

PATHWAYS TO HEALTH – JULY 1999

Meet Cape-based husband-and-wife team Gail and Ewald Meggersee, who turned painful, crippling adversity into triumph and pioneered the body stress release system of bodywork, which they now teach to students from all over the world. By Caryl Morgan

Fear of becoming totally paralysed while still in his 30s led Ewald Meggersee, together with his wife Gail, to pioneer the body-wellness system known as body stress release (BSR).

"I had the distorted posture of a 120-year-old and would frequently wake up paralysed from the waist down," says Ewald. "And all my life – from the age of five when I fell out of a tree and lay unconscious for a week – no one had been able to find the source of the continuous shooting pains and cramping I suffered in my lower back and legs.

His schooldays were a nightmare; he couldn't sit still at a desk and was shouted at for fidgeting. He would often collapse from a deep ache in his knees if asked to stand for any period of time – so Cadets was always a problem. Gym teachers forced him to touch his toes when he collapsed in agony. When he was 15, he was told his pain and severe cramping were psychosomatic, because no one could find any physical cause for it.

Ewald qualified as an industrial chemist, and met and married Gail, a teacher. His body pain

didn't let up. "Sometimes," says Gail, "Ewald would scream out in his sleep and leap out of bed in the grip of intense cramping in his calf muscles. Our blackest moment came the day he woke up feeling no sensation from the waist down. I watched in horror as he rolled out of bed onto the floor, pulling himself up via the wardrobe for support while he waited for sensation to return to his legs."

The nightmare became a regular occurrence for Ewald. "You can imagine my fear of going to sleep at night when I didn't know if I was going to wake up permanently paralysed," he says "Eventually it got so bad that I faced losing my job and spending the rest of my life in a wheelchair. We felt we had nothing to lose, so we decided to pack up everything and both train as chiropractors in America."

Over the years, Ewald had received temporary relief from regular chiropractic treatments, but the pain would always return. Now they hoped to discover something which perhaps others had missed – and find a way to identify the source of

Ewald's pain and reverse his worsening condition.

"During our studies in America we had the good fortune to meet Dr Richard van Rumpt, a retired chiropractor who had researched an approach completely different to chiropractic manipulation," says Ewald. "He talked about listening to the body and using it as a biofeedback mechanism that would be self-healing. When we returned to South Africa, we built on his method of reading the body's feedback response to areas of muscle stress and contraction. The technique became known as body stress release."

"What we discovered is that the body protects itself from stress in a highly organised way. Although it can normally adapt to the various stresses and strains of everyday life – falls, jerks, heavy lifting, bad posture – if the stress gets too severe, the body suffers overload and locks the stress into itself in lines of tension and contraction. This tension – or body stress – leads to pain, numbness or stiffness. It also interferes with the body's self-healing defence mechanisms. The body is less and less

able to cope with or adapt to added stress, and begins to deteriorate further. This is why a person with long-term body stress may also feel tense, tired, and lacking in energy and enthusiasm for life. Headaches, backache and indigestion may follow.”

In some cases, a person suffering stress overload no longer feels still or sore – but just comes to accept as normal a sense of having less than 100% well-being.

Thousands of South Africans beat a path to the Meggersees’ door as work spread when they started their BSR practice in Cape Town in the 1980s. Many of their clients, like Ewald himself, had tried other traditional avenues of medical and chiropractic treatment – without success. But now the couple had found a gentle, almost miraculous way of enhancing the body’s own healing powers by releasing long-held stress locked in the muscle system.

They knew it worked because their prime guinea pig, Ewald himself, had gone from being a near-cripple to regaining his strength and the pain-free body he now describes as being as fit as a teenager’s. Today, at 54, Ewald reports that his body continues to improve. “For the first time in my life I can feel the sensation of socks

and shoes on my feet and have improved movement in my ankles” he says.

Ironically, the BSR system which the Meggersees pioneered differs radically from its chiropractic roots. Ewald says that most of their students come from fields unrelated to medicine – alternative or traditional. “BSR differs from chiropractic in that it uses information provided by the body itself to determine where abnormal muscle tension is undermining the efficiency of the nervous system and disturbing its ability to co-ordinate its functioning.”

Two years ago the Meggersees moved from Cape Town to set up a healing centre between Wilderness and Sedgefield, near Knysna on the Garden Route. Here their main focus is teaching. The five-month BSR training course attracts applicants from all over the world – but they take only 12 students at a time, all of whom stay in or near the Meggersees’ centre for the duration of their training.

Is it necessary to have a medical or massage background or some previous body-work training to become a BSR practitioner? “On the contrary,” says Ewald. “This can be more a hindrance that a help, because our work looks at the body from a totally

different paradigm to almost all other methods available.”

The only prerequisite for becoming a BSR practitioner is to have personal experience of the therapy. Successful applicants must have experienced the transformation of their own bodies and lives. In South African there are more than 50 trained practitioners, all of who belong to the BSR Association.

How does BSR work?

Working with the body’s natural striving to be stress-free, BSR is a gentle procedure that does not require force. It is suitable for all ages; the Meggersees have had success with clients ranging from new-born infants to the aged, in all states of health.

“So much of the body’s energy system is taken up with being defensive and protective to muscles which over a lifetime lock up in corset-like layers, one after another,” says Ewald. “The key with BSR is to switch the musculature system to being supportive while damaged tissue heals. This involves restoring communication within all parts of the body.”

With the person lying fully clothed, the practitioner carries out a series of tests to locate the exact sites of body stress,

watching the reaction of muscles to indicate where and in what direction the tension lies.

Gently, the stress is then released by means of light but definite pressure, encouraging the body to let go. The process may provide instant relief, or require a number of sessions, depending on the severity and duration of the stress.

Tight protective layers of muscle tend to relax by degrees back to their normal tone. In Ewald's case, it took a year of regular treatments to undo the tensions which had been locked in his body for over 30 years. At times, the pain intensified as sensation was restored to previously numbed sites. But as the months passed he felt his whole spine becoming more flexible and his back straightening. His lower back, once imprisoned by rigid muscles in spasm, felt relaxed and smooth.

True Stories

In more than 18 years of practising and teaching

BSR, the Meggersees continue to marvel at the body's miraculous powers of self-healing. "This system is not a diagnosis or treatment or any condition or disease, but only seeks to assist the body's own in-built ability to heal itself" says Gail. "We see it as a complementary health technique – not an alternative to medicine." "Most people come for relief from pain," says Gail, "But as the body restores its general efficiency, so their general health improves."

Take the woman in her forties whose severe asthma cleared up after only three sessions – or the 50 year-old diabetic whose need for insulin ceased as his diabetes improved. Several women who thought they were sterile became pregnant after their lower-back stress had been released over a period of months. One man's eyesight improved so dramatically after a month, that he no longer wears glasses.

"Babies respond very rapidly," says Gail "After

a difficult birth, a two-day-old baby kept rolling her head and was unable to suckle. After the neck was released, she suckled and slept normally. A five-month-old baby was suspected of having cerebral palsy because his arms and legs were in spasm. He could not focus his vision and constantly moved his head. All these problems cleared up after one session, and two years later his development was normal in every way." The Meggersees often see babies who scream almost continuously. After the neck stress is released they become placid and responsive.

Ewald takes special pleasure in treating older children with "growing pains" and helping others to improve concentration at school. In this way he can give to others what he never had as a child – a gentle and effective way to relieve painful and distressing systems which can otherwise worsen and cripple the happiness of childhood.