



Using the Two-Chair Process for Helping Babies and Families

By John Chitty, RPP, BCST

The “two-chair” process is a remarkably effective, gentle and safe way to support new families. Popularized in the late 1960s by Fritz Perls, MD (1893-1970) as part of his Gestalt therapy, the method was expanded by Robert Hall, MD (1934-) based on Hall’s study with polarity therapy founder Randolph Stone, DO, DC, ND (1890-1981). The present-day manifestation of the two-chair process also reflects the influence of Peter Levine, PhD (1942-), who studied with Stone and Hall. For a complete description of the method, see *Dancing with Yin and Yang* (2013) by John Chitty, which contains an extensive 80-page, highly detailed chapter of the two-chair process.

The two-chair process, also known as polarity counseling, consists of alternating one’s perspective from one point of view to another, then back again. Actual chairs are used to heighten the experience of differentiation from one state to another. The effectiveness of the method derives from how it induces movement between perspectives. In a young family, the two perspectives might be mother and baby, mother and father, the client and a medical condition, or any other combination.

For example, before the birth, the mother could imagine the baby to be in the other chair. The mother might experience particular emotions, sensations or thoughts in the presence of the imagined baby. Then the mother switches and sits in the other chair, “becoming” the baby. Typically the autonomic nervous system (ANS) state changes instantly, to a quite different configuration. A different set of

emotions, sensations and thoughts appears. A conversation can be encouraged, with making statements or asking questions in one chair, then responding in the other chair. Often remarkable insights arise. By switching back and forth, experiencing different ANS states, the whole system loosens up and begins a healing process from within itself.

The theory underlying the two-chair process can be visualized as a pendulum in an energy field. Randolph Stone famously said that illness accompanies fixation and healing accompanies movement. We go through life residing in our primary habitual perspective, but we always have a secondary aspect. Switching from chair to chair causes the pendulum to start swinging, instead of being glued to just one position. Similarly, we all have a primary baseline autonomic state, deploying strategies that we developed in the past, for good reasons. Since the autonomic nervous

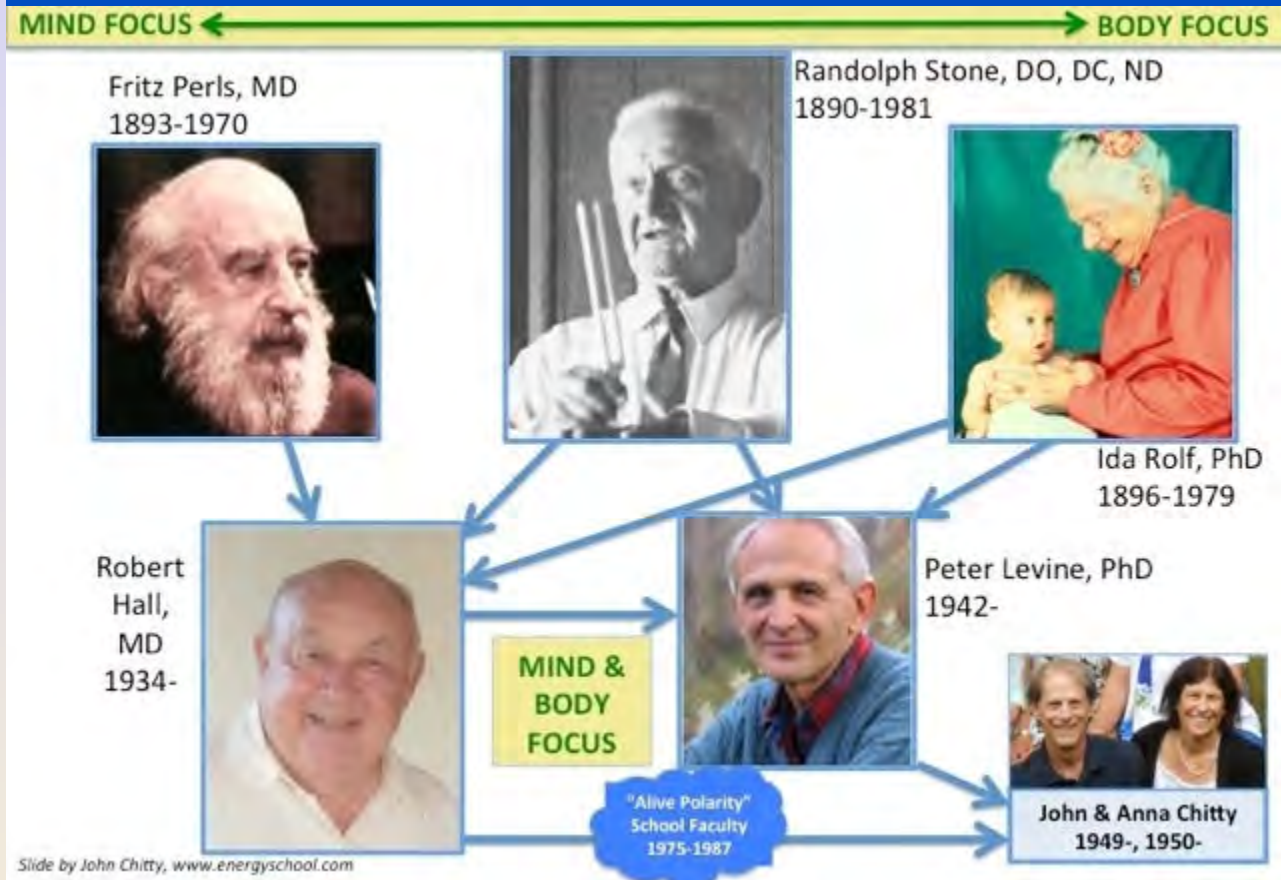
system is the substrate for all health, including mental, emotional, and physical, fixation in just one state undermines wellbeing. Switching from chair to chair induces movement in ANS states, leading to profound benefits.

