



THE RETROFLECTED SELF: BENDING BACKWARD  
AT THE CONTACT BOUNDARY.  
A GESTALT THERAPY PERSPECTIVE OF PSYCHOSOMATICS

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# PSYCHOSOMATICS

“You know I can't express emotions. I internalize, I grow a tumor.”

(Woody Allan, as cited in Harrington, 2008: 67)

Adamovic defines psychosomatic illness as a somatic illness that has pathoanatomic leisure in whose conception psychological factors are decisive or at least very significant (Adamovic, 2005).

# PSYCHOSOMATIC ILLNESSES

Alexander suggested that an illness is not caused by the repressed emotion, instead, it is caused by the chronic activation or stimulation of a specific vegetative organ, until it loses its healthy way of functioning (Ewen, 2003).

He sorted out seven psychosomatic illnesses and named them as "holy seven":  
bronchial asthma, peptic ulcer, ulcerative colitis, hyrotoxicosis, essential hypertension, rheumatoid arthritis, and neurodermatitis (Harrington, 2008).

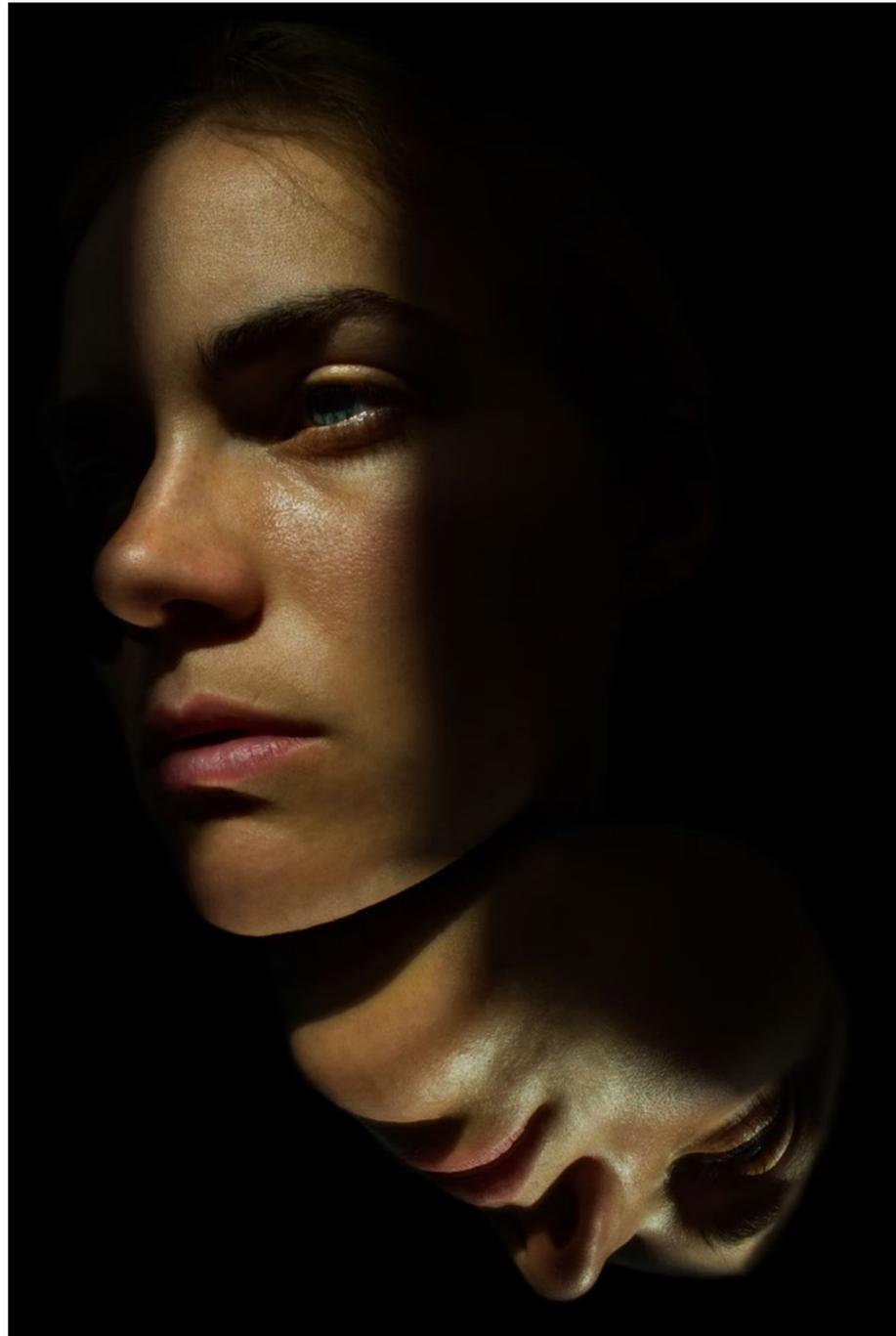
Adamovic (2005) adds ten more illnesses to Alexander's list:  
coronary disease, diabetes mellitus, herpes simplex, zoster and genitalis, hyperinsulinism,  
hypoglycemia, obesity, regional enteritis, tuberculosis, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa.

