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Chapter **1**

Somatic Movement in a Nutshell

We all hold many amazing memories in our bodies. We also hold on to traumatic events and experiences that may be holding us back from living our best lives. Through somatic movement, you can unlock things that are stored and start to process events that you may not realize are creating unhealthy patterns and thoughts.

Somatic exercise is a form of exercise that uses the mind-body connection to discover things about ourselves and release physical and emotional tension. I like to think of somatic exercise as a “work in” as opposed to a workout. Somatic exercise is movement for the sake of movement, not for an external result. With somatic exercise, you are not concerned with an outcome or a result. You are instead looking to connect with your body in a way that makes it safe to process things that may be stored inside.



TIP

Soma refers to the living body, as indicated by Thomas Hannah, a pioneer in the somatic field.

Somatic movement requires a certain kind of patience and focus. The goal is to be fully in touch with your body, mind, and breath as you practice somatic exercises.

Understanding the Mind-Body Connection

Our bodies and minds are connected. When something happens to us mentally or emotionally, it's often stored physically. We may not even realize it at the time and then may create movement patterns based around the trauma.

Have you ever been thinking about something and notice that your shoulders are up to your ears? Or have you ever been moving your body and the next thing you know you've completely spaced out? So often in life we are thinking or moving, but not in the moment. I see people at the gym on the treadmill, watching television or listening to music; or some are on a stationary bike reading a book or magazine. It's impossible to be fully connected to what your body is doing when you are multitasking.

Somatic movement is the opposite of multitasking. Instead, you connect your mind and your body and pay attention to how the two are united in the same task. When we are mindful of what we are doing and present in the moment, it's miraculous how time moves differently. Many call it a *flow state*. You are so all in on what you are doing that you lose sense of anything else. You are in the flow, and nothing gets in your way.



REMEMBER

Finding that mind-body connection can tune you into all aspects of your life. It takes practice and somatic movement can help you get better and stay in that zone more often.

Exercising the Somatic Way

The concept behind somatic exercise isn't too complex. As human beings, though, we are programmed to be "doing" as opposed to "being." Because of this, learning to slow down and listen intently to our bodies can be challenging.

There isn't an external goal when it comes to somatic movement. Yes, you will notice the benefits. Maybe you'll be stressed or you'll lose a little weight, or reduce pain, or feel better. But you're not doing somatic exercises for that reason. You're moving your body in a way that feels good and helps you understand yourself better. Focusing on the mind-body connection is the ultimate goal of somatic movement. Through this process, you will experience some incredible breakthroughs and results. The first goal isn't the result, but you will inevitably see changes as you put in the work to get to know yourself better.

Somatic exercise is a body-based practice that involves noticing what you are sensing. As you start using your senses as you move, you'll start to release tension. You'll find ways of freeing up space. You'll connect to your breath. The goal, if there is one, is to become at home in your body.

You can practice somatic exercises on your own or with a trained somatic therapist. You can work on body awareness and connection using titration, pendulation, breathwork, and grounding exercises:

- » *Titration* involves gradually and carefully exploring traumatic experiences by working with small pieces at a time to avoid getting overwhelmed.
- » *Pendulation* involves moving between two sensations — safety and discomfort, or expansion and contraction — so that you can slowly release these in a balanced way.
- » *Breathwork* combines conscious breathing techniques with body awareness. The goal is to enable physical, mental, and emotional well-being. You learn to use your breath as a powerful tool to release tension, promote self-awareness, and foster a deep connection with oneself.
- » *Grounding exercises* root you in the present moment, helping to deregulate the central nervous system. When you focus on your body's contact with the floor or with the Earth, you are able to be in the moment and calm yourself.

HOW SOMATICS HELPED ME

I struggled for many years to feel at home in my body. I remember in my early teen years I was uncomfortable with the signals my body was giving me as I entered puberty. I started controlling what I was eating and lost quite a bit of weight. I was borderline anorexic, and my parents were unfamiliar with what was happening. I went to a counselor and surprisingly she gave me a workout VHS tape to bring home and start moving my body. She wanted me to start eating healthier and gain an appreciation for how my body moved and supported me at the same time. I wasn't doing the at-home workouts for an external result; rather she wanted me to feel myself from the inside and appreciate my body for how it could move and breathe and nourish itself. Eating disorders of any kind involve losing a valuable connection between the conscious mind and the physical self. Somatic movement and exercise help foster the mind/body connection.

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This was my first experience with somatic movement. Thank goodness I realized how important it was to eat healthy, and I got back to a normal weight. I was also a dancer and in dance we'd look in the mirror and compare ourselves. When I went to college, I fell back briefly into the trap of punishing my body by restricting and then overeating. I lost track of feeling myself from the inside and cherishing what my body could do for me.

