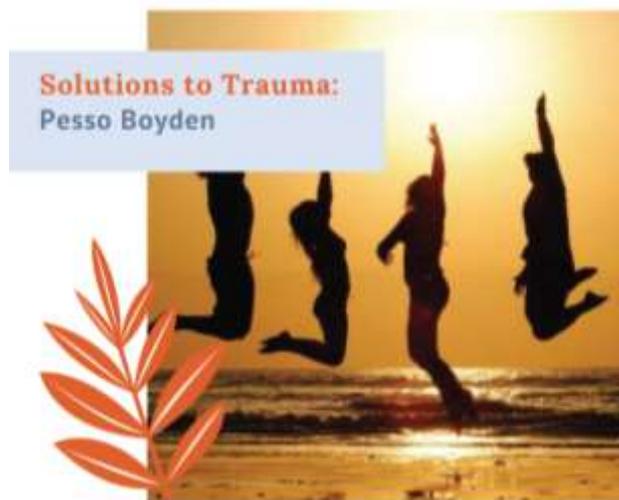


This chapter was written for the free e-book

## Solutions to Trauma, edited by Lou Lebentz

### Pesso Boyden System of Psychotherapy

“We’re are made to be able to be happy in an imperfect world that is endlessly unfolding, and we are the local agents of that unfolding process.” Al PESSO



#### What is PBSP

The Pesso Boyden System of Psychotherapy (PBSP) is a body-based method. This highly respectful approach helps the client to access the hidden emotional processes and limiting patterns that continue to influence their present-day emotions, attitudes, expectations and decisions<sup>i</sup>. These limiting patterns are often based on experiences from the client’s past. The creation of alternative body-mind experiences – symbolic ‘counter-events’ – help the client to review and redesign these patterns, thus updating their ‘personal software’. This releases untapped potential, leading to a more optimistic life-perspective, more successful interpersonal behaviour, a sense of self fulfilment and an ability to trust. Clients experience the delight of becoming more tuned-in to their own and others’ thoughts, feelings and needs, which leads to more pleasure, satisfaction, meaning and connectedness in their daily life.

#### Where does it come from?

Albert PESSO and his wife Diane Boyden were dancers and choreographers. They created this unique and revolutionary body-based method of psychotherapy in the early 1960’s, developing it over the next 50+ years. PBSP combines classical psychology and the latest neuroscience. In 2012 Albert PESSO was given one of only six Lifetime Achievement Awards by United States Association for Body Psychotherapy<sup>ii</sup>.

#### The impact of a PBSP structure

In the acclaimed book *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*, the psychiatrist and trauma expert, Professor Bessel van der Kolk wrote about the impact of his first experience of PESSO work: “I’d spent several years in psychoanalysis, so I did not expect any major revelations.” However, on the conclusion of his session he reported a dramatic body-mind event typical of PESSO psychotherapy: “Instantaneously I felt a deep release in my body – the constriction in my chest eased and my breathing became relaxed. That was the moment I decided to become PESSO’s student.”<sup>iii</sup>

## PBSP in a group

A structure is a one-hour session focused on a single client. With the guidance of the therapist, the help of group members and the use of symbolic objects, the client talks about a current issue.

The therapist micro-tracks the client, helping them to notice their feelings, core belief systems and internalised prohibitions and commands, as well as noting changes in posture and breath. This process often awakens a memory from the client's own history, and enables the client to see the causative connections. For example a client might say, *'When he looks at me like that it reminds me of my first boss who was always angry'*, or *'When people get too close to me on the tube it reminds me of being shut in a cupboard as a child'*, or *'Being a group like this reminds me of being at school and being ashamed to say 'I don't understand''*.



The client is then invited to imagine a new and different 'ideal' context. One that would have given them an environment where they felt fully alive, completely welcomed, and unconditionally loved. Group members are often asked to role-play these Ideal Figures. The aim is to give the client a real experience with another person, symbolically representing the figure that was needed. This might be their ideal Mother, their Ideal Father, or another Ideal Figure.



This ideal setting is an 'antidote' to the client's actual history - the scenario that wounded them. Through this alternative situation, co-created by the therapist and the client, the client can imagine receiving, as a child, the *'right response'* at *'the right age'* from *'the right kinship figure'*. Thus, a believable *'new memory'* is produced which has a palpable impact on the body-mind, triggers a genuine shift in attitude and leads to enlivening life changes.

Differentiating Pesso work from drama based therapies, van der Kolk writes, “. . . *this work is not about improvisation but about accurately enacting the dialogue and directions provided by the client . . . every time I conduct a structure I’m impressed how precise the outward projections of the right hemisphere are.*”<sup>iv</sup>

### **PBSP can be a one-to-one therapy.**

Whilst originally designed as individual therapy within the setting of a group, PSBP can also be offered in one-to-one face-to-face sessions, or by video conferencing.

