

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down



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With Your Host

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, and Life Coach, Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. It looks like spring has sprung, at least for now, and I'm so delighted by the warmer air, the birds are coming back. It just feels so good. This week, I want to talk about something that has been a huge part of my life, which is the mind-body connection.

From childhood, I knew that if I was sad or grumpy or had a lot of feels, I'd get a tummy ache. But I didn't understand it with any more depth than that because well, I was a child. Having spent the first 30 years of my life sick with digestive issues that rocked my world and the intermittent depression and anxiety that so often go along with digestive issues, I dedicated my life to learning how to heal the body.

I studied herbal medicine and became a family nurse practitioner, and while working as a primary care provider, I studied holistic and functional medicine and got into the nitty-gritty of root cause based medicine because I wanted to help people who were sick like I had been and who weren't getting the help they needed from allopathic western medicine.

In my own healing process, I came to understand just how real my girl had knowing about the mind-body connection is and that there is no real sustainable lasting healing if we are focused on either the mind or the body, as though they're not just connected, but in many ways, one and the same.

There is an information superhighway from your gut, from your body to your mind and back again. And the state of your nervous system directly impacts your thoughts and your feelings, thanks to our sweet old friend, the

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

vagus nerve. And so too the state of your thoughts and feelings directly impacts your nervous system, your gut, and all of your human body.

So today, we will be exploring the field of somatics, which is where this mind-body connection is studied and explored and given the space to be felt, connected with, understood, and can be summarized as Susan McConnell, a personal shero of mine says, “In the felt shift from I have a body to I am my body.” How beautiful is that?

I’m excited to explore this topic because getting to know my body somatically and really feeling embodied, present in my own body has been such a gift in my own life and in my own healing journey. And the changes that I see in my clients’ lives when we bring somatic practices into our coaching work is nothing short of mind-blowing.

Now, before we dive in, I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. Mindset is so vital in our health and wellness. And not everything is mindset. And not everything is physiologic. This is so important to me to say clearly and from the get-go because it’s a place where I see not just confusion but folks getting upset with themselves because they think they aren’t doing healing right, whatever that means.

Your mindset leads to a cascade of chemicals in your body. The molecules of emotion, as Candace Pert calls it. Your thoughts create your feelings. And simultaneously, your nervous system state dictates the story that your mind receives from your body. It’s circular. It’s this constant circular flow of information, top down, brain to body, bottom up, body to mind. And it’s circular.

And what’s really important for me is to remind you wherever you can get a foothold in to understand your own experience of life, and to therefore intervene for your own wellness, whether it’s starting with your mind or

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

starting with the body, it doesn't matter. Wherever feels easiest to start is a perfect place to start. Just start.

Know that your thoughts and mindset can play a deep and important role in your experience of symptoms from irritable bowel to chronic pain to depression, anxiety, insomnia, this has been well evidenced in the literature. We've got stats on that.

And if you have Lyme disease or degenerative disc disease or whatever chronic or acute condition, a broken leg, it's not just your thoughts creating that pain. That's reductionist and can sound pretty yucky and victim blaming and it's just not kind.

So I'm not saying that. I'm never saying that your thoughts create all of your sensation in your body. Not at all. I'm not that ableist #spiritual person ever. Listen, I was a clinician and a patient for too long to think that way. It's not all your vibration, folks. Sometimes it's genetic or from an accident or a virus.

So that said, most things in this complex human life are just that. Complex, multi-factorial. My small intestine bacterial overgrowth, also known as SIBO did not start or keep going simply because I had negative thoughts about myself. It started exogenously from something outside of me because I had a parasite, blastocystic hominis, that went undiagnosed and untreated for many, many years, which impacted my gut microbiome, leading to a cascade of symptoms.

And my codependent, people-pleasing, perfectionist mindset kept me revved up in sympathetic activation, jacked up on adrenaline and worry and future tripping and ruminating and externalizing my sense of self-worth, which in turn sent signals to my vagus nerve, which slowed the migrating

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

motor complex in my small intestine, which kept the bacteria I got from food poisoning - PS, cannot even look at a calzone to this day.

