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Healing

Trauma Touch Therapy helps people come to terms with their past

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COLORADO SPRINGS, CO. – Tony Volz doesn't have to look far to see reminders of his traumatic past. His abdomen is a mass of scars. Since childhood, he has undergone multiple abdominal surgeries to correct his malfunctioning digestive tract. The scarring is so bad that he's sometimes been unable to lie flat on his back or participate in his favorite sports: skiing and in-line skating.

As if this weren't enough, his wife died of cancer four years ago.

"Losing somebody you love is a terrible trauma," he says.

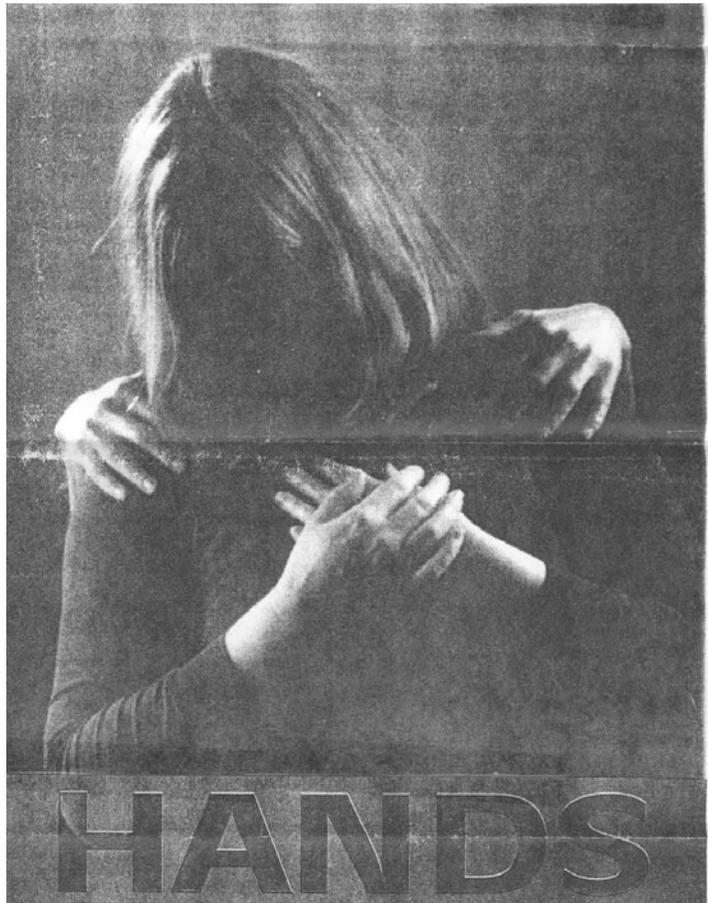
As a nurse-practitioner, Volz knew how crucial it was to get help. Traumatic events - especially the death of a spouse - are associated with an increased risk of serious disease and premature death.

So he embarked on a search that led him to licensed massage therapist Teresa Bohn, owner-operator of the Trauma Therapy Center in Colorado Springs.

Bohn practices Trauma Touch Therapy, a form of massage developed in 1992 at the Colorado School of Healing Arts in Lakewood.

It's based on the theory that trauma memories are stored in the body as muscle tension. By manipulating affected tissues, therapists attempt to release the tension so clients can come to terms with their past.

"The issues are in the tissues" is a catch-phrase for the 100 Trauma Touch therapists in practice worldwide. "It doesn't matter if the issue is surgery,



Trauma Touch Therapy aims to limit damages caused by traumatic events. The therapy is a form of massage developed in 1992 at the Colorado School of Healing Arts in Lakewood, Colo. It's based on the theory trauma memories are stored in the body as muscle tension. By manipulating the tissue, therapists can release the tension so clients can come to terms with the past.

rape, incest or being held captive in time of war," Bohn says. "Any kind of trauma activates the fight-or-flight response. If the body can't respond the way it needs to by fighting or running away, it gets stuck in the traumatic event and the tissue takes it on."

Bohn considers herself uniquely qualified to practice this form of therapy.

"I'm an incest survivor," she says. "My parents were alcoholics, and I grew up in a very violent home."

Before beginning Trauma Touch Therapy, Bohn requires clients either to be in psychotherapy or to have recently completed a psychotherapy course.

