

The Growing Popularity of Somatic Practices

New Approaches for Mind, Body & Spirit

More people are turning to somatic practices to help them heal and live a more authentic life. What exactly are these practices and how do they work?

There are two primary ways you experience your body—from the outside and the inside.

Most often you observe yourself from the outside. You look at the placement of your feet to get the right support for your deadlifts, or you tweak the rotation of your shoulders to get yourself into a safe and comfortable downward dog. You watch, evaluate, and adjust yourself for maximum performance and, hopefully, minimal pain.

You can also be aware of what you are doing by sensing yourself from the inside. In the 1970s philosopher and teacher Thomas Hanna used the term somatics to refer to this way of sensing ourselves and our experience. He described (<https://ismeta.org/>) somatics as "the study of the self from the perspective of one's lived experience, encompassing the dimensions of body, psyche, and spirit."

Somatic practices use your internal awareness—through proprioception (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/proprioception>), interoception (<http://www.pc.rhul.ac.uk/sites/lab/index.php/research-themes-projects/interoception/>), kinesthetic awareness, (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/kinesthetic>) etc.—to bring unknown parts of yourself and your experience into the known. Somatic learning makes the unconscious conscious, and in the process leaves you with more options for moving, acting, thinking, and living. It maximizes not just your physical body but your full human potential.

"Somatic movement is not about functional movement," says Continuum teacher and somatic educator Elaine Colandrea. (<https://www.eomega.org/workshops/teachers/elaine-colandrea>) "We are actually taking a holiday from movement in service to specific activities and instead move from inner sensation, curiosity, and pleasure, which brings us to an inner state of beauty, wholeness, and wonder. When we return to functional movement, to our everyday activities, we often have more capacity for life as we let that wholeness inform all the ways we move in the world."

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—Thomas Hanna

Are Somatic Practices New?

If all of this sounds like it also describes ancient practices like yoga, tai chi, or qigong, that's because in a way it does. Some would argue that yoga is the original somatic practice. While this wouldn't be wrong, strictly speaking, it's not completely accurate. When someone refers to "somatic practices" today, they're generally referring to systems developed in the last 100 years or so.

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, a number of philosophers and teachers began to create practices using this experiential, body-based approach to learning. Martha Eddy, director of The Center for Kinesthetic Education, says (<http://wellnesscke.net/downloadables/AbriefhistoryofSomaticanddance.pdf>) these “somatic pioneers discovered that by being engaged in attentive dialogue with one’s bodily self we, as humans, can learn newly, become pain free, move more easily, do our life work more efficiently, and perform with greater vitality and expressiveness.”

These early teachers created methods of bodywork and systems of movement—like the Feldenkrais Method®, the Alexander Technique, Rolfing®, and the Trager Approach—that are garnering new attention today for their subtlety and effectiveness at taking advantage of the brain’s capacity for neuroplasticity. These practices outline specific ways people can learn to sense their experience from the inside, and generally, when people refer to “somatic practices,” they are referring to these types of practices.

The Wide Reach of Somatic Practices

Somatic approaches are used in a number of fields—including psychology, movement, dance, and bodywork. Here are some of the more popular practices by category, but keep in mind that much like the holistic approach of somatics itself, some of these practices will overlap into multiple categories.

Somatic Psychology

Somatic psychology, also known as body psychotherapy, (<http://usabp.org/somatic-psychology-body-psychotherapy/>) moves beyond talk therapy to include the felt experience of a person in their body as a primary means of understanding what’s going on in the mind.

Somatic psychotherapist Eric Monkhouse (<https://www.eomega.org/workshops/teachers/eric-monkhouse>) says, “Somatic psychotherapy is an integrated treatment of the body mind and soul viewed as a functional whole.”

According to the California Institute of Integral Studies, “somatic psychotherapists are trained to help clients explore the bodily means by which they conduct their daily lives. Through the use of breath work; movement exercises; touch; and explorations of feeling, sensation, posture, gesture, and expression, clients experience how they shape particular identities and interact with others.”

Somatic psychology practices include:

- Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) (<https://www.thetappingsolution.com/what-is-eft-tapping/>)
- Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) (<http://parnellemdr.com/emdr-and-af-emdr/>)
- Focusing (<http://www.focusing.org/>)
- Reichian Therapy/Orgone Therapy (<https://orgonomictherapy.com/about-us/reichian-therapy/>)
- Somatic Experiencing® (<https://traumahealing.org/>)
- Tension & Trauma Releasing Exercises (TRE®) (<https://traumaprevention.com/>)

Somatic Bodywork

Somatic bodywork uses touch to help a person develop their internal awareness and address physical or emotional pain.

Somatic bodywork techniques include:

- Alexander Technique (<https://alexandertechnique.com/>)
- Body-Mind Centering® (<https://www.bodymindcentering.com/>)

Bodywork and Somatic Education (BASE)[™] (<https://daveberger.net/workshops-and-training-programs/bodywork-and-somatic-education-base/>)

Functional Integration[®] (Feldenkrais Method[®]) (<https://www.feldenkrais.com/>)

Neurokinetic Therapy[®] (<http://neurokinetictherapy.com/>)

Rolfing[®] Structural Integration (<https://www.rolf.org/rolfing.php>)

Rosen Method Bodywork (<http://rosenmethod.com/>)

Trager[®] Approach (<http://www.trager.com/approach.html>)

Somatic Movement & Dance

Somatic movement is a phrase often used to refer to (<https://somaticmovementcenter.com/somatic-movement-what-is-somatic-movement/>) any movement that is "performed consciously, with complete internal focus and attention." It defers to a person's internal experience as a touchstone for movement and learning as opposed to external sources.

Somatic dance practices emphasize the internal experience of the dancer (and their self-development) as opposed to dancing for how it looks to those who are watching. Colandrea says, "Somatic dance is not done for what it looks like; it is not specifically a performance art. However, many dancers find somatic movement a great resource, a lifesaver that extends their dancing lives and helps them recover from the injury and stress of repetitive movements that dancers often have to perform."

Somatic movement and dance practices include:

Awareness Through Movement[®] (Feldenkrais Method) (<https://www.feldenkrais.com/>)

Authentic Movement (<https://adta.org/2015/08/18/what-is-authentic-movement/>)

Contact Improvisation (<http://www.contactimprov.com/whatiscontactimprov.html>)

Continuum Movement[®] (<https://continuummovement.com/>)

Hanna Somatics (<http://hannasomatics.com/>)

Skinner Releasing Technique[™] (<http://www.skinnerreleasing.com/aboutsrt.html>)

Somatic Expression[®] (<http://www.somaticexpression.com/>)

Ready to Try a Somatic Practice?

"Somatic movement, in general, is the wave of the future," says Colandrea. "Because it is self-generated and self-regulating, it is available to everyone of all abilities."

If you're ready to try a somatic practice, find a particular approach that resonates with you and search their online directory for a practitioner or class nearby. You can also find lessons online for some of the disciplines. You may have to do a little digging and testing to find a practice, but it's great preparation for the internal exploration you're embarking on with somatic practices.

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