## **PBSP CONCEPTS**

### **The witness**

Reading the symphony of emotions that play across a client’s face during their hour-long structure is important in PBSP. Shifts in the muscles of the face, along with subtle changes in body posture, tone of voice and the gaze of the eyes are noted by the therapist, and responded to as messages from the client’s unconscious. The therapist invokes a helping presence – the witness - whose sole purpose is to reflect back to the client the emotions signalled by these changes, many of which are out of their awareness. As the story unfolds the witness acts as a mirror, reflecting the ebb and flow of feelings and excitement. When tracked precisely, the client feels seen and heard. Within a context of safety and respect, the dialogue deepens and the healing possibility is enriched.

### **A new memory**

This notion is the amongst the most remarkable of Al Pesso’s contributions to healing. Traditionally psychological repair consists of facing our past and grieving the loss of what we should have had, and didn’t get. In PBSP, the therapist helps the client to imagine and install new memories in the client’s ‘hypothetical past’ – how it should have been. This generates an inner worldview of secure optimism through direct interaction. Research using fMRI scans has shown literal, beneficial brain changes after a structure.<sup>v</sup>

Van der Kolk notes, “[*the Pesso structure*] offers, the possibility of forming virtual memories that live side by side with the painful realities of the past and provide sensory experiences of feeling seen, cradled, and supported that can serve as antidotes to memories of hurt and betrayal.”

With focused attention, these ‘new memories’ can be consolidated into a strong and positive inner framework based in our natural birth-right of safety and love – what students of John Bowlby term an ‘earned secure attachment’.

### **Holes in roles**

We all have an in-built sense of justice, a sense of how things should be. When this is disturbed by events, the child steps into the emotional breach. Albert Pesso called this filling ‘*Holes in Roles*’ – the innate desire of children to make things right in their family system. An absent parent, a lost sibling, even a country at war – all can provide the impetus for the child to seek to fill the hole that the absent role presents.

Powerful energies are released as a result of filling these roles, which can feel overwhelming to the child. They may learn to suppress these feelings and impulses, or to disassociate. Not only this, but filling holes in roles leads to an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and omnipotence. A pattern of emotional giving is established which makes emotional receiving difficult, or impossible. Healing these patterns through ‘holes in roles’ work, within the therapeutic holding of a PBSP structure, is one of the cornerstones of PBSP therapy.

### **Trauma**

In PBSP we think of trauma as an event that breaks the boundary between the self, the outside world, and the

inner world. It is a forceful entry — physical, sexual, or emotional — into the self without choice<sup>vi</sup>. Even essential surgery can be experienced as a trauma, because it breaks a boundary by piercing the skin.

PBSP offers a set of powerful theories and techniques to work with the trauma. By utilising the body, as well as language and imagery, the therapist helps the client to strengthen their internal 'pilot', in order to regain control of their internal and external worlds. Ideal Parental figures are enrolled, who would have stopped the assault, so that the traumatic event would never have happened. Thus, the therapist helps the client to make a new memory that is a reversal of their traumatic experience.



People who are traumatised typically lacked sufficient protection from their parents in their childhood. In structures (client sessions), attention is paid to creating a stronger sense of feeling protected at an early stage of life. The client's other unmet basic needs are attended to as well. These include: a sense of having a place in the world, being nurtured, feeling supported and being given healthy boundaries and loving limits. This helps lessen the client's vulnerability to being traumatised by challenging external events.

Sometimes, clients with a deficit of nurture in their history can be prone to be re-traumatised because they get a positive emotional payoff. This is known in PBSP as 'negative nurture.' It is as if they experience the violation as the unconscious equivalent of food and love. During a structure, the requirement for food and love are met in healthy ways using the Ideal Figures, so that the client no longer needs to use dysfunctional means, such as re-traumatising

themselves, to get fed and to feel satisfaction.

Juliet Grayson, one of the 3 PBSP trainers in the UK, says, "PBSP is the most powerful method I have found in 40 years of personal development and over 25 years of working with clients. This is because in PBSP we work with both the mind and the body, both the ego and the soul." As Van der Kolk said in an interview with Claire Pointon, "where a person has suffered severe developmental deficit – perhaps with no early experience at all of what it felt like to be safe with someone – it will be hard for the patient to feel safe in the therapeutic relationship. ...the answer lies in the kind of body work done by Albert Pesso in which a patient in a group context is able to orchestrate their own reparative somatic experience."

Sources:

<sup>i</sup> <https://therapyandcounselling.co.uk/q-a/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://pbsp.com/2012/03/12/usabp-2012-lifetime-achievement-award/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://pessoboydenttraininguk.com/brochure/>

<sup>iv</sup> Kolk, B. V. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Penguin UK.

<sup>v</sup> <https://albertpesso.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/published-prague-research-paper.pdf> and <https://albertpesso.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/pre-publication-notes-on-czech-research-on-pbsp-at-charles-university.pdf> and <https://albertpesso.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/brain-scans-from-prague-research.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://pbsp.com/train/modular-training/>

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The whole e-book is available free of charge from Lou Lebentz  
<https://www.traumathrivers.com/Ebook>