

Releasing early, childhood fears through haptotherapeutic guidance in water; experiences of a therapist and a client

Truus Scharstuhl¹ and Tonny van Banning²

Abstract

Both children and adults can be afraid of water. Sometimes the reason for this is that they had a traumatic experience with water. More often, however, there is no explanation, as such. The following article discusses the underlying problems that may be a factor in fear of being in water or, in more extreme cases, being under water. In addition, the article explores how haptotherapy in water can offer healing, address the vitality of a person or lack thereof, thereby reawakening a person to their own individual character.

Keywords: haptotherapy, therapy in warm water, childhood fears, attachment.

Introduction

This article is a continuation of Scharstuhl 2020, where insights were shared on how we connect with ourselves and others in water (Scharstuhl, 2020). In this article an in-depth patient-therapist experience of haptonomy in water will be analysed and discussed.

Scharstuhl is the haptotherapist offering treatment, further referred to below as the ‘therapist’, and Van Banning is the participant or client, further referred to as the ‘client’.

In 2013, the client wished to take an introductory course, Haptotherapy in Water, with the haptotherapist. This is a course designed for fellow haptotherapists to discover the specific qualities of warm water with regard to their own ability to feel and connect with themselves. The client wanted to understand why she could submerge herself in water by sheer willpower, but only whilst suppressing her fear. She was unaware that she could achieve this by trusting her senses.

Prior to this course, the client had followed two individual sessions. During these sessions, she discovered for the first time at an experiential level that her difficulty in breathing was an existential fear. A fundamental fear linked to a deep sense of abandonment that came out during the session in the warm water. Intuitively and confirmed by her mother’s stories, she knew that this fear had its origins at her birth. Difficulties at birth often occur

(Scharstuhl, 2020). She had unconsciously carried this with her throughout her life and it has been a determining factor in her attitude towards life. In the two sessions and during the introductory course, she discovered how she could learn to deal with her feelings of fear in the water. (Scharstuhl and van Banning, 2013) Subsequently, she felt she needed to explore this further and took the follow-up courses of Haptotherapy in Water.

During these courses, the following themes are explored:

- a. clarifying what water can trigger that can ‘t be ‘touched’ within the client outside the water;
- b. what additional role does ‘warm water’ play on top of regular haptotherapeutic interventions?

This article gives a description of a process that encompasses two years, summarized here in essential moments and themes that were important to the development of the client’s ability to feel. The client’s experiences are related in the text in italics.

Safety through enfolding

First and foremost, a feeling of security must be established to start the session in warm water. A feeling that also invites exploration. The participants who followed this extension course and the subsequent course on the theme ‘Attach – detach’, have allowed themselves to be enfolded by the water, wearing it like a coat, and used

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¹**Truus Scharstuhl**, Healthcare Haptotherapist, Training Center for Applied Haptonomy in Water, STHWater; Eerbeek, the Netherlands. Email: truus.scharstuhl@planet.nl.

²**Tonny van Banning**, Healthcare Haptotherapist; Houten, the Netherlands.

circumsensus to accept it. *Circumsensus* (Veldman, 2007) is a term from the haptonomy practice meaning “the perception of the space around us”.

This then allowed them to explore and discover, alone or with each other, where any fear or resistance in themselves might reside.

The space around us in water is more tangible than on dry land; air is after all less tangible than water. Feeling this ‘water coat’ makes the water feel softer and fuller around you and thus you move and approach others with a gentler intention. This allows you to share your sense of safety and presence with others. It also makes you feel good about yourself. The movement of the water in the swimming pool will mirror your own agitation or relaxation based on your connection to the water. This mirrors how you ‘wear’ your ‘water coat’.

