

While we can be sensitive to the unknowns of the person's lived experience, we can also appreciate the intelligence of their organism that survived, that found its way through whatever it is that they experienced. So we don't need to baby people or to assume they're fragile, because they're not. At the deepest aspects of their humanness, they are incredibly resilient.

## Introduction To Somatics

Welcome to lesson 3, your introduction to Somatics.

So, what is “somatics” exactly?

The root of the word ‘somatic’ is ‘soma’ which comes from ancient Greek and is commonly translated as “the body.” However, the ancient Greeks didn't distinguish between body, mind, and spirit— in their eyes, all the aspects of our beingness are one.

‘Soma’ really means the “living wholeness” of the individual, of the being.

‘Soma’ encompasses the full experience of what it is to be human. We're more than mechanical physical bodies— we have a spiritual aspect of our being, a mental aspect, an emotional aspect.

We are multifaceted beings, and ‘soma’ is the best word we have to describe this ‘living wholeness of being.’

Somatics is the art and science of working with the Soma.

Recent research in somatics has taught us that the body keeps the score and the body is the key.

The body, primarily through the nervous system, is constantly and continuously scanning the environment and making unconscious shifts on our behalf to both keep us safe and to help us thrive.

The body tracks, assesses, and categorizes every single thing we experience, day in and day out throughout our lives. Every person we come into contact with, every situation we find ourselves in, even every thought or idea we have.

The endless stream of sensory information is essentially being continually encoded into the hardware that is the nervous system. Each experience lands in one of three categories: safe, threatening, or dangerous. This is evolutionarily intelligent because there are many situations where we need to make near-instantaneous decisions in order to survive. Not all information is stored indefinitely; only that which is relevant to our growth or survival ends up making the cut.

Knowing that this primary protection mechanism is at play at every moment in your client's life gives you a broader and deeper understanding of the unconscious preferences underlying every choice your client makes.

Because of this, the body is key when it comes to lasting healing and sustainable transformation.

Think about learning to ride a bike or drive a car— we start off having to pay attention to every little piece as we learn, but eventually it becomes implicit, or encoded as body memory. Have you ever been driving and suddenly found yourself at your destination without really thinking about every step it took to get you there?

This is implicit memory, or body memory. This unconscious and effortless memory is literally how our ancestors stayed alive. By prioritizing relevant data from the environment and deleting ‘unnecessary’ data. It’s how our species, and every species that came before us evolved into being.

It’s the part of you that knows to step back from a fast moving car before you even have time to think about it, or the part of you that turns away from rancid food and knows not to eat it. If we had to consciously think about every little thing in life that could harm us, it would take a large portion, if not all of our brain and body’s energy/capacity and attention.

Thankfully, the body has a built-in mechanism called the Autonomic Nervous System that allows us to bypass the need for conscious decisions at every moment.

So why should we, as helping professionals, pay attention to the body and its experience?

It’s been said, “The issues are in the tissues.”

This is why talk-therapy only works up to a certain point. When we’re only talking and only working at the cognitive level, it’s like we’re only working with the tip of the iceberg.

What we can “see on the surface” so to speak, is only a small portion of what’s happening below the surface.

Working with the psyche, through perspectives, and narratives, and stories is only a small part of the equation.

Working “top-down,” or with and through the mind, is an important part of healing. We as individuals can tell ourselves new stories and reframe for days, or months or years even, but that underlying orientation that has us needing to reframe or shift our perspective in the first place is what we work with when we’re working “bottom-up” from a somatic perspective.

So what does this mean practically? What is the practical application of working ‘bottom-up’ instead of ‘top-down’?

Let’s say your client comes to you with a habit that they’re trying to break.

It could be anything— a health or lifestyle habit, a cycling situation at work, a repeating relationship dynamic, or something else.

Working top-down could include looking at their value systems, at limiting beliefs, at ego-constructs and stories around identity and who they would be without this habit or with a new one.

Working bottom-up however requires slowing them down, drawing attention to the present moment, and noticing how it is experientially to inhabit or embody that pattern. It’s the difference between watching a show and being the actor in the play. It’s the difference between looking down at a situation from above or from outside, and sitting in the actual embodied experience of the situation.

Instead of going to the mind, or allowing your client to stay in their head, a simple question such as “what sensations do you notice in your body as you share that?” can help them to shift internal positions from “top-down” to “bottom-up.”

Whatever issue or challenge your client is coming to you with, working bottom-up will help them to shift that deep rooted, primal experience of the situation because you’re working at the level of the nervous system instead of the higher-thinking brain.

Let’s use another example—

Let’s say your client has a goal, a big dream, or a vision. It’s clear, they know what they want and why they want it, yet something keeps showing up on the way to them embodying that vision and bringing it into form in the real world.

You’ve done all the mindset work, and yet they’re still bumping up against something. There’s something that’s keeping them from moving forward and you can’t quite put your finger on it, neither can they.

