

# BENEFITS OF INTEGRATIVE BREATHWORK THERAPY WITH HEAVILY TRAUMATIZED CLIENTS

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For many years I have worked with clients with severe trauma, using Integrative Breathwork Therapy, intense counselling and personal work. I have witnessed remarkable recoveries. Women who had been abused since a very early age have come full circle and now work successfully in the social field and live healthy, productive and successful lives. It has been a great privilege to work with, and observe the recovery and spiritual growth of these human beings.

One of these women we will look at today. Please understand that some of the presented material, which I was allowed to use, is sensitive and disturbing.

However, before I speak about Ina, I want to emphasise the importance of a couple of prerequisites we need as therapists in order to be successful, as well as some characteristics the client needs.

Therapists need to have worked through their own "stuff" to a large extent so that they are not "in the way". Only if we have let go of our judgements about the darker side of human nature, we will be able to support our clients to access their deepest and /or darkest inner self.

This doesn't mean that we - our Inner Child - will never get confused, upset or sad listening to the sometimes-horrid details of their experience. But as long as our emotions are carried in awareness, and we know our Inner Child intimately, there is no danger: we will have developed other parts like an Inner Parent to take care of our own vulnerability. And working in a team where one can share these experiences certainly helps a lot.

There is also the need of absolutely honesty and authenticity, because every severely traumatized client has trust issues. In the case that I do make a mistake, I really need to apologise for it.

We will feel deep compassion for what clients went through, and we can name what happened as an absolute offense against them, but if we take sides in a sense of judgement, we are off! We would quasi force the client back into an old, sometimes false, sense of loyalty towards their perpetrator, who most often was a part of their own family.

If we are consciously and truly acquainted with ourselves, we will know that there is a part in us as well, that might be capable of manifesting the same behaviour, as that which we are now confronted with. We have to be able to feel acceptance for those parts, which will normally be considered as bad; we should be able to accept them in us as well as in our clients.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, clients additionally need to be really willing to face their darker side and be actually brutally honest about it, because in truth, *we* are the *only* source of our thoughts and feelings. This means clients need to be willing to take responsibility for whatever they feel. Taking responsibility doesn't happen over night, it is a process and an inner journey. The here and now is the only moment where transformation or healing can happen. Transformation won't happen if we resist the experience that needs to be transformed. Consciousness decreases when we resist the experience of what is. Consciousness expands when we are willing to experience what is.

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<sup>1</sup> Tilke PLatteel-Deur, *the Art of Integrative Therapy*, page 30

## WHO IS INA?

Ina is born in a lower class family. The abuse starts when she is about 4 years old. I let her speak for herself, reciting from her thesis, which she wrote as a graduate from our training program. Ina writes in the third sense as if her inner Protector-Controller is talking.

*Ina's Protector-Controller speaks:*

*Many years she has been abused, beaten, tormented and often nearly killed. At the age of five, her father abused her so brutally and maliciously, that for days afterwards she couldn't ride her beloved orange bicycle.*

*I, her Inner Protector, was always with her, deep inside. I helped her to lovingly suppress the feeling while the abuse happened. She hoped that one-day life would be good again. Being alone in her room, sometimes bleeding and wounded, she would internally contact me and cry secretly and silently.*

Ina grows older and the violations become worse. However, in school and in her contact with other kids, she likes being looked at as courageous and clever. She is a loving and sensible young girl.

But at home, where the abuse happens, she sometimes cries so long that finally someone notices and rushes her into hospital.