Substantial theory, science, and specific “tricks of the trade” form the foundation for the two-chair process method, but perhaps a few examples are the most expedient way to get a quick overview of how and why it works.

Example 1: Newborn Nursing

A first-time mother came to see me because her one-week-old son was not feeding well. Sitting in the first chair, we spent a few minutes just getting settled, using the body-low-slow-loop method (a form of body scan meditation—*see next page*) and without any particular context. Then I asked her to imagine that the baby was in the other chair. Immediately a

Two-Chair Method Family Tree



Body-Low-Slow-Loop

This simple practice is quick, effective first aid for autonomic nervous system conditions. It is indirectly derived from the work of Peter Levine, attempting to capture one of his main ideas in an easily remembered formula. BLSL has four steps and takes about 10 minutes. It can be done with the support of a guide, or just by oneself. Repeated daily, it gradually re-molds the autonomic nervous system. It is excellent as a coping practice for children, people in stressful situations, and people with anxiety or depression conditions.

The Four Steps:

Body: Bring your attention into the body and scan for sensations

Low: Among the various sensations detected, choose one and find the most distal (furthest from the head) edge of the sensation cluster.

Slow: Ask yourself three or more specific questions about the sensation, such as: Is it more on the left or the right? Is it shallow or deep? Is it moving or still?

Loop: Transfer your attention to a different body area, such as the toes or fingertips. In the second location, spend an equal amount of time noticing every detail, using exploratory questions similar to step 3. After the allotted time, shift back to the first sensation location and notice what is present now.

Repeat as needed, for a total of about 10 to 15 minutes.

The method is described in the book *Dancing with Yin and Yang* starting on page 185 and is also available as a podcast in the Resources section of www.energyschool.com.

Two-Chair Setup & Logistics



wave of emotions washed through her; we let that subside naturally, as these waves tend to do. Next she posed a question, “Baby, what’s happening with nursing?” I said, “Switch,” and she changed chairs.

Sitting in the “baby” chair, a completely different autonomic nervous system configuration appeared. Responding to the question, the baby said, “Mom, you are so nervous and overwhelmed, I don’t want to add to your troubles.” I could have stated the same, but having her hear it from herself was much more effective.

Switching back to the first chair, mom could really take in the message, and because she had just experienced a different autonomic state, she was not so fixed in her nervousness. The process continued for a few more switches, while the energy field of the dyad gradually became more and more flowing instead of fixed. The baby nursed well after the session, and I received an email the next day saying that all was well after lots more nursing and an excellent quality of sleep during the night.

Example 2: Pre-birth

A client called from her hospital bed saying that she was poised for delivery but the baby was not coming out, and the medical staff was talking about intervention. She was familiar with the method from our earlier sessions. I asked her to “Put the baby in the chair,” which in this case was imaginary since she was in her delivery bed. She imagined the baby in front of her and asked, “Baby, why are you not coming out?” Switching to be the “baby,” she immediately blurted out, “Mom, what is happening out there? Why is everyone so excited and what are they doing with all those sharp objects?” Switching back to herself, the mother explained, “No worries, these people are just here to help us and keep us safe and everything is alright!” Switching back, the baby said, “Oh.” The mom interrupted the process saying, “Ooops, gotta go!” and the baby was born without complications. The whole process took about five minutes.

Example 3: Family dynamics

The father of two young children, a newborn and a two-year-old, came to see me complaining of depression and other autonomic symptoms. These indicated he was moving into a parasympathetic ANS state, the lowest rung on the ANS hierarchy, as explained in Chapter 6 of *Dancing with Yin and Yang*.

