really innocent. The child normally trusts his parents and is just expressing his or her love with this behaviour, it is exercising relating with "erotic" energy. It has absolutely nothing to do with adult sex: only with innocent curiosity, arousal in the body and the exchanging of energy. The girl needs the mother and the boy needs the father, as a support

from the same gender, in order to approach the parent of the other gender with this innocent genital excitement.

Between approximately 5 and 11 years, there will usually be a greater latency in the genitals. But with the beginning of puberty, the person's hormonal development starts to transform their sexual organs, ready for adult reproduction. These hormones also influence the behaviour of the child, and it will become more interested in sexuality, in the functions of the sexual organs, in relationships, and in its own appearance and sex appeal. This is a very vulnerable phase, the youngsters already want to behave like a man or woman, but most of the time, they still feel like a child.

The young girl, during her adolescence, needs her mother to tell her everything about the female body and its functions. She also needs responses from her father (the opposite gender) to trust that she is attractive to men. She wants to know how men see women. The boy needs the father for support to become a man properly and also to hear from his mother how women want to be approached, how women feel, what they find attractive, and so on and, again, the reassurance that he is attractive to women.

Such adolescents are very sensitive about having too much, or too little, attention paid to their developing sexuality. This means that their parents have to be able to regulate their own sexual drives: as well as being well-bounded, they must also be quite allowing. If the child is more attracted to partners of the same gender, the parents need to be interested in these feelings too, and accept and support their child's unique expression of their own sexuality.

While in childhood, the parents were regulating the forms of expression of the sexual energy of their child, now the adolescents have to learn how to do this for themselves. Therefore, the parents have to look together with their pubertal child at the consequences that their sexual behaviour might have: and since children learn more by actions than words, they probably need to look at their own sexual behaviour as well. In this way, youngsters can develop their own inner morality and learn to take responsibility for their sexuality.

However, we rarely find such ideal circumstances for the child's sexual development. Mothers and fathers seldom had support from their own parents in regulating their sexual energy. Most teachers are embarrassed while giving sex education and keep it technical, without any real understanding of the emotional needs of the children that they are teaching. In some cases, the children's innocent impulses get sexualised because their parents or educators are not able to see the developmental stage from which the child's behaviour originates, and instead, view the behaviour from the framework of their own adult projections.

When the basic needs in a child's sexual development were not fulfilled by their caregivers, that person, as an adult, can remain fixated on other people, as substitutes for the necessary confirmation: this puts them in a dependent position. The hope remains that somehow the now adult 'child' can still manage to get what he or she needs from the outside, but this needs to be balanced with an inner awareness that they need to make up this deficit for themselves. Without any contact with their inner knowing, the inner truth recedes into the background.

Given the precepts of the modern world, we often lose faith in our biological programming and the wisdom of our bodies, so we give up searching for fulfilment (inner or outer). Satisfaction, often confused with fulfilment, seems the only thing that can be achieved, but this is a very slippery slope.

How can Sexual Grounding Therapy® support people?

In Sexual Grounding Therapy®, we have a whole scale of effective interventions and exercises to rediscover this inner trust. We support people to:

- Develop body consciousness
- Reconnect the energetic stream between their heart, brain and genitals
- Find the roots of pain and frustration in relation to their sexuality
- Express (possibly childish) emotions and needs from an adult's perspective
- Reprogram old patterns and beliefs
- Find their own morality that fits with their inner nature
- Acquire a developmental perspective to maintain their innocence, excitement, curiosity and regulation until the end of their lives
- Forgive their parents for not being ideal and connect to their line of ancestors
- Regulate their sexual energy and to bring it into their relationships in a healthy way
- Examine their relational patterns openly and critically, seeing what works and where it doesn't
- Handle the sexual education of children healthy (their own or children they work with)

The main pillar is that we work with the concept of "ideal parents": fellow participants in this form of group therapy, who play the role of the parent that knows exactly what the child needs, as a mirror. Finding this role of ideal parent is surprisingly simple: just remember what the young child in you would need: the body memory is still available. However, it is not that easy to express our needs, as there is often pain, rejection, shame, etc. in the way. This is why working in a group can really help.

Like several other therapies (“Birth into Being”¹, “Lifespan Integration”²), we work with the principal of giving the brain another experiential imprint, an imprint that is experienced as healthier, that matches our nature and inner expectations, and which helps to neutralise the old, somewhat disturbing ones. We still know exactly what we need for our healthy development. So, it is important to re-activate this intuitive knowledge, to trust it implicitly, and to exercise healthier behaviour in the future. The concept of working with the “ideal parents” often has a deep impact on clients; mostly their body reacts with a release of tension and an increase in inner trust. By working with energizing exercises and therapeutic constellations, we can achieve a deep healing resonance in the body and the mind.

In Sexual Grounding Therapy®, we treat the client as a whole person – with a body, a set of feelings, lots of thoughts, and a unique ‘soul’. And we treat all parts of the body as equal. That’s why the therapy has deep and permanent effects. We see that clients can really lose their burdens of poor or inappropriate sexuality. They develop a better inner balance of male and female energy that can bring greater stability to their intimate relationships. Their self-trust and forms of self-expression also grow. This has an influence not only on the personal, but also on the professional level. People have become, so to speak, good parents for themselves.

The benefits for our Society

When children get the chance to grow up with the permission to express their inner nature and uniqueness, also on the sexual level, they can grow up into men and women with self-trust and a greater inner dignity. In this way, they will also naturally treat others with more respect and responsibility.

Our society could benefit in a number of different ways when we are able to change our imprints and our conditioned attitudes about sexuality. By learning to regulate our sexuality healthily, instead of suppressing it or acting it out, we can create more stable relationships, also with our parents and other family (in-law) members. This can directly influence our physical and emotional health and the well-being of our children. Divorce rates and health care costs could go down, as well as sexual abuse and rape rates and drug misuse (and so on), less sexually transmitted diseases could occur. We could use our sexual energy, which is in fact an aspect of our life energy, to create a better world around us. By remembering how we came into this world, we can regain our human dignity.

¹ Birth into Being: www.birthintobeing.com

² Lifespan Integration: www.lifespanintegration.com

Presenter

Maya Schrier-Kerstan is a Dutch Sexual Grounding® therapist and trainer. She is originally trained in Physics, studied Art Therapy and Body Psychotherapy and has the European Certificate for Psychotherapy (ECP); specialises in Energetic Integration, Sexual Grounding and women's health; has been working in private practice and with groups for more than 20 years; and taught people in the field of Body Psychotherapy in several different countries: Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, France, Spain, Ukraine, Hungary and USA.



Website: www.rodeparel.nl, www.sexualgrounding.hu

E-mail: therapie@rodeparel.nl

For more information about Sexual Grounding Therapy®: see www.sexualgrounding.com and W. Poppeliers and M. Broesterhuizen “Love and Sexuality in the Perspective of Relations and Generations”, Protocol Media Productions.

This article is part of the EABP congress book (Lissabon September, 2014) “The body in Relationship”, see www.bodypsychotherapypublications.com.