

# Townsend Letter

## *The Examiner of Alternative Medicine*

© 1983-2006 Townsend Letter for Doctors & Patients

### **Reichian-Myofascial Release Therapy for Deeper Emotional and Physical Healing** *by Peter M. Bernstein, PhD*

Reichian-myofascial release therapy is a new and unique treatment – the combination of two of the most successful body-oriented therapies in use today. Each therapy in its own right is a very effective treatment, but combining the two creates results that are exponentially greater than either therapy used alone. In application as well as in theory, there is an incredible amount of overlap between the two treatments, and yet they are largely unknown to each other. This article offers a brief introduction to their origins and to the benefits of using them in combination.



#### **Origins of Reichian Therapy**

Wilhelm Reich, MD, was a noted psychiatrist and protégé of Sigmund Freud. He was one of the first to employ the practice of psychoanalysis, which used the theories and techniques of verbal exchange to understand and reveal the inner workings of a patient's unconscious mind. For the purpose of this paper, we will describe the human unconscious as the brain's reservoir of thoughts, experiences, and impressions. Though generally hidden from our day-to-day awareness – e.g., we are not conscious of them – these thoughts, experiences, and expressions exert significant control upon our actions, conscious thoughts, and resulting everyday behavior. Practitioners who came after Reich and incorporated his work into theirs called these thoughts, experiences, and impressions that make up our unconscious mind: imprints.

Reich thought imprints were responsible for an individual's destructive behavior – both to others and to themselves – and that the power of these imprinted experiences resulted directly from the pain that was repressed (unexpressed) in the past when the original incident or circumstance (which he called trauma) made the imprint. The imprint metaphor is useful in understanding this relationship between the past and present in that the greater the amount of repressed pain, the deeper the imprint. In other words, the

greater the impact of the trauma, the greater the troubled behaviors and troubled lives.

In his early work with those who exhibited emotional illness, Reich could only deal with the symptoms of the sickness, which were expressed through behavioral manifestations of their character. For example, Reich might have asked why the patient always agreed or disagreed with the therapist, why he or she came late for appointments, or why the patient said everything with a smile? In time, he learned that these behavioral manifestations of character are also clearly demonstrated in a person's physical characteristics such as a person's dulled eyes, clenched jaw, stiff neck, tight throat, shrugged shoulders, held breath, flexed pelvic area, or tight buttocks. He taught that these physical characteristics, or biophysical statements, are the way that the body manifests deep character distortions.(Hershkowitz M. Human armoring, an introduction to psychiatric orgone therapy. Chapters 1-3. *The Annals of the Institute for Orgonomic Science*. 1984; 3(1).)

Reich reasoned that biophysical statements were caused by repressing a natural emotional reaction to a painful experience and that the process of repressing this emotion altered what he called the "energy economy" of the total person. He termed this process armoring. Before addressing what is meant by energy economy, let's take a closer look at armoring.

**Repressed emotions are often stored in the temporomandibular joint (TMJ), which is frequently a tender, painful area for patients. Relief can be provided by a variety of myofascial release techniques.**



### **Understanding Armoring**

The key to understanding armoring is realizing that it is simultaneously manifested in both the mind and the body, because it is directly connected to emotional repression. Armoring can take two forms. When armoring is reflected in attitudinal behavior, it is called "character armoring." When it's manifested in bodily tension, it's called "muscular armoring."

Armoring can be thought of as the juncture between body and mind that causes abnormal behavior. Both character armoring and muscular armoring are the demonstrated effects of the underlying character disorder. In other words, the symptom perceived by the person himself (and the behavior observed by others) is a reflection of the disease, but not the actual disease itself.

While the symptoms and the behavior caused by armoring may be manipulated or altered by various techniques – chemical, physical, psychological – the underlying disorder is not altered. It persists, limiting the patient's ability to feel, think, act, and relate to others. It's like a mental, physical, and emotional straitjacket that compromises an individual's reactions to life and reduces the ability to function in the world.

### **Energy Economy**

Once Reich began to understand the process of armoring and its meaning in our lives, he began to develop a number of techniques to dissolve or unwind it. The first of these techniques is hinted at in the term "energy economy" mentioned above.

Reich saw emotional repression as a conflict of opposing forces triggered by a painful experience. When individuals experience a physical or emotional trauma, they naturally want to express it. However, when that natural expression is repressed out of fear or for other reasons, it doesn't just go away, it continually seeks expression. It pushes to get out. When the need to repress the emotion pushes back, the two forces become locked in a constant state of opposition.