A short digression about the ANS is useful here. Using Stephen Porges’ Polyvagal Theory, the ANS can be described as a three-rung ladder. The top rung is the “social engagement system,” which exists in mammals and primates to facilitate infant maternal bonding and adult communication. This ANS subsystem consists of a set of cranial nerves that innervate the face, senses, throat, neck and heart. The social branch is the evolutionarily newest and most sophisticated ANS system. The second rung in the ANS sequence is the sympathetic autonomic nervous system, which is evolutionarily older. The sympathetic enables mobilization for survival functions. The third and

last rung on the ladder is the parasympathetic autonomic nervous system, which operates baseline metabolism and nighttime repair functions. Each rung on the ladder has a set of stress responses in addition to its primary function: emergency communication for social, fight/flight for sympathetic and immobilization for parasympathetic.

We started with him in one chair, and again used body-low-slow-loop to establish a baseline and also experientially learn a self-help method for himself to use in the future. Experiential learning is more effective than instruction or coaching.

We put his wife in the other chair, and he showed body language of shrinking and turning away. Body-reading is an important skill in the two chair process. He greeted her and switched to the other chair. As his imaginary wife, “she” was agitated and uncomfortable. They had a conversation about their feelings, and the ANS states started to soften. Then, while he was in “her” chair, we put the babies in the first chair. Her ANS configuration immediately changed to strongly softening and leaning toward them. The difference between how she was with him, and how she was with the babies, was clearly obvious to him, and we talked about the notorious “surrogate spouse,” “husband lost in space” syndromes, which are very common but often unrecognized. This happens when the family welcomes a new baby and the mom-baby dyad supplants the wife-husband dyad as the primary foundational energy field for the system.

Returning back to the original dyad, husband in one chair and wife in the other, they re-negotiated their relationship, resolving to really focus on preserving the primary energetic foundation of the family.

I saw him a few weeks later, and he reported that the problems were greatly reduced and that his ANS state had improved. In addition, he felt more successful in his business and as a result he had just completed a favorable deal that greatly enhanced the family’s financial security. In polarity therapy terminology, his *Yang* (outgoing, active, materialization) energy had been constrained by the bind in his domestic situation; when that subsided, the energy became much more effective in life.

Experiential learning is more effective than instruction or coaching.

Example 4: Working with a Condition

A male client in his forties had a vague desire to quit smoking before his young son was old enough to become consciously aware of his habit, but there were always excuses and distractions, not least because smoking was really helping him manage his inner state. In the “two chairs” he had a conversation with tobacco as an old and valued ally in managing his anxiety, and they ended up bidding each other a respectful farewell. Then the second chair became his son, and the sense of determination increased enormously when he experienced how much his son looked up to him as a hero. He

reframed quitting smoking as a heroic act for the benefit of his son, a real world field of action for his fatherly instincts.

He was able to quit smoking after that session and later reported that his relationship with his wife had also improved as a side-effect, not only because she appreciated the change in odor but also because he felt less ashamed and generally better about himself as a result of being more in command (balanced Yang) of his life.

Example 5: Turning around

A mother was close to delivery but the baby was turned the wrong way. The mom was well-educated and knew that this could be a great complication, involving significant pain for her and possible risk for her child. Putting the baby in the other chair, the two had a conversation, and I encouraged the mom, “Sell the idea of turning to the baby!” She imagined the baby in the other chair and switched back and forth once, to get some flow going between the two in dialogue, then she talked to the baby about the advantages of turning.

When she switched to the other chair and role-played as the “baby,” the posture and gestures suggested that the baby was not actually paying attention; instead the baby seemed to be obliviously enjoying just dreamily floating in the womb space. Switching back and forth he became much more engaged, and the advantages of turning were repeated again, and this time the “baby” was much more available for interaction. There were some poignant sentiments expressed back and forth, including the mom being able to express some of her fears, and the baby gradually becoming more cooperative. That night the baby turned, with the help of prenatal massage, and the next week the birth happened without complications.

Summary

The two-chair process was invented in about 1955 as a psychotherapy method and subsequently enhanced by other contributors. Fritz Perls' application of it can be viewed on YouTube, and Peter Levine speaks of its principles in what he calls 'pendulation' in his Somatic Experiencing® system. From polarity therapy is added innovations such as energy anatomy, cosmology and body reading, and from Stephen Porges is added the new understanding of the Polyvagal Theory, the triune autonomic nervous system. In its current form, it can be deployed in many different environments. It has multiple advantages relating to safety and efficiency. Clients are protected from overwhelm because a change of state is



always readily available just by changing chairs. Insights come from within the client instead of from the external authority of the therapist. The process is constantly body-referenced, making clients more self-aware of autonomic nervous system states and therefore more empowered for their own self-regulation.