This is what her Protector/Controller has to say about this period in Ina's life:

*Ina's Protector-Controller speaks:*

*I think she was 9 years old as her father tied her up. We both knew that today something horrid was going to happen. Never before did he have such a malevolent and hateful facial expression. He restrained her hands and feet to the bed and went out of the room. I went deeply into her mind and said to her; "I don't know what is going to happen. But you have to protect yourself. We will stick together and all will be well somehow."*

*As her father came back into the room, he had one of his guns with him. He put the gun in her mouth with his finger on the trigger. With a hideous smile he abused and offended her most brutally, all the while keeping the gun in her throat.*

*I succeeded to let her loose consciousness for a moment. But her father didn't even notice that she was unconscious. After a while she came to her senses and then, looking at the door, she saw her mother standing there. As her father noticed a change in her, he shouted at them both and went off her.*

*Bleeding from her genitals and the corners of her mouth, she fell back into unconsciousness.*

Ina is devastated. How can she go on? She fears for her life. Her father might shoot her, just like he has already shot her in her arm one day.

At 11 she is already smoking heavily and begins to experiment with LSD. Using a trip each time when her father is visiting her. This way, she is actively creating a drug addiction.

Her father sometimes hits her so hard that she can't hide her injuries any longer. Broken bones are not that easily to ignore.

When she tries to tell about the abuse, no one believes her. She begins to use cocaine.

And then, around 14, she is dealing drugs in Amsterdam, her second homeland, using heroin, sometimes living with a friend, sometimes sleeping on a bench in a park. She earns her money as a barmaid.

One day she wakes up next to her best friend. He has died from an overdose while she was sleeping. She decides to return to Germany even though she knows that going back home is back to hell again.

Back in school she deliberately gives herself an overdose, lands in hospital, but she survives. Feeling that nobody is going to give her a chance, not trusting that she is able to get off the drugs, and noticing that nobody really cares, not even her parents, something shifts inside her. An unbelievable willpower is set free within her and she decides to really stop using drugs. When the cold turkey is too stark, she loses consciousness and has to be reanimated. This happens eight times. After being clean for a while, she has a relapse and then lands in a psychiatric hospital, where a male nurse sexually abuses her. For the second time she goes through a period of cold turkey. She is treated like a criminal. Outside the clinic she is often close to committing suicide, but Ina pulls herself through. Her inner strength is enormous. But, although she is now clean, she is far from recovered. She still feels wounded in her thoughts and feelings.

And something very interesting happens: After leaving her parent's house her father stops drinking and apparently never hit her mother or siblings again. This leads to an enormous inner turmoil in Ina. Was she guilty? Was it all her fault?

### INA COMES INTO THE TRAINING

I meet Ina during one of our intake weekends where she decides to take our training. She is then 26 years old. She is groomed completely in black, from her close-cropped hair down to her boots. A certain darkness seems to surround her, a gloom of hurt and anger. Her sadness, however, is deeply hidden.

Ina's first sessions during the training are dramatic. A normal session exchange, which is done under supervision of the trainers, is often too difficult for her fellow-students. So, frequently, one of us trainers has to step in and finish working with her. Although Ina is very willing to follow instructions, she often re-experiences cold turkey symptoms, which causes physical memories of unconsciousness. For an inexperienced student this is too hard to handle.

In our training, we are three well-experienced trainers. We share the sometimes extremely intense and difficult work with Ina between the three of us. Occasionally Ina would wake up during the night and ask for support. My dear colleagues mostly took care of these "night-shift" sessions, for which I am still very grateful.

All these horrible events in her life were stored deep in her physical memory. Therefore, she was often so terrified that the only way to keep her in the here and now was asking her to open her eyes and look at me. We would then breathe together so she could "hold on" to my eyes.

#### Session

In this particular session, she is trembling all over, sweating profusely. Her facial expression is distorted. From time to time she is on the verge of losing consciousness.

Nevertheless, after opening her eyes, she is able to follow my instructions on how to breathe; therefore I do not feel disturbed or anxious by her very intense, sometimes violent experience. Her connected breathing rhythm enables her to feel a constant stream of life energy, while reliving all these quite horrible images and the arduous bodily sensations.

After a while these sensations begin to change. Ina is able to really feel her old fear and express it, while breathing connectedly and relaxing her exhale during the process.