Think of two equally-matched arm wrestlers who are committing all their strength and energy into an intense battle. The casual observer, who sees no movement, may conclude incorrectly that nothing is happening. When a body is in this constant state of opposition, bio-physical energy is not only wasted in the continuous struggle to bury emotions, it is no longer available for other, more natural uses. The body becomes "energy inefficient." In this way, armoring causes people to behave unnaturally, because they are deviating from their natural "energy-efficient" state.

Reich reasoned that emotional repression constricts the body, producing a physiological contraction that manifests itself as muscular tension. Furthermore, he saw that these constrictions become chronic with time, binding the body's energy in a manner he called stasis. When a body is in stasis, the normal pulsation of tension and relaxation comes to a halt. Like the arm wrestlers who drain all their energy while locked in a fruitless contest, armoring traps the individual in a pain-filled and unproductive life.

### **Segments of Armoring**

In practice, the study and treatment of armoring in Reichian psychotherapy must first recognize that muscular armoring is manifested in segments throughout the body which are, in effect, constricting muscular bands beginning at the top of the head proceeding down through the pelvis to the lower limbs.

To help you visualize the effect that these constricting segments, or bands, have on muscular tissue, imagine a jellyfish floating in the water. As it moves, a healthy jellyfish's body expands and contracts in a graceful rhythm. Now imagine what would happen to the fluid, pulsating motion if you placed a rubber band around the jellyfish's body. The rubber band would compress and choke the tissue underneath, interrupting the normal pulsations. With its tissue constricted, the jellyfish's system would react: the natural pulsation is replaced by erratic pulsations in twos, then fives, then sevens. The jellyfish would soon lose its ability to function naturally in the water. Instead of its naturally beautiful movement, it would become abnormal and spasmodic. In effect, the addition of the rubber band would make the jellyfish a different creature.

Just as the rubber band distorts the jellyfish, the constricting muscular bands or segments

of armoring distort human musculature. And like the jellyfish, with our natural muscular pulsation (from tension to relaxation) choked and unbalanced, we lose our ability to function normally, and we become different creatures.

**The fascial web extends throughout the body. Fascial restrictions and armoring can be released by a valuable technique called unwinding. Unwinding often releases unconscious, repressed memories of emotional trauma, which are sometimes actually relived "positionally."**



### **Diagnosing Armoring**

As we have discussed, armoring exerts a powerful effect on people who repress physical or emotional trauma. So powerful, in fact, that its symptoms aren't hard to distinguish...even for the layperson.

- A young child's eyes, which one would expect to look deeply and lovingly into his or her mother's eyes, look sideways with suspicion and distrust, revealing a child who is afraid of being hurt or having its trust betrayed.
- Our natural aggression, which helps us overcome life's obstacles and difficulties, becomes distorted into a tool of hatred, belligerence, and hostility or into the greed demonstrated by those driven to acquire unfulfilling amounts of possessions, wealth or fame.
- Armoring causes bodies to lose their ease, grace, and spontaneity. Instead they become stiff and constipated. In other words, they become bound up and "imprisoned" by their muscular constrictions.

In sum, armoring distorts us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In so doing, it blocks us from more rewarding and productive lives. While armoring does have a function in that it suppresses the unpleasant feelings of anxiety, discomfort, or pain, the price is steep, because it limits our contact with our environment and with ourselves.

When we are armored, we trade the freedom of spontaneous reaction and the fullness of our natural feelings and thoughts for a mute deadness and numbness. For example, in place of free and genuine contact with those around us, armoring will cause us to substitute artificial behavior. It may take the form of a social disguise that masks who we really are, reducing and dismissing the genuine person inside.

Sometimes armoring is temporarily useful, as when a child is hurt and holds its breath to diminish the pain. But if this armoring is allowed to continue untreated, the child will learn that it lessens the intensity of feeling and to protect itself the child will continue to use armoring as a form of pain-killer.

In later life, the adult who as a child relied on armoring to lessen the intensity of his

painful feelings will develop an armored chest (shallow, interrupted breathing), which will diminish the experience of all feelings. The armored child becomes an armored adult who leads a shallow, interrupted life in order to avoid any pain. By clinging to the armoring, the adult will grossly limit genuine exposure to, and a deep understanding of, many, if not most, of life's valuable experiences.

There is another tragic consequence for adults who cling to their armor for survival. If they become parents they will, through their distracted and disengaged behavior, cause their children to become armored. By passing this behavior on to their children, the parents continue the cycle of pain into the next generation.