This is an indicator that it’s time to get curious about what’s happening in the body— a great question to ask yourself in these moments as their guide is, “What’s here? What’s under the surface that I’m not noticing?”

Curiosity and exploration are key in somatic work.

The soft inquiry of “What’s here?” invites space for the complexity of the body and its lived experience to reveal itself.

Start by asking yourself, “What’s here?”, remaining open, curious, and inviting, then guiding your client to check-in with their body using reflective language with a simple prompt such as, “Where do you notice that in your body?” or asking “What does that feel like in your body?” That being whatever they’re experiencing— a block, a disconnect, etc. This can help drop them down towards the root cause of what’s getting in the way of them moving forward.

You may discover there’s a fear or sadness right there at the surface. Dropping them a layer deeper, there may be an old, deeply rooted self-protection mechanism underneath that. As you stay with this sensation, you may uncover a stream of memory that can seem unrelated to the current situation, yet when in tune with the body’s somatic experience, it feels similar or even exactly the same.

This is the body’s wisdom at play. If the vision or the dream feels similar on a somatic level to a painful or traumatic experience from the past, the body will remember that and essentially override any higher-thinking commands.

To live embodied means to live inside of our own skins, inside of our own somatic experience, instead of simply existing in the mind. In the modern world, it’s not uncommon for people to sort of “hover” above or outside of their bodies, almost like floating heads primarily inhabiting the territory of the mind through logic, reason, and rationale. This is what it means to be “heady”, to overanalyze and try to think our way through life.

The mind is a sense organ, an extension of the autonomic nervous system that literally “makes sense” of all the information fed into it from the 5 primary senses. Understanding that the mind is an extension of the innate wisdom of the body, an emergence of the deeper, primal experience of safety, dignity, and belonging helps us as practitioners to keep the holistic picture of the person in view as we work with them.

It's important to keep in mind that a person's level of embodiment doesn't necessarily have anything to do with athleticism, flexibility, or strength. Some people who are ultra-athletic can actually be disconnected from their body when they continually override its messages and push their physiology past its own capacity. On the other end of the spectrum, people who live with chronic pain, illness, or even physical disability are not inherently “less embodied” because of these physical limitations. In fact, some differently-abled people can be deeply embodied through their attunement to their own body, its messages, and its needs.

Ultimately, to be embodied means to be in deep contact with the body, to understand its messages, and to relate to it in such a way that its wisdom and needs are honored and valued.

Somatic literacy, both as individuals and professionals, involves deepening connection and intimacy with our bodies. As we expand our vocabulary of sensation and emotion, we have greater access to the full range of our human experience.

When we know how we feel in our body, we have a richer palette to choose from. When we are able to access and interpret the body's messages, we have a greater awareness of the choices available to us in any given moment.

With awareness comes choice, and with choice comes power.

When people feel they have access to their own agency, their own power, their own choice, that's when people feel empowered and in the driver's seat of their own life. It's when we feel out of control, helpless, and powerless to our own inner experience that destructive habits start to emerge, and can feel insurmountable.

The more you give your body space to communicate its experience and its needs, the more likely you are to channel your life force, your attention, and your energy into something constructive and creative. The same is true for your client.

To have somatic awareness and to cultivate somatic literacy is to have access to our deepest, most primal source of power.

As a practitioner, the more awareness you have of your own body, the more aware you become of the resonant field— the 'we' space between you and me, us and them.

This resonant field provides a wealth of information— without context, this space can be considered "intuition." But what it really is, is a complex exchange of information between your nervous system and the nervous system of another, attuning to their state, their inner somatic experience.



With enough awareness and skill, we can literally **\*\*feel\*\*** what is going on in the body of the other person in front of us.

This information helps us as practitioners to know where and how to guide our clients through their challenges, working with their body instead of against it.

Remember, the body will always win. The Autonomic Nervous System is designed for one thing: survival.

It doesn't care about your client's hopes, dreams, or visions. If the nervous system interprets something as threatening, or dangerous, it will override any bigger vision, no matter how much the head or heart desires it.

This is why working with the body, at the level of the body, is key.

### Slide 9: felt-sense experience

What you're working with when working with the body is the felt-sense experience, also known as the somatic experience. It's body wisdom, bodily knowing. It's about experiencing and working with the body, through the body.

A great example of when working on the body through the mind from a top-down perspective doesn't work, is dieting. Diets often fail or are unsustainable in the long-term because either some outside source or inner thought process about what is 'right' or 'best' is telling the body what to do. The alternative to this is called "intuitive eating" which involves dropping into the body and accessing its wisdom moment to moment about what is best for it, right here right now.

It's the difference between telling the body what it "should" be doing based on general criteria instead of listening to its unique needs and desires in the moment. This can work for a while, but it's usually unsustainable, causing the body to eventually cry out for attention through pain or disease.

The inner Felt-Sense Experience has two parts, including both sensation and emotion.

When we ask someone, 'how are you feeling?' we can mean both, how are you in your body and how are you emotionally?