But that slowdown kept those bacteria from being flushed out of my system. So naturally, they proliferated and grew and boom, SIBO. So it wasn't just the bug and it wasn't just the mindset. It was the interplay. And whatever is going on for you physically and mentally may be due to just such an interplay of factors as well. And the more you can explore and understand your body's innate intelligence, the more information you'll have to sort out what the what is.

So let's do what my nerds love to do and let's define terms. So Thomas Hanna was an early leader in somatic studies and coined the term somatics from the Greek root soma, which means body. Since the enlightenment, there has been a very white cis dude driven view of the human experience, which to quote Susan McConnell once again, "Regards the mind and the soul as holy and exalted and the body as a subservient mortal carcass."

And the study of embodiment and somatics seeks to shift that paradigm in so many vital ways. As human mammals, we are so much more than just our brains, our minds, our thoughts. We are creatures living in bodies. We are thinking animals, feeling and emotional animals, biological, interrelated, and spiritual animals.

We are all of these things at once. Complex and simple with simple needs that we create complex ways to get met. By getting in touch with and coming to understand our human bodies through a lived experience of being ourselves, we learn a way to work with and love ourselves as integrated, embodied, whole humans.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

Not just a mind with thoughts, a biological system that can be changed with a pill, but as whole creatures. Creatures whose communication is about 70% non-verbal after all, meaning that words are vital, language is so important. And what our bodies communicate in other ways is just as important if you want to hear your whole self speaking.

Somatic practices are about bringing your awareness and consciousness to your experience in your body. Not just the story in your head about it, but what your body needs to tell you. What's stored within you that needs a voice?

The word emotion comes from the Latin *emovere*, which means to move. Our emotions are tied to movement by their definition and through somatic practices, we give movement to our emotions so they can move through and out of us or can find a safe home within us. So we can stop fighting against our moods and emotions, stop denying them and buffering against them and pushing them aside and can learn to move with them.

By bringing your awareness and attention to those feelings that live in your body, you can give those feelings the attention they want and need. How many times, my love, have you said, "My neck hurts. I'm just really stressed," or, "Before I go on stage, every time I get these butterflies in my belly?"

You are already in touch with your somatic experience of being alive. The next step is continuing to bring consciousness to it. Somatic practices provide us a way to ask our bodies what they need to move and when we are feeling tension in our bodies. Somatic practices provide us a way to ask our human form, our bodies what they need in order to move that tension through and out.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

So getting in touch with your body's innate wisdom and honoring it can lead you to take a break or a rest or to move in a different way so you can process the stress. Instead of just taking a leave to make it go away, though of course, take whatever you want to. You're an adult. No need for extra suffering around here.

Through somatic practices, we learn to live on our whole bodies, from our noses to our toes, not just the neck up, which is an experience I hear my clients say all the time. "I live in my brain. I don't feel connected to my body." I see you nodding along. These statements often resonate for so many of us living with codependent thinking.

Our mindset, our worldview is so externally other people focused and we are so dedicated to the project of managing the world and everyone and everything in it to try to feel safe in our own lives that we lose track of our connection with our bodies, our feelings, with the felt, lived experience of being alive.

And somatics teaches us how to reconnect. How to come home to our bodies, to learn from and with our bodies. To be in conversation with our bodies. To know what occurs in our human form when we have certain thoughts or worries. To hear the subtle sounds our bodies make before they can get to yelling at us with painful symptoms like the digestive and chronic pain symptoms I lived with for most of my life.

To not just know in our minds what nervous system state we're in, but to feel it in our bodies. And to understand what's stored in our bodies so we can get into right relationship with ourselves on this deeper level.

One of the most powerful parts of somatic work is that it gives us insight into understanding the daily practices that make up our lives. The ways we move and hold our bodies, our tension patterns and postures. The way we

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

communicate our internal landscape, both to ourselves and the world. Practices that have become a part of our psychobiology over years of repetition, the way a thought becomes a belief in our minds once you think it often enough.

One of the most helpful questions I've learned to ask from a somatic framework is what am I practicing? Meaning what are my, what are your bodily habits? And do those habits serve us? Are they aligned with our values for our lives?