### **Reichian Therapy Relieves Armoring**

Thanks to Reich's groundbreaking work, there is hope for those whose lives have become distorted by the armoring that results from physical or emotional trauma. The key lies in Reich's discovery that treating the psychological issues begins by first treating the physiological symptoms. In Reichian psychotherapy, the repressed memories that are at the root of the armoring can be retrieved and eventually released. This is possible because the memories of acute emotional or physical trauma are actually stored in the segmented musculature. By releasing or unwinding the constricted tissue, the Reichian process releases the traumatic memories and begins to relieve the symptomatic behavior associated with armoring.

**Intra-joint and surrounding fascial restrictions in the hip area are addressed by Dr. Bernstein and his staff, using the team approach.**



### **Myofascial Release**

Once you appreciate the many ways that Reichian psychotherapy understands and treats armoring, you will begin to appreciate how well it complements and is improved by the addition of a relatively new physical therapy called myofascial release. Myofascial release physical therapy is a powerful form of biophysical release that has moved far beyond the traditional medical model of physical therapy. When coupled with Reichian psychotherapy techniques for releasing a body's armored segments, myofascial release enhances therapeutic results with finesse and elegance.

The term myofascia comes from the combination of myo, the Greek word for muscle, with fascia, a sheet of fibrous tissue beneath the skin that permeates the body enclosing muscles and muscular groups, separating muscular layers, and touching virtually every cell in the body.

The fascia is a multi-layered matrix of tough, fibrous connective tissue that sheaths and supports all of the human body's organs, muscles, and bones. It interconnects the body

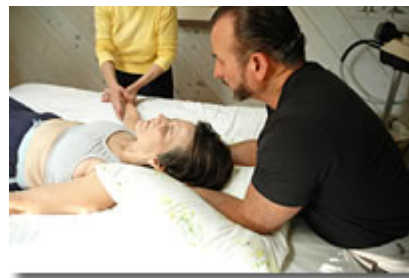
from head to foot with a web that extends in all directions to accommodate the infinite variations in the body's muscle bulk and movement. Because of its poor blood supply, damaged and constricted fascia heals very slowly. Ironically, although fascia has poor circulation, it has a rich supply of nerve endings so that any damage to it produces a high level of pain.

In addition to causing the fascia to shrink, repeated trauma creates adhesions where the fascia become stuck together, even further constricting the enwrapped muscles and organs. Fascia is estimated to have a tensile strength of 2000 pounds per square inch. Therefore, when damaged fascial tissue constricts and loses its elasticity, the fascia's enormous tensile strength can literally twist the human body out of its natural state.

Not only is damage to fascia painful, the resulting constriction reduces blood circulation to the encased tissue, which often leads to serious physical complications. Releasing the pressure by stretching the fascia improves both blood flow and nervous system transmission to the constrained tissue, while reducing pain and enhancing the body's ability to heal. Practitioners of myofascial release refer to the release of myofascial torsion as unwinding.

It is highly common for a myofascial release session to trigger an emotional as well as physical release, during which patients often recall the traumas that damaged the fascia. We'll discuss this further on in the article.

**Dr. Bernstein performs an occipital condyle release to improve craniosacral system mobility and release armoring in the neck, shoulder, and upper back muscles.**



### **Reichian Theory and Myofascial Release**

How does Reichian theory and practice intersect – or more precisely - overlap with myofascial release and its applications? In his book, *Myofascial Release, the Hidden Search for Excellence*, John Barnes, PT, describes how myofascial release physical therapy techniques can access submerged, repressed, often totally blocked memories, including trauma and sexual abuse (my comments are in brackets):

The body remembers everything that has ever happened to it. When a person has experienced unpleasant situations or trauma that overload the ability to cope, the body in an attempt to protect [e.g., armor] itself from further harm, effects a dissociation or amnesia of the event. Time does not heal emotional wounds; it simply covers them up with an adaptive fascial layer, tightening over time. These buried [or repressed unconscious] memories in the fascial system [which I will explain later in the paper] are uncovered during the "myofascial unwinding process," reversing the amnesia or dissociation that was not available to the person's consciousness. This is called state

dependent learning, memory, and behavior, a concept that can be expanded to include "position dependent" learning, memory, and behavior. This theory states that when a particular state or position is attained, all physiological responses, memories, and beliefs at that event become conscious and can be re-experienced. This places the patient in a state of awareness, allowing for a change of beliefs, emotions, holding or bracing patterns that are responsible for perpetuating myofascial restrictions and their resultant symptoms.

From this brief excerpt, it's possible to see how the theories of Reichian psychotherapy and myofascial release physical therapy complement each other. How then do the techniques reinforce each other in real practice and application? Let's look at a typical therapy scenario for an explanation.