This experience in the group was important to the process that the client has been going through. It allowed her to gain much more experience than in the one-to-one contact with the therapist. We utilized the individual contact on occasion to further explore and delve into a confusing experience. An example, the client had lost contact with another person and that profound feeling of abandonment possessed her again:

My experiences in the warm water helped me to allow this process to take place, to feel it intensely and to clarify it. The space, the proximity and the affective connection with the ‘water women’, the group participating in the therapy in water session, also helped me to experience this very early event in my life to the fullest extent and to realise its impact on me. In this context, I was able to really allow the pain and fear inside and was able to endure it. Surrounded by the warm water, images of the many times I fled, and the resulting disconnect flashed before me like a film. I only then realised how often I was on guard and threw up defences.

The client has become much freer in submerging herself underwater. She now loves it and finds a peace there that is good for her. She no longer has to concentrate on always maintaining herself. The enormous fear that caused her to disassociate is gone. She can control her breathing and can choose when she wants to come up for air. She can straighten up and has control of her underlying feeling. She is safe in and under water.

From contact to attachment

Water makes close proximity easier, that is, it seems to do so. Think about how easily strangers in a whirlpool sit next to each other, using the water as a coat wrapped around them. Water also helps clarify to what extent you are autonomous in the affective contact with others. That is to say, connections flow much more easily between people, which is something that people love about being in

water, but it doesn’t teach you how to be yourself and remain yourself within that intimacy. You can lose contact with yourself in such a situation.

The client discovered issues within herself when making contact, especially in close proximity. She would assimilate very quickly to the other person in that contact, almost like she melted into the other person. This can happen easily in water, since there is little resistance. It required a colleague of the therapist, who also conducted this course, and the therapist herself, to not only visually observe, but to empathize fully in order to be attentive to this process. It was apparent that the client lost herself too much in the other person, tried too hard, thus losing contact with herself and the water in the process:

During the subsequent courses in the warm water, I became increasingly aware of how difficult it was to align myself to the other person. During the exercises, I realised that actual alignment is a bridge too far for me; I adapt automatically. That adaptation proved to be a habitual reflex that I had learned very early in life, one that I could neither articulate nor feel. I first had to be reassured many times, to the very depth of my being, in order to realise what I really needed. That’s why I couldn’t ask for it. It became clear that I subconsciously expected the other person would be able to feel and fulfill my needs. I didn’t realise this either, so I couldn’t take my own responsibility to break out of the old patterns.

During the sessions with the group in the water an important exercise was carrying each other. The client gradually learned to carry the other person without having to ‘work’, and she could feel herself being carried while still remaining separate and true to herself. By showing her how she could continually call on her feeling (*hapsis*), she learned to feel when she had lost contact with herself and the water and how to react differently (Scharstuhl, 2020). In this way, she could achieve contact that came from within, contact which is not based on her desire to do her best. This is how attachment, actively making contact while preserving oneself, can be established.

*It was during the exercises in the warm water that it first became clear for me at the vegetative level what kept happening: I would freeze up. The water increasingly became a safe space where I could experience and let down my guard. The way the therapist gently guided me in the water with a well-balanced mix of affective closeness and autonomy, gave me the opportunity to really feel what happens, even if I freeze up. In this context, I dared to really feel my loneliness and panic. I almost lost the connection once, but the therapists attention kept me in contact. I realized in a flash that I can simply **be** in this affective flow, and at that moment I could open up. It is such a delicate balance, finding that one precise moment in which it happens. That experience moved me deeply.*

Basic presence plays a just as important role in water. Carrying someone in water provides more depth to the contact when done from your own fundamental intention.

Participant feedback indicated that the intent of the other person is felt more directly. Also, the main advantage of being in water is that you can and may carry an adult. We are lighter in water, which makes it easier to carry someone. The water enveloping you softens the physical touch and any unease caused by the closeness, as if you are both wearing a large winter coat. It feels freer and more autonomous. You can be that close and still not be intrusive (Scharstuhl, 2020). At least, not if you do this using the haptonomic PTP principle, that being: prudent, transparent and present (Veldman, 2007).

The therapist, the client and the other course participants experience personally how precise the PTP must be. You can feel exactly if and when it fits, both as the person carrying and the person being carried. Both are in tune with the other and can feel it; there are no misunderstandings. The communication between parties is clear, both can feel the alignment.