At this point, I discovered yoga, and it honestly changed my life. I started going to the local yoga studio near me in the East Village every day. I started to feel more connected to myself than ever before. I cried often in *Savasana* (the final relaxation posture at the end of a yoga class to soak in the effects of the practice) as I let go of my harsh inner critic. I learned to listen to my natural hunger cues and trust that my body knew what it needed. I tapped into my breath and found healthier ways to cope and manage my anxiety. Yoga helped me activate my parasympathetic nervous system so I could get out of flight or fight mode and relax. Somatic movement like yoga saved my life. This may sound dramatic, but I honestly think had I not discovered yoga (which then opened up the door to many other forms of somatic exercises), I wouldn't be the person I am today. See Figure 1-1.



FIGURE 1-1:
The author
feeling lighter
after a somatic
movement
session.

Photograph by Guen Egan

Calming vs activating the nervous system

Somatic movement has a calming effect on the nervous system. The stress of many people's daily lives has led them to be more reactive and living in fight-or-flight mode constantly. This can lead to illness and disease. It's important to find things that can help you tap into a heightened state. Somatic exercise activates the parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous system. When you move in a mindful way and incorporate deep breathing, you allow your body to settle down. It's not easy to constantly be on high alert. Many people need a way to relax and release.

Yoga, meditation, Pilates, walking in nature, Tai Chi, and dance are all forms of somatic movement. They allow you to connect with yourself and your senses.

Differentiating somatic work from other exercises and treatments

There are, of course, other ways to calm the nervous system, such as listening to classical music, talking to a friend, or reading a good book. The difference between somatic movement and other treatments is that you use your body to process your emotions first, instead of your mind. People often try to “think” their way out of a stressed state or an anxious mood. *Soma* means “of the body” and, in somatics, you start with your body and let it guide you to a better state. You move with purpose and connectedness. As you connect your mind and body, you can start to unravel what's putting you on high alert.

Psychotherapy

Talk therapy is the basis of psychotherapy, but in somatic therapy, the body is the starting point. Instead of talking through your issues, you become aware of bodily sensations and learn to feel safe in your body so you can achieve healing. You can explore your thoughts, emotions, and memories more easily when your body is aware and you're tapping into the areas where you've held tension and tightness due to certain experiences. Somatic exercise can certainly be a nice complement to talk therapy, but they are not the same thing.

Massage

Somatic massage focuses on the mind-body connection to help improve overall well-being. It can help you become more in tune with your body and understand how and where you store difficult memories or experiences. In addition, it can relieve tension, pain, and stress and can improve circulation. A somatic massage may include effleurage (long gliding strokes), petrissage (kneading movements), tapotement (percussive tapping), and friction (pressure applied to certain areas),

deep touch, light touch compression, light shaking, and assisted stretching. During a session you may feel yourself yawning, shaking, laughing, crying or letting go of stored trauma.

A regular massage is where you go in and have your sore muscles rubbed. Although it can also be very beneficial, it is much different than a somatic massage.

Working out

When you're working out, you usually have an external goal you want to accomplish. You may want to build muscle, lose weight, or train for a specific sport or event. Somatic exercises, on the other hand, focus on the body's internal sensations, perceptions, and experiences. You can perform any workout or sport with a somatic approach as long as you're emphasizing the connection between the physical sensations and your emotional and mental state. Most workouts focus on the physical. Somatic movements have you "working in" as much as you're "working out."

Exploring the History of Somatic Exercises

Somatic exercises can be traced back to ancient Eastern practices as well as the work of philosophers and teachers in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Many somatic practices draw from Eastern healing practices such as Tai Chi, yoga, meditation, and breathwork. These ancient techniques were used as teachers developed practices that used a body-based approach to learning.

Ancient yogis were always using their bodies as tools to explore and refine their minds. They used breathwork and postures to gain a deeper understanding of and access to their consciousness. The yoga philosophy views the mind and body as interconnected, not separate. Yoga *asanas* (postures) and breathwork are used to cultivate awareness of sensations that can help quiet the mind and focus attention inward. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, philosophers and teachers developed practices that use a body-based approach to learning.

Thomas Hanna, a philosopher and educator, coined the term *somatics* in the 1970s. His belief was that many ailments were caused by a disconnect between the mind and the body. He found that focusing on the body movement, education and mindfulness could improve physical and mental health. He called his work *Hanna Somatic Education* and said that many negative health effects could be due to sensory-motor amnesia.