We ask these questions because like our ingrained habitual thoughts, our somatic processes and practices can be so unintentional, so habitual, so beneath the radar that we don't even realize what we're doing. How we hold ourselves, relate to ourselves and the world through our bodies.

Nerd alert, though this whole show is a nerd alert. Some of these habits are what is known as procedural memory, which is a part of implicit memory, which helps us to do things like hold chopsticks, drive a car, swim, put your hair in a bun without even thinking about it, via repetition, though of nerd note, we can learn something instantaneously and unconsciously without repetition when adrenaline is high.

For example, that dogs are dangerous if you're bit by a dog out of nowhere, and dogs are to be avoided. So repetition trains are neural networks in our brain to automatically respond, to do the motor skill or cognitive task at hand. These learnings can come from necessity, from a survival or safety need like to move away from loud noises, to shrink ourselves down around someone who tends to have oversized reactions or anger.

They can come from our socialization and culture, physical movement, such as to hide our tampons, or to slump our shoulders inward if we have larger breasts and we're taught to be ashamed of our bodies, which most of

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

us were. Or to suck our bellies in when we're on the beach or to hold our bodies in uncomfortable positions to not bother anyone else or to have them move so you can have comfort too.

And many of our automatic reactions come from stress responses to emotional or physical hurt or loss, rejection or abandonment, an attempt to make us feel safe. Particularly if we have not felt seen or understood in the past. We move our bodies to try to create a felt internal sense of safety.

Through somatics, we can find meaning in the ways we hold and move our bodies. And our somatic or embodied practices or ways of showing up in our bodies and world are both individual expressions and our collective, societal, and social in origin.

And many folks have disabilities or chronic illnesses or conditions that impact the way they hold their bodies. The way their bodies move, their posture, their gestures impact the ways their bodies look. And meaning doesn't always belong there. And this too is important to keep in mind and most importantly, to honor before we go ahead pathologizing or making everything into a thing.

And what somatics provides is a way to learn what we are practicing in our bodies and the effects those practices, that daily experience of being you in your body has on your life. What the feelings or emotions are that correspond with our habitual ways of moving and relating to both self and the world.

When we spend a lifetime walking on eggshells, we become emotionally armored against the world. We walk around expecting things to go wrong, to get criticized or judged, taking things personally, fearing intimacy on that most important heart-to-heart level, doing what we can to avoid things like failure, vulnerability, armoring our hearts.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

That armoring, that tensing through our form like a boxer preparing for a strike in the ring gets patterned into our bodies too. And so we spend a lifetime walking around tight and tense, jumping at the smallest sound, worried about making a wrong move, questioning everything. And we carry that worry in a tight neck, tight shoulder muscles, or in a tightening through the gut, chronic digestive issues.

The chronic outward focus of codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thinking can lead many of us, myself included, to lose touch with our own bodies and to become disconnected. When you are busy worrying about everyone else, it can be hard to tune in with your own body, so we lose touch with the subtleties.

We aren't clued in when the pain or discomfort or tension is a one out of 10, and we only pay it mind when it gets unbearable, when our bodies scream to get our attention. Or if the world feels unsafe historically or actually, we can get so internally focused that the slightest ouch leads to a tidal wave of thoughts and feelings as we start to feel detached from our sense of control of and in our bodies.

I see both in my clients who are working to overcome codependent thinking and I have experienced both myself at different points in my life. Either ignoring all my body's signals or overreacting. And I'm saying I was overreacting, not anyone else. But overreacting at the smallest ouchie.

I can remember being disconnected from the sensations in my body like they weren't even me, which led me to say things like, "My body just hates me," or, "Ugh, my belly is just the worst." It's disembodiment on this profound level that keeps us in this fight, in this tension with our own selves, and keeps these painful cycles going and going.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

I leaned on my smarts as my primary emotional resource. After all, I could probably logic it out, right, my nerds? So I learned to think my way through moments that really called for feeling. And when I was in feeling, I wasn't present to the experience of that feeling, that emotion in my body. I just kind of had the thought of the feeling.

It was the cognitive experience of being sad. Not sad as an experience in my body. Through somatics, I've gotten into such deeper touch with my intuition. Now I know that my brain may have one answer but when I ask my body what the best course of action is for me, I get a different answer with a different resonance and a different energetics to it.