Briefly, that old, vulnerable feeling on the vegetative level, that I am all on my own, reappeared. Because of my own defences I cannot connect with the other person. If the other person is not connected to themselves, then I have another problem. Early on, I developed a seventh sense for this and it that redoubles my defences. My system is so afraid of old pain, that I try to avoid it at all costs. I fear that salt will be rubbed into old wounds.

Attach and detach

Although attachment in current psychology, such as in the parent-child contact, is also meant to be loving and affirming, we believe it is important to provide the haptonomic vision on this. Attachment in haptotherapy is seen as a natural active searching behaviour deriving from the survival instincts of the child. This behaviour already shows autonomy. The connection between parent and child arises from the loving answer and the understanding of this behaviour. This very close proximity contact with its tactile-affirmative aspect ensures the need of safety and security and nourishment of the child. Thus establishes the basic security (Veldman, 2007).

Attachment depends so much on what the parent or guardian can offer the child from their own experiences and what they can set in motion with regard to the other. This expresses the interactive nature of the contact. The term attachment here means a liberative way, that is an affirming and involved loving approach to people (Veldman, 2007)

Detach and disengage is specifically used in haptotherapy, as a liberating act, to accompany the children into the world, were they are out of the prenatal fase of semi-symbiose with their mother, and see their father, the others and the world.

Old patterns become visible and tangible because the therapist helped the client to feel contact in different ways in water: unlimited, limited and limitless (Veldman, 2007). This releases pain and grief. A newborn baby does not know any limits; unlimited.

A growing child becomes conscious of limits because socializing means meeting other people putting up boundaries in tolerance and behaviour: limited.

A person with inner security, chooses in his/her own way in living, essentials without regarding obstacles as limiting for his/her necessary development: limitless.

The client also discovers a new opportunity to experience herself in this liberating, yet still affectively connected contact. She experiences what it is like to meet the other person limitless. In this space, she feels that she can stay true to herself within this close proximity. This encounter between client and therapist, is also something that happens at the right moment for her, so that she can really allow the emotional contact, can connect and then follow her own momentum. Her freeze reaction and her feelings of isolation that she experienced within the other two forms of contact (namely, limited and unlimited), gave her a renewed insight into her life story. It touched on a very early time. It was not easy, but gradually she was able to process this and lay it to rest. This now happens from a growing capacity to feel and she is increasingly able to remain true to herself when in contact with others. She can now show her true self.

My fear loses power when I enter into contact with another person through the affective connection with myself. The difference in presence is clearly tangible in warm water. And then the reciprocity I want so much just happens. It is so much easier, I don't have to work, or tense up. I don't have to assimilate and freeze up either anymore. What a relief! My breathing doesn't seize up anymore, it remains calm. All the other tensions in my body resulting from the old reactive patterns are so clearly tangible in the water. I can let them go and still maintain connection, with less and less help from the therapist. Maintaining connection still requires an effort, the old patterns run deep. I sometimes lose that contact before I realise it, I can feel that I am becoming softer, in my communication and responses.

Invitation to affective contact without limits

Entrusting yourself to another person provided that, that person is autonomously present, happens naturally and feels intense due to the embrace of the warm water. The person is 'present' trusting the therapist. In contrast to 'yielding', whereby a person surrenders themselves or adapts drastically. During the group carrying exercises, the person supporting the other person feels them in their entirety, invites them with tender intention and uses the

embrace of the warm water to do so. The person being supported feels the invitation to connect with the other person. The person feels the safety of the physically tangible space the water provides in which they can be themselves. This is how the contact is achieved, allowing the person supported to continue to feel and be present. The client experiences personally what is going on, because the feeling is transported directly through the water. It has been our experience that in this process, often a part of ourselves related to our earliest years is touched, the time before we could express ourselves with words (Scharstuhl, 2020). In that moment, we can really feel the way in which we were approached both tactilely and affectively, what our own free will was like. We could either enter into the inviting contact or end up in survival mode if there was no invitation. In the latter case, the familiar patterns of fight, flight or freezing are natural reactions. Our client's response was to freeze.