Because she feels safe, she dares to finally feel her disgust, her anger and her deep sadness.

At last, not feeling alone but in safety with another human being she can trust, she can finally and really weep. She begins to see how small a child she has been at the time. She can begin to believe in her own innocence, at least a little bit.

A main reoccurring topic is Ina's inner decision to become her true self and to stay alive. She also begins to realise that it is truly and only her own choice if she is happy or not. In her thesis she writes:

*Ina*

*Often I experienced cold turkey symptoms. I had to choose for myself and for life. It became clear to me that only I could decide to be happy or not.*

*I felt that everything that happened is physically stored deep inside of me. It begins to feel as if I have slowly begun to reprogram the cells in my body.*

*The thought that I could fall back into using drugs became like a red thread for me. I slowly recognised that my old behaviour pattern had caused my actions. I only had to give real attention to my behaviour patterns and breathe into them; that was what was needed.*

During Ina's first year, she worked through a lot of heavy topics. The dark gloom around her began to lift. She started to dress differently, with more colour. Her hair stopped being painted a deep black.

After nearly every training, there would be a knock on the door of the team room and we knew it would be Ina. With her head around the door she would say; "Thank you for all the support you gave me. Especially for the 'nightshift'." We could laugh together and were certain that Ina truly received what we gave her during the trainings, because of her showing her gratitude so clearly.

She finished her basic training in 2002. After one year of working as a therapist, she came back and did the training for trainer.

In the meantime she has studied in university, where she finished cum laude. Today she is leading a home for elderly people with 80 patients. She is married to a wonderful woman. She is happy and thinking about doing her doctorate.

#### SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE BASICS OF THE WORK

The Classical Medical approach tends to emphasize on what is wrong: the defects and inadequacy. In our perspective we search for what is still 'whole' and 'healthy' even if whatever 'healthy' is left, is quite hidden. Then, we start from there. So rather than focusing on the problem we look for threads of possibilities, pockets of trust, a sparkle of insight **underneath the problem** that will help us get in touch with our inner resources enabling us, autonomously, to become whole again.

In 1970, Aaron Antonovsky did a remarkable research with women in Israel. Some of these women were born in Europe and had survived the concentration camps. 29% of these surviving women were in good psychic health. They had a deep, hardly definable, basic inner trust, and a way of making sense of the world. He called this phenomenon "Sense of Coherence", SOC.

There will always be stress factors in human life, therefore a person confronted with stress wishes:

- **To believe that the challenge is understood. - Comprehensibility (Mind)**
- **To believe that resources to cope are available. - Manageability (Body)**
- **To be motivated to cope, - Meaningfulness (Feeling)**

**A Sense of Coherence therefore, is a construct that refers to the extent to which a person sees one's world as comprehensible, meaningful and manageable**

It is a feeling of trust in a holistic sense, whereas the different components may be developed to different degrees.

What matters is that one has had life-experiences that lead to a strong SOC, which mainly develops through the experience of consistent human relationships, a healthy balance between stimulus and relaxation, and being part of a valued social system.

Our SOC develops especially and most intensely in early childhood. Around thirty, according to Antonovsky, it is fairly developed and relatively stable. After that age, he considers deep changes hardly possible, and if they happen they will be mainly temporary.

As said by Antonovsky, it is possible however that people may learn to reinterpret their past. That is, if therapists are able to give them the tools to find - what he calls - experiences that improve the Sense of Coherence in their lives.

Antonovsky called the factors, which move us towards health, Generalized Resistance Resources, GRR's. These are resources that help us to handle the inherent stressors of human existence. For example: self-esteem, physical strength, intelligence, trust in God, people who are supportive, healthy financial circumstances, etc.