"They've got to be in touch with what's going on with themselves," Bohn says. "It's important they have somebody they can call if deeper issues come up during the sessions."

A typical Trauma Touch Therapy session begins with deep-breathing exercises to relax clients and get them focused on the tension, pain or numbness in their bodies. Then therapists employ body-work similar to standard massage.

But it's different from standard massage because clients are expected to call the shots. "I always ask permission before I touch," Bohn says. "And when a client says, 'Stop,' I stop."

Giving clients control is therapeutic, Bohn says, because they had no control when the traumatic events occurred. By taking charge of their bodies, they can learn to set limits in their personal lives, develop trusting relationships and experience touch - sometimes for the first time - as a positive, healing force.

But getting there can unleash powerful emotions. During sessions, clients often scream, yell, pound their fists and kick their legs.

"They get into a running motion like they're trying to, run away," Bohn says. As long as clients realize they're in a therapist's office, such acting-out is good, she says. The danger is that they can lose their bearings and think they're re-experiencing the traumas.

To keep them from dissociating, Bohn gives them frequent reality checks.

"I make sure they're grounded and present in the session and know exactly what's going on," she says. "Sometimes I'm like a cheerleader. I say, 'It's Teresa. I'm right here, you're safe and you're doing great.'"

When Volz started Trauma Touch Therapy, he had been through a grief-recovery workshop and a standard course of massage.

The massage helped him regain enough mobility to resume skiing and in-line skating, but it also produced some disturbing physical reactions.

"The first time I had scarwork done, I developed nausea and tears," he says. "There was no-pain, just these tears squirting out of my eyes."

Convinced he still had one more step to go in his recovery, he began Trauma Touch Therapy last summer.

During a recent session, Bohn gently rests her hand on Volz's scarred abdomen and asks what he's feeling.

"A little tightness," he says. Such reactions are typical. "I actually relive the pain, and Teresa keeps me focused on that," he says. "My legs often tremble like crazy, all this pent-up emotion and energy."

At first, Volz wanted to know why he was having such symptoms. "But I came to see that wasn't the point," he says. "The point was to re-experience the pain and accept it for what it was. As an adult, you can do that. As a small child, you can't."

The theory that traumatic events are stored as muscle tension was first advanced in the 1940s by Austrian-born psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich; who developed physical-therapy treatments to relieve neuroses.

Reich believed that releasing the tension could release a traumatic event's hold on a person. Starting in the 1960s, his ideas were incorporated into many holistic therapies, including Gestalt and Bioenergetics.

Today, many psychotherapists embrace Reich's theory, but not without reservations.

"I believe people do retain memories of traumatic events in their bodies, but the evidence is mostly anecdotal," says Joseph Michelli, a clinical psychologist with the Penrose-St. Francis Health Care System. "There's not a lot of scientific evidence to support it."

Michelli has seen body-workers work wonders on emotionally disturbed people. "The outpouring is phenomenal," he says. But he says he would never touch a client even if he thought it would prompt a healthy emotional release:

"The psychological profession is a little hung up on not touching people, and for good reason," he says. "Touching can lead to sexual abuse."

Since legal and moral taboos prohibit psychotherapists, from physically interacting with clients, much of the impetus toward new forms of touch therapy has come from massage therapists.

Chris Smith and Roberta Gibson - co-founders of Trauma Touch Therapy - were prompted to rethink their approach to body-work when they found that up to 60 percent of their massage students at the Colorado School of Healing Arts had histories of trauma - most often sexual abuse.

"As they received body-work, a lot of memories, feelings and sensations would arise that were difficult for them to process," Smith says. "It became increasingly apparent to me we had to do something to train massage therapists in the area of trauma and abuse."

As Smith and Gibson refined their techniques, they say they witnessed the blossoming of emotionally stunted clients.

"It's an amazingly wonderful thing," Smith says. "We were like midwives helping somebody become aware of their full human beingness."

An in-house study showed that about 90 percent of clients felt positively toward the therapy. But about 20 percent complained that it produced an increase in such negative sensations as pain and anxiety.

Smith has seen instances where Trauma Touch Therapy appeared to make clients remember forgotten traumas. But she won't judge whether such "recovered" memories are real or figments of the imagination. "When that happens, we don't try to psychoanalyze it," she says. "We don't have to get into 'Where's the truth here?'" The truth is that this is a person whose body has been severely affected."