

The New York Times

Less Talk, More Therapy

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NOVEMBER 17, 2014

My first session with Ann E. began as they all would: I stood against a wall wearing only a sports bra and underwear while she stood against the opposite wall, looking me over. She had me face north, south, east and west, and each time her eyes seemed to be tracing invisible lines down my body.

Being with Ann E. feels a little like being in psychotherapy, except you're usually lying on a massage table in your underwear. It costs about the same for a session, although it lasts a lot longer and she doesn't care if you doze through most of it.

Settled on her table that first day, I explained to her that I'd had many intractable physical problems in the last several years, the most recent being a pain in my knee that no medical professional could make heads or tails of. I couldn't sit cross-legged on the floor or rise up out of a full squat, and I'd feel a sharp stab whenever I slipped that leg into my jeans. Some yoga practitioners that my husband knew had recommended I see her about this.

After I'd spent 30 minutes on the table, Ann E. still hadn't attended to my knee.

She hadn't so much as looked at it. In fact, she didn't even touch me. She just held her open palm a few inches from my body — first at my hip, then my feet, then my other hip, then at the top of my head — and I became so relaxed I fell fast asleep in the middle of her talking to me.

I barely woke up as she started pressing her finger into my C-section scar. "What are you doing?" I asked her.

"Releasing fascia," she said. Fascia is a connective tissue throughout our bodies that acts like webbing, keeping our innards where they're supposed to be.

As she pressed on my scar, Ann E. talked to me about my body in a way I wouldn't really

come to understand for many months, but which I could experience the effects of right then and there. She used one or two fingers, touching my torso gently until she felt something release, then she'd move her fingers an inch or two to a new spot and press gently there.

I didn't know what I should expect from this subtle prodding, but it wasn't for my lungs to inflate like balloons. As Ann E. worked, my breath deepened, my lungs filling as they never had. "My breath just completely changed," I said.

"Yeah, I just created some real estate in your torso so your lungs are less constricted," she said.

Now she had my attention.

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Although I have spent about three decades — nearly my entire adult life — in talk therapy, I have always felt fundamentally unfixable.

My longest therapy stint started in my late 20s. I was always sort of unhappy, but went to a therapist specifically to stop smoking cigarettes and to leave my job. At the end of six years, I was still at the same job and still smoking. Then, my company closed and I got pregnant, so my job ended and I quit cigarettes. But I don't think I really changed at all.

I had always been skeptical of anything too "alternative," until about eight years ago, when I first started to see the connections between mind and body. I'd been referred to a psychologist to deal with back pain. But even that experience, despite eliminating the distress in my back, felt like more of the same — we sat across from each other, I told my story, I talked about my "feelings," I cried.

I could have gone on like that for years, just as I had with other therapists, because no matter what I said, or how I looked at my story, the

emotional pain always felt fresh and new. I felt stuck.

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After pressing on my C-section scar, Ann E. moved around the table to my right shoulder. I had injured this shoulder twice. It took almost a year for the first injury to heal and then eight months later I reinjured it, leaving me in such discomfort I had to prop my arm with pillows when I drove. After doctor visits and months of physical therapy, the pain was gone, but I no longer had full range of motion.

I hadn't told Ann E. any of this. I'd told her only about my knee, which she continued to ignore.

"Don't touch me there," I said as she approached my shoulder. "It makes me uncomfortable even having you near it."

Yet ever so gently, she slid one hand under my shoulder and then even more gently, laid her other hand on top of it, holding it as lightly as you would a baby bird, and in an instant I was sobbing uncontrollably.

What she was doing did not hurt and there was no sadness — or any specific feeling — attached to the crying. Tears streamed from my eyes, and my chest heaved. It went on like that for maybe five minutes, and then the crying stopped suddenly and completely, as if it had never happened at all.

And without moving a muscle, I could tell that my shoulder had changed.

Ann E. refers to her work as "unwinding" and likens the process to taking apart a big ball of tangled necklaces. Each tangle has come about through some emotional or physical injury from which our body has attempted to heal. But the body compensates in areas where it is weak, and those compensations turn into habits. The pain we feel is largely due to a once efficient system no longer working the way it should.

When Ann E. presses into fascia that has become gummed up like glue, holding parts of our insides where they don't rightly belong, her touch somehow "dissolves" the gooeyness and allows the fascia to revert to its original light, fluffy nature. With each of these releases, the "necklace tangle" loosens and our bodies can start to sort out the mess that has been

accumulating for so many years.

As I discovered on that first day, she rarely works where the pain is. She says that the body provides her a map of where it's really hurting, pulling, stagnant, frozen, and she starts there, unfurling one little piece of the necklace ball, so that the body can begin its own organic process of unwinding itself back to health.

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My shoulder was not the only area that incited sobbing. This would happen many times, with other parts of my body, during my work with Ann E. Every episode came on the same way: I suddenly felt very vulnerable, almost unbearably so, and then the tears came, completely devoid of emotion, and then they stopped, leaving me feeling as if I were suddenly freed of something.

What happened on that table was like nothing I'd ever experienced. I cried harder than when I was 17 and lost my father to cancer, harder than when our family dog was run over by a truck a month later, and harder than when I was dumped by my first love.

But this is a body crying, not the crying of a heart.

I'm not quite sure how to explain how the emotions become unstuck, but as with my shoulder that first day, much of my lifelong pain now feels as if it had never been there in the first place. The main thing I feel is a kind of unfamiliar optimism, along with a lot more energy — energy that, Ann E. would say, has been freed up from letting go of longstanding trauma.

I continue to let Ann E. untangle me. I try to trust that she has my best interests at heart. I wrestle sometimes with how much I'm willing to let myself need her. But as I unwind, I sleep better. I breathe better. Parts of me that have hurt for years have stopped hurting. When I look in the mirror, I'm still middle-aged and my hair is still graying, but I feel able, possibly for the first time, to truly cope with life.

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