In Somatics "feeling" can mean either emotion or sensation, and as practitioners, we can create distinction and expand somatic literacy by distinguishing the two aspects of 'feeling.'

There's a difference between 'feeling our feelings' or truly experiencing them, and 'thinking our feelings.'

Naming a present-moment sensation such as "my heart is beating fast" is different from trying to figure out or making meaning of sensation, like "why is my heart beating so fast? I must be anxious."

Trying to figure out the meaning or reason for a sensation can take us out of actually experiencing the sensation, which takes away from the somatic integration that's trying to happen.

Another example, "I'm feeling a knot in my stomach," is different from "my stomach hurts. I must have eaten something bad."

By pairing the naming of sensation with openness and curiosity, an opening is created for the body to tell its story. Maybe there is anxiety, or something not sitting right with the stomach.

But why? What's going on underneath that? What is causing this to happen right now? What in the environment, either external through people or circumstances, or internal through thoughts and attention, is causing this particular sensation or set of sensations at this particular moment?

By staying in the sensation and attending to feeling it fully, there's an opportunity for the body to share more of what's really going on deep inside, underneath the surface of conscious awareness.

The same is true for emotion. "I feel sad" or "I feel angry" is different from judging or labeling your emotional experience— "Why am I so messy?" or "What's wrong with me?"

For the sake of creating greater emotional fluency and fluidity, staying out of the head and simply being with the emotion is key. By creating space to fully feel your emotion, your body has a chance to process the emotion cleanly without it being jumbled or hijacked by the mind. When we try to understand "why I'm feeling this way" or trying to override emotions to make them go away, we disrupt the natural expression of the nervous system.

Every emotion is valid. Just like it's healthy and appropriate for your body to sweat when it's hot out to help cool down your internal temperature, so are emotions healthy and appropriate to help regulate your nervous system. While it may not feel socially acceptable to cry in public when you experience something shocking, or to scream out in frustration when you stub your toe, to inhibit this expression can lock the emotion away in your body.

More and more research is beginning to show the negative impact that inhibiting and suppressing emotion has on the body.

In "The Body Says No," Gabor Mate writes, "The salient stressors in the lives of most human beings today — at least in the industrialized world — are emotional. Just like laboratory animals unable to escape, people find themselves trapped in lifestyles and emotional patterns inimical to their health. The higher the level of economic development, it seems, the more anesthetized we have become to our emotional realities. We no longer sense what is happening in our bodies and cannot, therefore, act in self-preserving ways. The physiology of stress eats away at our bodies not because it has outlived its usefulness but because we may no longer have the competence to recognize its signals."

By learning to decipher and interpret the felt-sense language of emotion and sensation is to understand your body's experience of itself on the deepest level. In doing so, you're able to act on these self-preserving signals in ways that are appropriate and support your well-being.

Again, the deeper you go in your somatic awareness journey, the deeper you'll be able to guide your clients.

To expand your sensation-language, we've included a handout called "vocabulary of sensation" for you to use for yourself and with clients. We've also included a "wheel of emotion" for this same reason— to expand your emotion-language.

Begin working with this material and information on yourself.

Every day, multiple times a day, ask yourself: What am I feeling right now? What sensations do I notice? What emotions are present?

It's okay if not a lot is clear or things feel muddled in the beginning, this is not uncommon. We live in a world that places less value on the body and its experience— cultivating somato-emotional literacy is like learning a new language.

With enough time and patience, your body will start to reveal its inner experience. And with enough practice, you can begin tracking and guiding your clients into their own felt-sense experience.

# The Ultimate Goal - Attunement

If we had to distill down everything you'll be learning in this training into one piece for you to take away and integrate into your work with clients as a trauma-informed practitioner, it's simply this: attunement.

To be attuned is essentially to be self and other aware, to connect with the experience of yourself and others in an honest and harmonious way. When people are well attuned, they respond with appropriate language and behaviors to the tone of the present situation— the tone includes emotions, words, and behaviors of everyone in the room.

The more attuned you are as a practitioner, the more available you are to offer your clients the support they really need. As an attuned guide for your clients, you move beyond theories and techniques to Embodied Mastery — blending the intelligence of your fundamental human nature with higher-thinking processes.

Richard Erskine defined attunement as: “Involving kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others— sensing their rhythm, affect, and inner experience by metaphorically ‘being in their skin’, and going beyond empathy to create a two-person experience of unbroken feelings of connectedness by providing reciprocal affect and resonating response.”

With awareness, we can track when misattunement happens with a client— something feels “off” or isn't landing quite right.

We can also track attunement— there's a sense of “this feels right” on both sides. You feel inspired and the client feels seen, heard, and understood.

You'll be learning a lot of theory and techniques throughout this course to add to your toolbox as a helping professional, and ultimately, your attunement and ability to meet your client in the present moment is what matters most.

Your attunement to their inner experience and what they need on a somatic level will make all the difference to them feeling supported at the deepest level of their human experience.