### **Observing the Patient**

An experienced Reichian psychotherapist will develop a clear impression of the patient as soon as the person enters the room – even before any words are spoken. The way patients walk, dress, hold their postures, as well as manifest their attitudes reveals how individual lives live and interact with others.

In Reichian psychotherapy, the patient is observed from two perspectives: first, the therapist defines the symptoms, the patient's history, and the observed behavior. These give the therapist an indication of the psychological side of the patient's character. Second, the psychotherapist observes how and where the patient manifests emotional repression in his physical structure to determine where the patient's body is armored. This second part of the Reichian process is where the elegance and refinement of myofascial release applications become such an improvement to the Reichian treatment process.

Let me show you how this works in my practice.

In the traditional Reichian techniques that I apply, the male patient wears a pair of shorts. For women, a two-piece workout outfit will suffice. The brief apparel allows me to see as much of their body as common modesty will allow. As I start working with the patient, I look for changes in skin color, skin temperature, hair erection ("gooseflesh"), and the visual and palpable signs of muscular tension. Before proceeding with a specific treatment, I assess the patient in the following ways:

- Their manner – Is the patient at ease or uncomfortable? Is he or she upset, tightened, angry, or saddened?
- Their body language – Do they lie on the table or "couch" with their legs crossed, spread open, separated with the toes turned in or outward?
- Their body signs – Are they pale? Are their hands sweaty and cold? Are their pupils dilated?
- Their features – Is the patient's face masked, serious, sad, embarrassed, or expectant? Does the patient look as if he or she will break into a smile or tears?
- Are there any sharp lines of demarcation (flushed face and neck, pale chest) or any sharp lines of temperature change (warm abdomen, cold legs, etc.).
- Their level of tension – What body areas are relaxed?

Because the patient's body reveals an emotional state, this initial visual assessment shows me more about patients and their condition than most individuals could tell me in hours of discussion. As I continue to work with the patient, the signs that I listed above continue to provide me a stream of information that guides both the choice and application of specific techniques. In this way, Reichian psychotherapy is quite different from other therapies, which rely mainly on verbal exchange to produce their results.

**Release of the glenohumeral joint, a particular site of pain and restriction for this patient with multiple sclerosis.**



### **Myofascial Release Refines Reichian Therapy**

Earlier in this paper I quoted John Barnes, an innovative myofascial release physical therapist. Though he doesn't come from a Reichian perspective, he has learned to distinguish the armored segments of the body and has developed skilled applications which are extremely effective in softening and diffusing muscular and physical armoring. In the process, he has developed an understanding which closely mirrors the Reichian principles discussed earlier (again, my comments appear in brackets below):

It's like when we get injured a lot of times, it seems like an indelible imprint is made in our entities when there's high emotional content and somehow that gets locked into the tissue memory system. I think what happens is that our need to survive and protect ourselves gets shoved down, and we tend to disassociate from [the emotional content], which is fine for a while as a coping mechanism, but the problem is that because we were taught to mask symptoms or run from our problems, the fascial systems slowly tend to tighten around those [affected] areas and then create restrictions.\*\*

(\*\* Exclusive interview with John Barnes: [www.myofascialrelease.com](http://www.myofascialrelease.com))

When Barnes' numerous myofascial techniques and approaches are applied, not only do the muscles and fascia begin to release, but the unconscious repressed material that is behind the muscular and fascial tension is also released, much as it is in Reichian psychotherapy.

Of particular interest is that, in myofascial release, the memories are actually relived positionally, that is to say that the patient will often repeat physical actions relating directly to the original trauma. For example, if a patient was abused as a child, he or she may assume the physical posture of that abused child, cringing, cowering, or dodging the blows received years earlier. This positional relief, along with the associated emotional catharsis, produces a result that is far more dramatic than that achieved with Reichian psychotherapy alone.

### **Conclusion: Combining the Therapies Produces Deeper Healing**

The two applications, used independently, are extremely effective in bringing the patient a depth of healing that would never be attained by simply analyzing or verbalizing. Yet, when the two practices are combined, the results are even more extraordinary, and through continued application of the combined therapies, patients improve dramatically. When the old emotional material is finally released the patient becomes "unstuck," experiences a new openness and vulnerability, and is transformed. At this point of transformation, the Reichian verbal and analytic psychotherapy takes on a major role in the healing process. The therapist, through experience and insight, helps the patient gain perspective, and – thanks to the myofascial release therapy – the depth of healing is much greater.

As patients begin to unwind, they begin to understand how their armoring causes them to mix the past and the present, confusing their traumatic past with their current life. Releasing their armoring allows them to see that their distorted perspectives, created by early damage, skew their present day behaviors and attitudes.