And somatic practices have given me the tools to be present throughout my day. Not just while stretching, doing yoga, or consciously working to be embodied and present in my body, but rather to be able to tap into my inner bodily intelligence moment to moment, to be present in my feet as I walk, to truly feel the sun on my face, to be in conversation with my digestion, to not just react to my body, to be in conversation with me, to inhabit myself.

To not just have the thought, "I feel overwhelmed," but to be able to ask my body where that overwhelm lives and to be able to interact with that sensation and to help it shift on the level of my physical embodied form, not just my mind. And to gain so much perspective on myself as a whole human. Not just my swirling mind.

Somatics provides a way to integrate mind, body, and spirit, to take what I know from my thought work and to ask my body what it thinks and to know my inner nervous system, autonomic nervous system state, and to relay that information into my thoughts, and to know what state I'm in before I do my thought work.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

Because of course it's all circular. Through somatics, we can reconnect with the earth, with the elements, with all of creation. Somatics gives us a landing place for change and transformation. As I work with the places within me that are armored against emotion, I am able to soften them safely without activating my nervous system into fight, flight, or freeze.

And through this process, I'm able to walk through the world more appropriately armored. Not just armored as a default. Sure, I may have my guard up on the subway, but I can choose in my body to have my guard down in conversation with those I love.

By getting in touch with the memory and my muscles and fascia, with the intelligence of my tissues, I experience myself as me. And not just a bag of bones. With each practice, each set of movements, I learn how to explore and be curious about the tension patterns in my body. The posture that leads to emotions and is born from emotions, and I can relate to myself on even deeper levels.

These somatic practices can be a slow build up towards exploring our lived experience, a layering in of understanding, and can also be so very simple. One of my favorites is this; and I do this one often to help me reconnect with my body from the neck down and you can do the following practice standing, lying down, in your wheelchair, it's all perfect.

And I choose to do this practice out loud because that serves me, especially as an English as a second language learner. But you do you. You can say it in your head if that's what feels safe or supportive for you. So I start this practice with my arms outstretched and again, modify this to your capacity. It's all perfect.

And I start by tightening my attention to one of my arms. So let's say my left arm. I will look at my left hand and my left arm and I will pat my left hand

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

and arm with my other hand, my right one. And I'll put a video of me doing this over on my Instagram @victoriaalbinawellness for you.

So as I do this, as I pat my own arm, I say out loud, this is my arm, this is my arm, and I'm doing it right now. This is my arm. And then I switch hands and I'll pat my right arm with my left hand. This is my arm. This is my arm. And then I'll do my chest, my belly, my lower back, or wherever you can reach. My pelvis, hips, thighs, legs, feet, neck, head, and as I do this and I slowly connect in, this is my body, I am this body, I feel my body calmly as I connect in.

And this is a beautiful, simple, quick way to come home to yourself. To anchor yourself in you. And it's a way to set an energetic boundary to remind yourself this is my body. No one else's. I decide where I go, what I eat, what I do, what looks beautiful, what makes me feel sexy. The patriarchy doesn't get to dictate that, my family of origin, my religion of origin, no one else gets to say what is what for this body. In this body, I am sovereign in the feminist way, in this human form. This is my arm. This is my leg.

Another simple one is to do box breathing, which has the beautiful effect of calming the autonomic nervous system, helping us regulate and find our way back into ventral vagal with ourselves, and to notice tension patterns in our bodies as we do this. Now, this doesn't have to be about going into your body because as we've talked about, that doesn't feel safe for everyone.

So if going into your body and being present in these sensations doesn't work for you, you can simply notice them as your own watcher as you practice what it could feel like to be present, for example, in your own fingertips, or in your own toes. That's often a safer way to start.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

So box breathing is this. I want you to imagine your breath as a box with four sides. We will breathe in for four, hold for four, breathe out for four, and hold for four. And folks do this with all sorts of different numbers. I stick with the four sides of the box because it makes it really simple and particularly if you're doing this when you're stressed out, when you're feeling anxious, worried, overwhelmed, if you're working on a new thought in your thought work and your body's like, nope, I don't believe it.

