

# Psychotherapy and Integral Somatic Education

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The first step to change is consciousness. The first step to consciousness is to free attention from old memories, old feelings, old sensations embodied in the physical self.

Sigmund Freud's seminal contributions to human understanding began with his observations of the interrelation of mind and body. "Hysteria" was the diagnosis he gave to a woman whose physical symptoms (paralysis) stemmed from repressed emotional disturbance. "Somatization" is now the more general term used to indicate physical manifestations of fixated (stuck and unconscious) emotional states. What makes Freud's contribution particularly interesting is that he did not start out as a psychologist and discover a physiological expression of mind; rather, he started but as a physiologist and discovered the correlation of physiological functioning and psychological state. His first interest was the physical body, and only after investigation did he discover that a person's physical functioning had a psychological correlate.

Much after Freud, Norbert Wiener described cybernetical systems. The word, "cyber" means "rudder"; cybernetical systems are self-steering systems. This robotic-sounding term actually refers to self-regulating systems, living or otherwise. The term, "feedback" applies here, where feedback is information about the functioning of a system that goes back into that system and induces it to correct or alter its own functioning. Just to give a simple example, a central heating system, such as is found in most buildings, is a cybernetic system in which the thermostat senses the results of a furnace's operation and causes the heating system to turn off or on to maintain the building's temperature within a set range. Thus, the central heating system is self-regulating by means of the feedback given by the thermostat and the responsiveness of the furnace to that feedback. It's cybernetic.

Human beings (and indeed all living beings) are cybernetic in their behavior. Hunger is an example. We feel hungry, we eat. We feel sated, we stop eating. That's self-regulation by sensory feedback. We're cybernetic. The term applies to our emotional, mental, and social life, as well.

Let's now marry the two concepts, somatization and cybernetics. That marriage would imply feedback between mind and body.

Without presenting, in advance, any argument as to whether "mind" and "body" are two (as Descartes represented them) or one (as it is popular today to conceive of them), let us consider instead certain actualities of our existence that are now generally accepted as fact.

1. Subjective emotions take objective expression as changes of physiology.
2. Our brain senses changes of both emotion and physiology (self-sensing as feedback).

3. Our brain, extended into the world as the whole body, is an organ of adaptation (memory), both in terms of feeling (sensation and emotion) and action (movement and responsiveness).
4. Our brain regulates bodily state to maintain us within a range of responsiveness (homeostasis) according to our conditioning, both emotional and physiological.

Let's cover each of these points briefly before putting them together. I'm deliberately holding a surprise in store for you, particularly if you are either a physiologist or a psychologist.

### **Subjective emotions take objective expression as changes of physiology.**

In general, we may say that emotions are either states of arousal or depression. They either turn us on or turn us off. This experience of turn-on or turn-off shows up as changes of breathing (faster or slower, deeper or shallower), changes of facial expression, changes of muscular tension, changes of hormonal balance, etc.

### **Our brain senses changes of both emotion and physiology (self-sensing as feedback).**

Not only do emotional changes occur in the objective ways described above, but also in subjective ways. We *feel* those changes, not merely emotionally, but also physically. Nothing new here. We're just summarizing that somatic experiencing has both subjective and objective aspects.

### **Our brain, extended into the world as the whole body, is an organ of adaptation (memory), both in terms of feeling (sensation and emotion) and action (movement and responsiveness).**

Again, the ground we are covering is so familiar as to be old-hat. Not only does our brain register changes of state (both physical and psychological), but it *remembers* those changes of state, which become our history and our make-up. To say it another way, our history has momentum that carries it into the present moment, to one degree or another.

### **Our brain regulates bodily state to maintain us within a range of responsiveness (homeostasis) according to our conditioning, both emotional and physiological.**

Now, you may see that I am sneaking up on something. The momentum of our past shows up both as psychological make-up (for good or for ill) and as our physiological state. This is not to say that our personal history entirely limits physiology, but that our history (both emotional and physical) tends to shape our physiological health through *memory* (conditioning). That is, our brain regulates our state within a range of responsiveness ("temperament") according to *the memories by which it determines what is normal – physical, emotional, and mental*. Thus, we become how we live. That's how the momentum of the past builds up to shape our present.

Here's where we make a little leap. We can probably agree that our physical health impacts our emotional state and we can probably agree that our emotional state affects our physical health – psychoneuroimmunology, and all that. What I am introducing, here, is the idea that the physiological effects of our chronic emotional state

have a momentum in the physical body. We get used to feeling that way and our brain keeps us that way. In other words, our emotions shape our body-sense, our state of tension, our hormonal chemistry; all of that has a feeling, and that feeling incorporates *the feeling of the emotions, themselves*. There is feedback between the body-sense and the emotional body, in which the body-sense reinforces certain emotional characteristics of the person because the body-sense *feels like those emotions*.

At that point, body and mind can be said to reinforce each other. Emotions create the body-sense and the body-sense feeds back and reinforces the feeling of those emotions, causing the surfacing of corresponding thought processes and behaviors, which reinforce the emotions.

Emotions may be so ingrained in the body-sense that the person has no distance from them. They lose perspective and sense of proportion. They are identified as the emotions, rather than able to observe them. The feedback of the body-sense reinforces the emotions. Consciousness is buried in the momentum of reinforced psycho-physical (somatic) adaptation.

To lighten the load for a person in psychotherapy (or otherwise dealing with the challenges of life), it helps to undo some of that physiological adaptation.

Wilhelm Reich, a disciple of Freud's, coined the term, "muscular armor," to indicate something of the nature of that adaptation. The term, "armor," is unfortunate, because it gives automatically rise to the concept of "penetration of defenses," a metaphor not so attractive to the vulnerable self. Still, it points to the domain to which I am alluding, which is the embodiment of emotion via muscular tension.

To articulate the concept in a more empowering and appealing way, let me say that the tensions of muscular armor are not armoring, but states of readiness to respond to any of a vast array of situations if the past. I'm talking about readiness as a heightened state of tension, in contrast to unreadiness, which is inherently a state of rest. So we are talking about enabling a person to come more to rest in the present, something a bit more attractive to the vulnerable self.

Most of the responses of any given individual in any given moment occur automatically and without the sense of conscious control. They're coming from pre-given adaptations. I'm talking about "the learning of life," as well as "the thousand natural shocks flesh is heir to." That's useful for much of life, but not so useful when those responses pertain to stressful situations long past. Such automatic responses undermine the person's sense of autonomy and interfere with their lives. Neurosis. Lowered self-esteem. Limitation. Disempowerment.

Because of the interplay of memory and the heightened state of tension we call readiness (you can see how those are related), I'm suggesting we can approach the situation from either end: from the direction of memory (the domain of psychology) and from the direction of physiology (responsiveness). Together, memory and physiology constitute the domain of the field of somatics, which is about the person experienced and controlled from within.

And so, the punch line. A somatic approach can aid psychological approaches to well-being. By enabling a person to recover awareness of their habitual state of readiness (tension), by enabling them to relax from it, we enable them to gain distance from their habitual responses. They have a platform on which to stand to view their habits of emotion and mind, some breathing room. They have recovered freedom and/or enhanced their capacity for self-mastery, not only of their bodily self, but of their entire self.

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