Scope of Practice

Discussion of the two chair process begs for a brief comment about scope of practice. From a strict interpretation, it is clearly a form of psychotherapy. However it is also significantly different in several ways. It does not rely on diagnosis or analysis, and it can be a short-term therapy. It does not necessarily deploy theories about psychological categories. It does not require significant excavation or interpretation of past events. Once the basic principles have been learned, it can be used safely by parents, educators, ministers, body therapists, coaches or other professionals. Laypeople can

even use the method safely and effectively on their own: one client reported that transformational changes were occurring in her life through daily practice of just 15 minutes a day, switching chairs from one perspective to another by herself and systematically "conversing" with all the main people and situations in her life. In other popular references, a version of the two chair process made *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, described by meditation teacher Adyashanti in a clip available on YouTube. Similarly, a version of it was described by physicist Nassim Hamein in his *Crossing the Event Horizon* lectures, also available on YouTube.

With babies and young families, the two-chair method can be used by midwives, nurses and birth attendants as first aid in many situations. The method has strong ties to bodywork and can be useful in several touch therapy modalities.

These kinds of diverse applications may attract criticism from some psychology professionals, who advocate strict separation of body and mind in therapeutic practice. There is an expectation that clients will see one specialist for body problems and a different expert for mental-emotional support, whereas this method often blurs the lines. This criticism reflects our society's deep conflicts about holistic vs. specialized care, and the unfortunate tendency to engage in professional turf wars.

I do not have an easy answer for the scope of practice debate. My priority interest is not about scope of practice, it is about the work itself. In my 35 years of experience, the two chair process has proven itself to be so valuable that I want it to become better known and more accessible. I expect that readers of this article will have a wide range of different professional bases, including not only psychology but also numerous allied professions. Readers will have to envision for themselves how the method might be used in their particular context. I just hope that this writing can help more people become aware of a truly remarkable healing method.

John Chitty is the author of *Dancing with Yin and Yang: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Psychotherapy and Randolph Stone's Polarity Therapy*. With his wife Anna, he has operated Colorado School of Energy Studies (www.energyschool.com), in Boulder CO, since 1992. His private practice combines Polarity Therapy, Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy, and psychotherapy.

Reference:

Chitty, J. (2013). *Dancing with Yin & Yang: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Psychotherapy, and Randolph Stone's Polarity Therapy*. Boulder, CO: Polarity Press.

Two-Chair: A Shared Experience

An Anonymous recollection to protect the client's identity



Before working with John and experiencing the Two-Chair exercise, I had some familiarity with Gestalt work as well as family constellation practice so I was somewhat prepared for the impact that “taking another position” can have on current stuck places. However, the precision with which John led the practice – and the state changes I experienced – were truly transformative and lasting. I’m not sure *how* it works but *that* it works – and provides relief in ways that other methods do not – is certain.

Having been divorced for almost 10 years I was truly baffled by the continued enmeshment between my ex-husband and I. The effects on our daughter (age 12) heightened my concern and mobilized me to take action. John suggested we try a “two-chair” to see more about the situation. I began by taking the chair as myself seated across from my mother. Immediately a series of physical sensations and postures became prominent in my awareness. He asked how old I felt and that too became very clear; I felt very young. He then had me take the chair “as” my mother. A completely different set of physical sensations sprung into my awareness as I took on a particular affect of resignation about her relationship with my dad. In my mother’s chair the sense that “This is painful; this is how relationships just are; there is nothing to do” was overwhelming.

John then had me sit on the floor with my father and mother in each of the chairs. I could feel a sense of being

conflicted. My mother’s chair was where the aliveness was so I was drawn to be with her but in my father’s chair, there was contraction and shutting down. I was just so sad for my disappearing dad. John pointed out the common constellation of Yin and Yang archetypal imbalance with my mother taking role of Critic and my father taking the role of Wimp. As a child of 12 myself, I was taking all of this in and in fact learning for myself the lesson my mother had obviously learned in her family; “This is how relationships are; they are painful and there’s nothing you can do.”

Now John had me sit across from my imagined ex-husband. I immediately felt the Critic arise in me. When I sat in my ex-husband’s chair I could feel the Wimp arise. I not only could see the similarity between what I had just experienced between my mother and father, I could viscerally feel it. The generational “passing of the torch” of what relationship is became clear and obvious when felt in my body. The kind of dramatic opening that this creates is what seems to distinguish this method from any other type of relationship therapy or trauma work I’ve encountered. There is not just awareness of the dynamics, there is a loosening of the actual stuckness. A dynamic flow begins simply from experiencing, and moving between, two positions. And, once freed, it remains free in a particular way that has liberated me from enmeshment with my ex-husband and opened my heart to both he and my daughter in a liberating way.