Thus, our ability to cope with situations and stress as they arise in normal life will depend upon our Sense of Coherence and our Generalized Resistance Resources.<sup>2</sup>

#### INTEGRATIVE BREATHWORK THERAPY

Integrative Breathwork Therapy deeply supports healing on a deep level. Basically, good Breathwork therapists will support their clients to have experiences that improve their Sense of Coherence and create - new - Generalized Resistance Resources.

However, as we all know, therapists merely create the circumstances in which healing can take place.

I don't heal. I trust that my clients carry inside themselves the resources they need. I support them in a way so that they can re-discover these resources. Then, healing can happen.

In a normal session, the client will come in with a problem in some area in his life. The therapist and the client together look at the stress factors that created the actual tension, as it has arisen in daily life. Then we dive in deeper, looking for the underlying original traumatic situation where the client felt the same kind of tension as in the problem he brought in the session today. These feelings are practically always located in our early years. And they can be felt in the physical body. So we are looking for the felt-sense of the old trauma.

Most often, the original trauma happened when we were very young; a time, when our sense of coherence wasn't well developed. Neither did we possess well-developed resistance resources to cope with the situation in the past.

This is a crucial moment. Using the actual resources and the actual Sense of Coherence of the client in this here and now, old experiences can be evaluated in a new way. During the session, also the therapist uses his own Sense of Coherence and his own resources (*GRR's*) and coaches his client. So both their Senses of Coherence as well as their resources build a kind of union. This makes up for an enormous potential of them together, as opposed to when we would meet a stressful situation alone.

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<sup>2</sup> Antonovsky; *The salutogenetic model as a theory to guide Health promotion*. Oxford University Press 1996, Vol.11. No.1

This way, together we move through the old trauma. The client feels the original feelings, while breathing connectedly, thus integrating them, and he solves the stress that the session started with, completely or partly: partly, because problem solving sometimes goes step by step. Whereas each step is considered a success, and every little success is honoured.

The therapist actively supports this process of releasing tension. This makes it clear that - as I said in the beginning - the therapist needs to be prepared through the inner development of his therapeutic techniques as well as personal qualities - resources - like, Presence, Willingness to serve, Discipline and Responsibility, Intuition, Trust, Acceptance, Mindfulness, Creativity, Ethical behaviour, Humour, and above all else, Love.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from these resources there is a particular resource that I need to mention. It is enormously important to me. In the bible it is said; "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*"<sup>4</sup> I have always understood this sentence as a promise of God supporting us when people come together for the purpose of healing.

Isn't it a very soothing idea that the Essence of the healing work is actually not done by the therapists, but by the healing force that is inherent in a human being's core? We as therapists merely create the circumstances for healing to take place. It is our task to not 'be in the way' so that healing can happen. This means that we have to clear our mind and spirit so that the channel within is clean. Then, and only then, Spirit can do its work.<sup>5</sup>

#### HOW DID WE WORK WITH INA?

So considering all this, what did we do to support Ina?

Our main goal in the beginning was to win Ina's trust.

As Ina obviously had many trust issues she was extremely sensitive to dishonesty. In order to create a platform on which trust could be re-established and flourish, it became imperative that we, as trainers, were completely present as well as absolutely honest about our own feelings.

Of course the main tool we used was conscious connected breathing. Further we used NLP techniques, Voice Dialogue, Family Constellation work, humour, but mostly we accepted and loved her just the way she was.

Using the connected breath to prevent her from drowning in the feelings that she experienced, we could move through them and integrate them.

As the original trauma happened when Ina was very young; a time, her Sense of Coherence nor her Generalized Resistance Resources had hardly developed. This was shown clearly in Ina's first Hot Water session.

#### Session

In our Hot Water Trainings, most of the participants will be naked while working in the water. For Ina, this is terrifying. Shortly before her own session will begin, she disappears. I go after her and discover her, crawling on the floor in another room. She is so deeply hiding inside herself that I can barely reach her. After a while, of trying in vain to get her into a conscious speaking mode, I tell her that I will have to call a doctor if she persists in not

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<sup>3</sup> Inspired by Elisabeth Schlenkhoff, *Essay*

<sup>4</sup> The Bible, *Matthew* 18,20

<sup>5</sup> Tilke PLatteel-Deur, *Healing the Past on a Soul level*, page 25

communicating with me. Ina's fear of doctors brings her back, and although she is furious at me, at least she is back inside her body.