The appeal to our capacity to feel directly in water clarifies our response, whether in a positive or negative sense. It requires the therapist to be transparent and to provide safety in everything he/she offers. It requires an awareness of what you are doing. The water here functions as a warm, enveloping biotope, whereby its specific warmth and softness can reach the sensorial memory from our earliest childhood. It allows us to 'not think', but 'just experience'. When we receive the embrace of the water so instinctively, we can at a certain point really entrust ourselves to it, because of the contact with the person supporting us.

Subsequently, it becomes possible for the contact to expand into a reciprocal encounter. The person being carried moves from within their depths towards the person carrying, who then feels this and answers the touch by accepting it. As the person carrying, it is wonderful to be able to feel this. In the beginning, it is often very light and hesitant, almost imperceptible to the person themselves. The fact that the person carrying does perceive it, is very affirming to the client.

The detachment of such a contact is a mutual sensing and 'understanding' of each other with regard to the moment of 'letting go'. After all, 'detachment while retaining the autonomous entity feeling of connection' can only occur if the attachment contact has been good (Delfos, 1999). The result is 'development of autonomous initiative' (Veldman, 2009).

Reflection

The client has already taken these steps: being safe, being herself in the water, and being in contact with the water. Entrusting herself to the therapist was possible

because she realised she was carried by the water, in which she had already discovered a bit of autonomy. It was a process of turning milder in the mind, guided by the therapist and others in that beautiful, warm, enveloping water. She was often affected, but she could move on because her insight was increasing, and because she could draw and sculpt her emotions during the phase that she had no words to express them. That helped her to make the experience more concrete. The client wrote the following poem about this process:

*At the bottom of my soul
The unutterable lies anchored
Resonating in the petrified emotion
Hammer, chisel and warm water
Bring me closer to the words
Of images that are never forgotten*



Figure 1: Sculpture by Tonny van Banning

The experiences in warm water contributed to freeing the images from that unconscious depth, so that I could first render my story in my own language of forms. Making the stone sculptures helped me to bring whatever was hardened deep within me to the surface. The starting point of my sculpture was a jagged, hard piece of marble. Yet, I felt the need to create from this piece of stone a sculpture that had an aura of soft embrace. The transformation from hard to soft was a metaphor for the process that I lived through while making the sculpture. Hacking at the stone with a hammer and chisel helped me to find a vehicle of expression for the initially unutterable experiences. The haptotherapy in water and the sculpting laid the foundation for me to allow everything that had happened in the past in my life to penetrate to my consciousness. Now I can put words to the unutterable and I can stay in connection and in motion. This is evidenced in my daily life in an airiness, a lightness, in compassion and in enjoying the moment.

Conclusion

The safety haptotherapy in warm water offers has helped the client to bring to the surface deeply hidden feelings of fear and abandonment. These feelings were brought into consciousness. Next to these findings the

water has mirrored the client's survival behaviour. The therapy process in water has helped the client to assimilate these feelings. She is now free to make her own movement in contacting herself and others.

The space around us in water is more tangible than on dry land; air is after all less tangible than water. Feeling this "water coat" makes the water feel softer and fuller around you and thus you move and approach others with gentler intention. This allows you to share your sense of safety and presence with others. It also makes you feel good about yourself.

Old patterns become visible and tangible because the client feels contact in different ways in water; limited, unlimited and limitless (Veldman, 2007). This releases pain and grief.

Haptotherapy in water has through its specific sensory qualities, brought to the surface a disturbance of mind which could not be met outside the water. This disturbance was known but not felt, the client was not able to live fully.

The warm water here functions as a warm enveloping biotope, whereby its specific warmth and softness can reach the sensorial memory from our earliest childhood. It

allows us to "not think", but "just experience". When we receive the embrace of the water so instinctively, we can at a certain point really entrust ourselves to it.

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