This point in the patient's therapy is exactly where the relationship with a psychotherapist who is trustworthy and well-trained and who has personally experienced these two therapies becomes key to helping the patient integrate this new experience. Over a period of time, the process of living and sorting out all of this information becomes integral to the healing process.

**The psoas muscle can hold a great deal of repressed emotions. During a pause in this patient's unwinding process, Dr. Bernstein palpates the psoas muscle and releases it using strumming and sustained pressure.**



Both Reichian psychotherapy and myofascial release physical therapy are brilliant innovations that have led to wonderful, therapeutic results. I have discovered the value of integrating these two schools of thought into an effective practice in a way that had been undiscovered up until now. As a result, the healing tools that I now am using are greater together than either one of these applications alone.

I am very grateful for the creative minds that have influenced Reichian- Myofascial Release: Wilhelm Reich, John Barnes, and another great influence on my life – my mentor, the late Dr. Gerald Frank. Without their knowledge and the personal guidance of Dr. Frank, I would not have made these discoveries.

---

### Testimonials follow author's bio.

---

Peter Bernstein, PhD  
The Bernstein Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy  
600 Seavey Road  
Petaluma, California 94952  
707-762-3253  
[pmbphd@netvista.net](mailto:pmbphd@netvista.net)

**Note:** Dr. Bernstein will provide more specific references and footnotes upon request.

Peter M Bernstein, PhD, DAPA, MFT, CMT, is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice in California since 1974, working with individuals, couples, families and children. He holds a doctorate in clinical psychology, specializing in Reichian psychotherapy, from the International College. He earned post-doctoral recognition and Diplomate status from the American Psychotherapy Association. Dr. Bernstein is the founder and director of the Bernstein Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy in Petaluma, California. In his practice he uses an integrative approach to psychotherapy and the treatment of emotional and physical pain. His therapeutic approach incorporates a broad spectrum of services, including a new modality he developed called Reichian-Myofascial Release Therapy. As of 2006, Dr. Bernstein has completed over 350 hours of training in myofascial release physical therapy. The Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals have certified him as a Body Therapist. Dr. Bernstein is a clinical member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists and California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, a member of the American Group Psychotherapy Association, the American Association of Christian Counselors, and the American Academy of Pain Management. His website is [www.bernsteininstitute.com](http://www.bernsteininstitute.com).

---

### Testimonials

Following are some of the testimonials from patients who were previously treated with either Reichian psychotherapy or myofascial release work alone, and what they have to say about their therapy experiences utilizing the combination of both treatments:

I've been in Reichian psychotherapy for many years. Though its benefits have made a substantial improvement in the quality of my life, I was astounded at the profound additional release from both physical and emotional pain I received after Dr. Bernstein began combining myofascial release with Reichian techniques.

-Business owner

I have great praise for what myofascial release combined with Reichian psychotherapy is doing for me. My emotional pain reflects itself in my body. I am feeling physical relief while reaching deeper emotional level – consequently healing even further.

-Administrative Assistant

I experienced Reichian-myofascial therapy after several years of Reichian psychotherapy alone. With his new therapy, Dr. Bernstein helped me release a large amount of emotional material that was holding back my progress. I have been able to take significant steps toward emotional maturity as a result.

-Musician

My therapy has changed dramatically. There are areas I don't think would have been touched without the addition of Myofascial Release...When I just let go, I'm amazed at the energy I feel afterward...it brings hope to the process and the future.

-Artist

Reichian-myofascial release therapy has profoundly changed my life. For 22 years, I have been struggling to remember and resolve the trauma in my past. I felt an immediate difference after the very first Reichian-myofascial release session.

-Author

Dr. Bernstein's work has had a profound effect on all aspects of my life – marriage, motherhood, health, spirituality, and creativity. The legacy of my biological family was hopelessness, but through an inspired combination of training, wisdom, and practical advice, Dr. Bernstein guided me to a new life.

-Writer / Mother of Three

As both a recipient of Reichian-myofascial release therapy that Peter Bernstein shares, and now, as a practitioner of the body work, I am very grateful for the benefits that it has provided to me. This work can be very transformative. I like to refer to the work as sort of a personal drain cleaner. When I first experienced the work, I was about ready to call it quits. I have tried just about every treatment available to lessen the personal pain that I have carried in my body for years. Nothing had worked. With the work that Dr. Bernstein does, I feel like my drains have been unclogged, and life is flowing through me in a wonderfully healthy fashion. This does in no way imply that my life is free from struggles, but I now have an awareness of the reality of my problems and along with them new ways to view possible solutions.

- Practitioner