For about an hour, we are sitting on the floor together, breathing connectedly. This helps her to stay focused and conscious. I keep looking into her eyes, telling her that I am there for her. "Please, realise that you are not alone, while you are reliving these old memories. In this here & now, you are safe. As long as you stay conscious and breathe connectedly, you are connected to your own life stream. You have survived the past and you will survive this too."

Sometimes during the night, Ina would have her roommate call one of us for help.

In one of those 'night shifts', she re-experienced the moment her dad hit her with a heavy ashtray. She managed to get into a hospital by herself, where she lay paralysed for six weeks. During that particular 'night-shift' session, again she could not walk. My colleagues spent 3 hours, holding her while teaching her to walk again... step-by-step. It was like an analogy to the way she was learning to live her life again... step-by-step.

Children have an enormous loyalty for their parents. Even if a child has been abused. This loyalty is one of the causes that an abused child will not speak up. It always hopes that things will get better.

In spite of everything that happened, for Ina this was still true today. Because her father didn't have a driver's license, he sometimes ordered her to drive him when he needed to go somewhere. In the beginning of her second year of our training, she was not yet able to refuse these requests, bringing herself again in a very dangerous situation.

On one of those drives, he forced her to stop the car and, while threatening her with a gun, he raped her again. That was the moment I told her to stop having contact with her parents.

Ina has been the only client whom I ever have forbidden this.

However, by the end of her third year, she had changed dramatically and she was so much stronger and sound, that her Dad did not even recognise her, walking past her in the street. Then Ina asked us permission if she could contact her parents again. She was even able to forgive them to a certain extent.

Each and every session that Ina received, brought her more and more back into her body. She was fascinated by the intensity of her thoughts and feelings. And all of that without using a substance!

It was sometimes unbelievable for her how simply by breathing, she could feel her inner needs and still them by breathing connectedly. It felt like a miracle.

She soaked up the respect and the love we showed her. She began to believe that she could be a lovable person, just by being herself... just by being Ina.

It was a long and intense process. It took millimetre-precision on our part. Step by step she was able to reveal the enormous amount of unconscious potential she carried inside. Each training would give input and at home she would receive her private sessions and integrate the experience more and more into her daily life. Then there would be another training... another session...

#### TAKING BACK HER RESPONSIBILITY

In the third year of Ina's training, things got easier so that her fellow students were not only able to begin an exchange session with her, but also to bring it to an integrated ending.

Slowly, Ina learned to look at her feelings from a position of the Inner Observer.

Already in her second year, Ina began consciously to take back her responsibility. In my interview with her, she said: "I had to take responsibility for myself, also because I had a fear that if I would go crazy during a training, I could jeopardize your means of existence."

But exactly in her third year, there were 2 very intense and remarkable situations. Ina put me to a test I never imagined possible.

I don't remember exactly what happened in a specific session I gave Ina. During our meeting two months ago, we spoke about it and we both could not remember. But I am 100% sure that there must have been something in that session that was not completely integrated. And I must have missed it.

Because right after that particular private session I gave her, we were saying our good byes in the corridor. I opened the front door to let her out and right in that moment she said to me: "I am going back to Amsterdam." I was flabbergasted and speechless for a moment. Then I answered her: "If that is what you really want to do... I will never be able to stop you. Think about what you have gained and what you might lose again. If you really go back to your old life, I will have to stop working with you."

Without a word she closed the door, leaving me shaking. I sat in my living room and breathed and prayed.

