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# The stress buster

Natasha Reid was desperate to treat her crippling panic attacks without drugs. But neither hypnotherapy nor cognitive behavioural therapy did any good. Finally, she stumbled upon the Grinberg method ...

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My first appointment with a Grinberg method practitioner was a revelation: I had barely got my shoes and socks off before Rivka Halbershtat started reading my feet and promptly recounted my entire physical and emotional history.

I was looking for a way to handle crippling panic attacks without taking anti-depressants, and found a remedy that seemed both baffling and commonsense. I had tried hypnotherapy, which was farcical - the hypnotherapist tried to link all my problems to potty training - and cognitive behavioural therapy, which helped me to analyse my fears and see them as irrational, but the breathing exercises to prevent hyperventilation were impossible in social situations. How could I inhale and exhale for counts of four throughout, say, a job interview?

A friend suggested the Grinberg method, calling it "a kind of a physical therapy for psychological problems". It is quietly gaining ground in complementary therapy circles, and in Berlin - where I live, and where alternative health practices are taken very seriously indeed - it is a rising trend. Most "qualified" practitioners are concentrated in Israel and continental Europe, although next year a new school will open in Los Angeles, and presumably decimate the pedicure industry (sanded down soles of feet make them hard to read).

A wave of Britons are training at European schools this year, while Victoria Oldham already runs a booked-out clinic in London's Triyoga Studios. People will travel great distances to see a particular practitioner - coming to Berlin from as far afield as Israel, Spain and Denmark. The method was developed by the Israeli reflexologist Avi Grinberg in the 1980s. Working as a paramedic and later as a nurse, Grinberg was frustrated by the care provided for patients with chronic health problems, and spent years exploring alternatives from Feldenkrais - which teaches "awareness through movement" - to martial arts and trying techniques such as deep tissue massage and acupressure. The method evolved, and continues to evolve, from this mishmash of references.

What I found startling about Halbershtat's foot diagnosis was how swiftly she got to the point, articulating things that I couldn't. The idea is that, if you stand on your feet all day, your emotional and physical history will show up as scars and marks on your feet.

Her questions invariably hit the mark, and I found myself in tears when she nailed the age I'd been when my family moved countries and I first started to experience anxiety. At this point, my inner sceptic was in revolt - wasn't this like "cold reading" when a fake psychic asks leading questions to extract information? I sent a friend, who is an even greater sceptic than I, off for a foot reading and he also ended up completely

bowled over and a little shaken.

Halbershtat was also able to map which parts of my body suffered pain or tension: the shoulders, chest and neck mainly, but also my lower back. I was mystified, and asked how she could tell. "Well, you have a lot of thick skin on the balls of your feet," she said, "which corresponds to your chest area. That indicates a feeling of heaviness and pressure which shouldn't be there."

The next stage was "body work". Halber-shtat went straight to two painful points on my shoulders and pressed deep into them, then told me to tense and exaggerate what I was doing. A clenched muscle in my shoulder connected to one in my neck, tightening my throat while another pulled up my diaphragm and my lower belly and so on, all the way to my toes, which started twitching.

My breathing became shallow, and I panicked and felt sick. I'd thrown my entire posture out of sync, constricted my lungs and my throat. So it hadn't been just psychosomatic after all - rather a mixture of physical and emotional reactions. The treatment also helped me see how every single bodily ache and pain I'd whinged about for years knitted together - all self-inflicted it seemed.

Halbershtat told me I had to recognise exactly what I was doing and then stop myself: I had to learn this physically, not mentally. Trying to suppress the panic was making it worse. She worked on my neck and shoulders then left me to lie quietly for 10 minutes. After, I got up and walked home, feeling strangely normal for the first time in months.

The "body work" seems intuitive to me, although Vered Manasse, a teacher at Berlin's Grinberg Method School, calls it "systematic ... we spend a minimum of three years learning many different techniques, and we can draw on all of them as the situation demands". The word "touch" is preferred to "massage", because, as Manasse points out, "Massage has a very specific intention - it's about relaxing the muscles - and we have many other intentions".

Through "touch", practitioners are also encouraging clients to focus on a body part, and understand that they are not using a certain muscle, or have knotted it up. After treatment you can end up feeling almost bruised - it can be excruciating - but that means that you remain aware of that precise part of your body.

Since I began my "process" my sessions have followed the same format. Halbershtat has found spots on my body - like my forehead or mid back - which are so tense that a particularly deep "touch" will leave me writhing in agony. Most clients present physical complaints. Oldham says: "We usually see people with symptoms which they don't recognise as stress: back pain, IBS, migraines."

Serious physical and mental illnesses are beyond the method, although practitioners often work with patients who are in recovery. Grinberg practitioners also recommend the method for those who are caught in a pattern of behaviour that exasperates them - it seems you can do Grinberg for pretty much anything that ails you: writer's block, poor concentration, relationship problems. Just don't call it a cure. "We aren't healers," says Manasse. "This is not a substitute for conventional medicine. We teach - you learn how to pay attention to your body, and to let it tell you what is best. Your body knows how to create a panic attack, and a practitioner helps you to understand how it does that, and therefore to stop it."

That's the crux of the Grinberg method: the responsibility lies with the client, not the practitioner, to make a change. One process - which could take anything from 10 appointments to two years, depending on how much the client wants to explore - is supposed to set you up for life.

After only a few sessions I was able to go to the cinema without bolting out in a surge

of claustrophobia, because I had learned that if I don't constrict my diaphragm I won't feel like I am about to faint or vomit. I know exactly how to stop myself doing it, too, and how to breathe easily.

Progress is a mixture of "Eureka!" moments and a slow, concentrated effort to break down habits that have built up over years, like calluses, but after six months of weekly sessions, the attacks have definitely become less severe.

• [grinbergmethod.com](http://grinbergmethod.com); [triyoga.co.uk](http://triyoga.co.uk)

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