**The Body Dialogue, an Action**

**Structure to Build Body Empathy**

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**Abstract**

“The Body Dialogue” is an action structure using role reversal to build a bridge of empathy between the body and the self. The director facilitates a conversation between the body and the self in an attempt to repair the bridge of broken trust and to re-establish the bond that was disrupted by the trauma or physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, medical trauma, illness, or aging. The goal is to facilitate the self’s acceptance of the body and the self’s willingness to listen to the body, to hear the body's needs and for the self to make a commitment for the body's care.

**Introduction**

“The Body Dialogue” evolved in the 1990s from work which I was doing in my private practice, mainly with clients suffering with eating disorders. Regardless of weight, size, or shape, clients often talked about their bodies as something separate from the self, and labeled the body names such as ''blubber, "jelly roll", "potbellied pig", and "beached whale." Clients engaged in a struggle to control and dominate the body often through dieting, food restricting, purging, laxative and/or diuretic abuse, excessive exercise, use of stimulants, etc. The body rebelled by reactively binging, over-sleeping or insomnia, constipation, and lethargy. Thus ensued an embattled struggle between the self and the body for power and control.

Later in my work, I found “The Body Dialogue” to be useful in the work I was doing with trauma survivors during my training with The Therapeutic Spiral™ and sometimes included use of *The Body Double™* with the “The Body Dialogue” in working with clients who struggled with dissociation (see https://healing-bridges.com/category/psychodrama-and-related articles/). Trauma Survivors often used words like "disgusting", and "gross" to address the body, which had been the holder of the trauma and pain. "The Body Dialogue" frequently resulted in the client's expression of sorrow and gratitude in the body for all it had suffered and survived.

The next application of "The Body Dialogue" came during an in-service, which I facilitated for colleagues who work with eating disorder clients, but who themselves were facing

declining physical capacities due to aging. The conversation between the body and the self again resulted in a new acceptance of the body's limitations and allowed the body to make specific requests of the self about the kind of care it now needed.

"The Body Dialogue" may be used with clients in private practice using an empty chair as well as in groups when another group member may take the role of the body. "The Body Dialogue" may be done seated or standing, with protagonist (self) facing the auxiliary (body).

Seven Steps for The Body Dialogue are listed below; however, it is important to note that the therapist/director does not necessarily follow this protocol exactly as written here. This is not a manualized intervention. Instead, the therapist looks and listens for verbal and nonverbal cues that might take the dialogue in a slightly different direction and/or enhance the dialogue. Spontaneity and creativity, as well as being in the moment, are important in this psychodramatic action structure, as in all psychodrama.

The suggested steps are as follows:

1. *The protagonist concretizes a Compassionate Witness, a part of the self that can stand back and notice the protagonist’s experience without getting caught up in the “spin” or “swirl” of sensations, emotions and thoughts. Instead, the Compassionate Witness noticed and names the protagonist’s experience without judgement or evaluation, and with curiosity and compassion. This inner role is a way to psychodramatize the skill of mindfulness.*

*The protagonist holds the object representing their Compassionate Witness in their hands throughout the dialogue with the body. (When the protagonist reverses roles with the body, they continue to hold the symbol of the Compassionate Witness. This signifies that the Compassionate Witness is always with the protagonist and is always available as a resource*.

1. *The protagonist and body are in role with chairs facing one another; or, may be standing, facing one another.*

Director: "Here is your body. How long have you had this relationship with your body?"

Protagonist: Responds with a number of years

Director: "Tell your body how you feel about your body now." Protagonist makes a statement to the body.

1. *Director asks Protagonist to role reverse with the body to see what body says, wants, needs.*
2. *Director asks Protagonist to role reverse to see if Protagonist can do what body is asking for and make a commitment.*

Director: "Look into the eyes of your body and make the commitment to do what you said."

1. *Director continues to invite Protagonist to role reverse between self and body until there is some agreement and new relationship between body and self.*
2. *Director looks for non-verbal cues to get information about what the new relationship could be. Body positions can be changed to facilitate the new connection, e.g. from face to face to side by side. Encourage physical connection between body and self if it doesn’t occur spontaneously, e.g. holding hands, hugging, etc.*
3. *Director asks Protagonist to complete the scene.*

Director: “Make a final statement to your body to close out the scene.”

**A Case Example**

1. *Kelly chooses a little bird figurine for the role of her Compassionate Witness. She holds it in her hand, close to her heart.*
2. *Kelly chooses Missy for role of Body.*

Director to Kelly (Self): "What do you want to say to your body?"

Kelly moves in, holds body’s hands and is crying. She says, “You are sick right now and I feel really sad that l haven't been taking good care of you somehow. I know I've gotten better, but I’m still not good at letting you rest, rest for no reason, not just when I am sick."

1. *Role reverse.*

Director to Kelly in the role of Body, "What do you want Kelly to do before you get sick?"

She answers, ''l need to go slow sometimes and it's hard for you, for your mind to go slow. You forget it's important to go slow with me, and when we rest we have time to be together. I need more rest than you. Sometimes you try to make my needs match yours and we aren't always in tune."

1. *Role reverse.*

Kelly (Self) admits to Body that she doesn’t pay attention to Body’s needs.

Body (Missy in role) repeats, “We are together when we rest, that's our time together."

Kelly (Self) says, "I have heard the teenage part, but I forget about the baby--that's the part that needs to rest. That's the part I forget because I didn't even know you were there for a long time."

1. *Role reverse.*

Kelly speaks in role of Body, "I'm really cute and I need to rest. Babies need to go slow and to rest. I'm good at the later years, but I need more rest"

Self (Missy in role) says, “You are cute.”

1. *Role reverse.*

Kelly (Self) says, "I will let you rest more, hear your needs and be attuned. I’m not gonna wait ‘til you cry. I'm just gonna know what you need.

*Role reverse. Missy (in the role of Body now) repeats these lines.*

Kelly (in the role of body) says, ''I do trust you."

1. *Director asks Kelly to make a final statement to her body.*

Kelly (Self) says, “You are a gift from God, and I am grateful you didn't die despite my hard efforts."

Body (Missy in role) says, "I stuck with you and I’m still here."

Kelly (as herself) says, "I don't feel like you're holding it against me, and I'm grateful for that as well. I'm gonna listen to the baby better. I can do that"

They hug.

*Director gently facilitates rocking motion and labels it “Rock the baby.”*

*End of scene.*

When used in a group setting, "The Body Dialogue" may be used as a warm-up or as vignettes, giving several group members an opportunity to have the conversation between the body and the self. Sharing, of course, follows.

I welcome questions, comments, and the shared experiences of other directors who use "The Body Dialogue" at www.healing-bridges.com Copyright, 2005.

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