And then, an hour and a half later - the longest ones I ever experienced - she came back. On the outskirts of Amsterdam, Ina had stopped her car and breathed, feeling the old magnetic pull, that deep attraction to use drugs again. The desire was deeply felt... and she was able to integrate that longing... she could turn around.

When she came back to my house, we held each other and cried.

This year, after she got married, has been the first time she has been back in Amsterdam. She showed her wife where she used to live. She is safe now.

The second situation arose a little later during the Hot Water training, where she experienced again very heavy stuff:

#### Session

It is Ina's third Hot Water training. In the two and a half years of her training, she has worked through a lot of the old traumatic experiences and I do not expect her to have real difficulties this time.

We normally have the participants about twenty minutes in the hot water. Also the 'getting-out-of-the-water' will often activate more material that has to do with actual birth memories. All this together will have activated in most cases more than enough material, which then can be integrated on a mattress, out of the stimulus of the hot water.

After about 15 minutes in the hot water, Ina begins to lose consciousness. Her two attendants call for help. There is of course always at least someone - more often two people - of the staff present outside the pool. Together we get her now very heavy body out of the water and onto a mattress.

I take over the session and with some difficulty, I coax her back into the world. But during the next thirty-five minutes, she keeps losing consciousness. Finally I have her completely back in the here and now. Again this has been a time of remembrance of her cold turkey period, with all the unconsciousness involved. Although I am happy with the result, I feel exhausted. I realise that I myself have reached my own limits.

In the evening I tell Ina that I am not willing anymore to carry the responsibility to keep her in the here and now. "My boundaries are reached, it is up to you now." She is livid. She doesn't speak to me for two days and refuses to even look at me. Then, on the last day of the training, there is a knock on the door of the team room. It's Ina.

"Tilke, I am deeply sorry. You are absolutely right. I have been trying to avoid the last important part of my accountability. I have tried to keep myself in the role of the poor victim. That is over now. I am wounded, but that doesn't mean that I have to keep focusing



on that part of me. There is so much more than that. I feel grateful to you for the lesson you gave me. It was a hard lesson, but a necessary one."

After that training, Ina's progress was steady. Her university studies went well. She finished her basic training with us and after a year of working with her own clients, she came back to take part in the Training for Trainer.

## CONCLUSION

The 'Course in Miracles' says that there are basically only two emotions: love or fear. It says: - *There is no order of difficulty in miracles. One is not 'harder' than another. They are all the same. All expressions of love are maximal.* - <sup>6</sup>.

The experiences in my work led to the conclusion that this is also true for traumas. *There is no order of difficulty in traumas. One is not 'harder' than the other. They are all the same. All expressions of fear are maximal.*

Integrative Breathwork supports people to become the master of their breathing. Over the years, I have seen them gain a profound sense of physical safety while experiencing their emotions, both negative and positive.

Through mastering the Breath, they are able to be conscious of their emotions, carrying them instead of drowning in them. This is what happened with Ina.

She was able to form the bridge between thinking and feeling, between head and belly: she was able to span the gap between body and spirit, between heaven and earth. She experienced a spiritual dimension, which created a context, which was much larger than her ego, into which she could finally integrate her traumas. Breathing connectedly brought her in contact with the sensation of an energy that is larger than we are: her Essence.

Love, acceptance and appreciation create the safe space to re-experience our old pains.

If a feeling is truly experienced, it can and will disappear. In the end, there is love to be found behind every emotion.

If a fear is truly felt, love re-appears. If anger, sorrow or guilt is really experienced, what will be left is love.

Over the years, I have seen that although our therapeutic techniques and tools may be the very best, if our heart is not sincerely in it, and if we are not truly in contact with our clients, the best techniques will not be of real help.

Through love we may feel the ultimate truth that deep inside we are never separated. Deep inside we are whole and connected.

**In the end, it is the love that heals.**

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<sup>6</sup> A Course in Miracles. *Text, Chapter 1, The meaning of miracles.*