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# CLIENT'S EXPERIENCE OF PSYCHOSOMATICS

- A wide variety of psychological and physiological symptoms
- Alexithymic tendencies
- Avoidant attachment style
- Demanding in relationships and taking a dependent role
- Perfectionistic and lack spontaneity
- Overuse of primary health-care services
- Separation anxiety on session cancellation
- Clients more eagerly accept pharmacological treatment than psychotherapy





## GESTALT APPROACH TO PSYCHOSOMATICS

The self or soul is considered as separated from the physical body. Tensions and the way feelings as energy affect our bodies are not really taken into consideration. This dualism is also applied in the language. It differentiates body from the self (Kepner, 1993).

The way a person disrupts their functioning and creates a psychological disease is through alienation what originally belongs to the self.

In Gestalt therapy, there is no body-oriented work, but Gestalt work. The work is conducted with the self, which arises at the contact boundary, the experience is always relational and involves body which is part of the self (Lobb, 2020).

# THE SELF

When certain aspects of one's functioning are disowned, or they are not experienced as the self, one is not fully available to make full contact with the environment. The more one lacks contact capability, the more they experience fragmentation, dissociation, and resistance (Kepner, 1993).

## ID function

Somatic symptoms indicate the loss of somatic support. The resistance and desensitization which brought to the development of somatic symptoms which are actively present in the id function, make it impossible for the clear figure to form.

## Personality function

In the process of somatization, there is a loss of a "healthy me". Personality function is oftentimes affected in a way that clients come with a question "will I be like I was again?"

## Ego function

Due to overwhelming amount of information coming from two other functions of the self, the ego function is not very strong and does not have enough capacity to make decisions.



# PSYCHOSOMATICS AND CONTACT CYCLE EXPERIENCE

**Full-contact:** illness becomes real for the client

**Contact:** awareness about the somatic problem

**Fore-contact:** awareness about the sensations

**Withdrawal:** the assimilation of past traumatic events  
and the holistic experience of the self is discovered

# PSYCHOSOMATICS AND INTERRUPTIONS TO CONTACT

Retroflection

Egotism

Projection

Introjection

Confluence

Deflection

Desensitization



## WORK WITH CLIENTS EXPERIENCING PSYCHOSOMATICS

For the successful treatment of such clients, a holistic approach is necessary. The task of the therapist is as follows:

- Bodywork to recreate contact with the body process
- Describe body processes through verbalization for the client to be able to understand the meaning of sensations and movements
- Create a dialogue between split parts
- Finish the unfinished business and assimilate the disowned parts of the self and in that way increase the creative adjustment of the client.

# CONCLUSION

“The whole is something else than the sum of its parts.”

Kurt Koffka, 1886-1942