Other pioneers in the world of somatic movement include:

- » **Frederick Matthias Alexander** was an actor who created the Alexander Technique after losing his voice and linking it to poor posture and bad habits. His technique helps people release tension in their muscles and change harmful habits.
- » **Dr. Moshé Feldenkrais** developed the Feldenkrais Method, which is a somatic system of movement he developed after combining his martial arts and relaxation techniques. He believed that thoughts, feelings, and movement are related and can influence each other.
- » **Ida Pauline Rolf** received her PhD in biochemistry and later went on to do more research in organic chemistry. Her drive came from trying to find solutions to her own health problems and discovered that proper alignment, physiologic function, and anatomical structure are the basis of many healing methods. She created a system of hands-on deep work (called “Rolfing”) on the fascia and the muscles to rebalance the body.
- » **Dr. Milton Trager** developed the Trager Approach, which is a somatic movement technique that uses gentle touch and movement to improve joint mobility and release physical and mental patterns. *Mentastics* is the term for his active movements that the client does after they have work done to them by a practitioner on a table. His approach is based on his idea that a physical change can follow a change in mindset.
- » **Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen** created body-mind centering, which explores movement and consciousness through a combination of movement, anatomy and touch.

From the ancient yogis to the dancers, actors, PhDs, and more, somatic movement has been developed by many people and practices. It all comes from the same place — a union of the mind and body.

Recognizing Why Somatic Exercise Is Useful

By now you realize that somatic exercise can help you become more aware of your body and mind and the connection between the two. Somatic exercise can help you physically and mentally. It has myriad benefits, including these:

- » Somatic movement relieves stress by helping you focus on how your thoughts affect you and what sensations are happening in your body. You can

understand what you need and manage your response to stress so you become more responsive and less reactive.

- » Somatic movement can help with pain relief through gentle movement and mindful awareness.
- » Somatic movement can help improve posture and strengthen and realign muscles.
- » Somatic movement can help you achieve better balance, mobility, and flexibility.
- » Somatic movement can help you process stuck tension and memories and help you learn more efficient and effective ways of moving. You can also become more aware and in touch with your body, so you have a better sense of your emotions.
- » Somatic movement can lead to pain reduction, increased mobility, and stress management and relief. You'll find you have reduced stress and less anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues as you develop a better relationship with yourself and connect your mind and body. You can also work on healing deep-seated trauma by releasing muscular tension and issues you have stored in your body.
- » Somatic movement helps you tune into your body's wisdom. You'll cultivate awareness of physical sensations and your emotional state. You'll learn to listen and understand what your body is telling you.
- » Somatic movement can help support personal growth and enhance your emotional well-being. As you discover what your body is telling you, you also recognize what it does for you. You can work with your body and mind to grow to new levels.

The bottom line is that you can find a deeper connection to your body. This is what helped me heal so much when I had an eating disorder and especially when I would slip back into unhealthy eating patterns. You'll begin to get a better understanding of your physical needs, and you'll listen to your body on a deeper level. You'll recognize its true hunger cues, rest cues, when you're pushing too far outside of your comfort zone, and when you may need to give yourself a bit more motivation.

Looking at Current Trends

Somatic practices have become increasingly popular in the Western world over the last 50 years. They are taught in many programs and used by professionals (including medical and physical therapists) to help with pain relief and trauma recovery.

Somatic yoga has become increasingly popular. Somatic yoga differs from regular yoga in that it focuses on the internal experience of the body and less on external alignment. Somatic yoga takes a more intuitive approach; it helps you move with the flow of energy in your body. Somatic yoga has no end result or peak pose to achieve. It can help you connect with your emotions and release trauma. People turn more to somatic yoga because of its deeper benefits.

Somatic healing modalities are also on the rise. People want to take care of themselves and move in a way that does not add more stress to their lives. Some people who are very active are turning to somatic movement for recovery. Others who are inactive find somatic movement as a great entry point to move in a mindful way that promotes health and balance. They use somatic movement to stay injury-free and carry it into anything else they choose to do.

Some other cool new trends include using virtual reality and biofeedback to improve the outcomes of somatic therapy. Neuroimaging and biomarkers can lead to more personalized somatic intervention. Generative somatics integrates trauma healing at the individual and systemic levels.

Somatic dance has also become quite popular. Group dance gatherings are becoming a popular wellness practice in many arenas. I think with the rising trend of sober outings, somatic dance is a wonderful outlet for people to come together. Somatic dance is also great on your own and is a way to unwind at the end of the day, instead of grabbing a drink.

Combining somatic movement with other workouts is also becoming popular. If you're focusing on mobility, body awareness, and alignment, somatic exercise is great before a workout. It can enhance movement efficiency and help reduce your risk of injury. After a workout, somatic movement can help you recover and release tension and return to a state of calm and awareness. It's like having a *Savasana* at the end of every workout.

Somatic exercises will continue to gain popularity because they are effective tools for holistic well-being. It isn't expensive to start and you only need your mind and body and a willingness to get to know yourself better. You can choose from many styles of yoga and Pilates, go to a Feldenkrais practitioner, try the Alexander Technique, practice Tai Chi, or start with a book like this one!