I want this to be as simple as humanly possible for you. So I do this in those tense moments when I want some support from my body to calm myself. Often before I do my thought work to see what the thought is that's kicking me out of that calm. And I also do it when I'm already feeling calm and centered.

Same with this is my arm. I do it before I'm tensed up to get my body into the habit of it, to make it feel a little less weird and more habitual. And I do both of these things when I want to self-regulate my ANS, my autonomic nervous system.

So I'll do a few rounds of the box breathing, in for four, hold for four, out for four, hold for four. And then I'll do it again and I'll bring my loving awareness to any tension or holding in my body. The goal is not to change it or judge it, but as you get started with somatic practices, just to notice it.

So perhaps as you're breathing you notice I'm having tension in the back of my shoulders and the thought is coming up, "I will never get unstuck." So there's tension due to thinking that thought and thinking that thought creates more tension. So you get to notice the intersection of body and mind through these practices, of giving your lizard brain something to do, which is the box breathing, and then bringing your awareness and tension to wherever the tension may be.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

And through this, you start to recognize all these ways that body and mind are one. And the circular nature of being a human, having human feelings. Through this work, my clients and I are able to reintegrate the parts of ourselves that we lost access to when life happened, when we experienced stress, distress, or trauma, and locked away some of our tenderness.

As we get present with our bodies, we learn where our edges and limits are. What movements and postures and situations in life push our nervous system past their capacity? Known as the window of tolerance, or the window of bodily dignity, as Jane Clapp calls it, which means the amount of sensory input an organism, a body, a nervous system, and a psyche can manage and can stay in ventral vagal with before there's activation into sympathetic, fight or flight, or dorsal shutdown, immobilization or freeze.

And once you know the felt sensation of your window of bodily dignity, what you are able to stay present and in your integrity with, in feeling safe with, you can start to consciously decide that you may seek to broaden that window by 1%. You may seek to support yourself to broaden just how much input your nervous system can take, to see what you can breathe through and keep that steady, solid anchor within yourself so that you can set a boundary, so that you can honor your needs.

Somatics is so beautiful that way, in helping us to recognize just how much we can shift through and move through in this lifetime. And somatic practices help us to be present in ways that make buffering or attempting to push our feelings away with unconsciously driven distraction less and less attractive.

I feel so much less of an urge to check out now that I'm checked in in this new bodily way. It just doesn't feel good anymore. And the more checked in and present I am, the more choice I have in any given moment. The less

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

reactive I am to the world as I gain more confidence that I will in fact have my own back physically as well as metaphorically.

So I experience myself as less reactive and more responsive as that window of bodily dignity amplifies and expands. And that has been such a gift. And not just a gift to me, a gift to the people I love in my life as I meet myself and them with so much more love and kindness and grace.

This somatic awareness has reconnected me to my intuition, my gut level knowing, which gives me the opportunity to choose to follow my own inner knowledge and guidance, versus following those old codependent cassette tapes that tell me to people please, to put myself last, to beat myself up, to push myself past my limits, to attempt to reach some kind of perfection so I can prove to myself and the world that I am worthy of love and care.

Because when I look inward, I recognize. My body knows and my body tells me that I already am so, so, so very worthy and so are you. And we don't need to do anything in this world to prove it, to ourselves or anyone else. My body tells me there is nothing to fix or change about myself to be lovable. And there is so much to be curious about.

So my love, I hope that this short introduction to somatics has been helpful for you. Your body has so much wisdom and you get to learn how to listen. And because somatics have helped me to change my life and shift my understanding of myself so much, it is a profound part of the work that we do in my six-month program, *Anchored: Overcoming Codependency*.

I know you've heard me talking about it and if you are ready to join us, this group coming up, starting April 5th, 2021 is likely to be my last group for this year. So if you want to get in on the action, now is your chance. This program is absolutely life-changing and I can't wait to share it with you.

Ep #109: Somatics: Living From Your Neck Down

Head on over to victoriaalbina.com/anchored to learn more about it and to apply now. It is such a delight to spend my days with this group of powerful women who are ready to change their lives, to stop swimming in the seas of codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thinking, and to find all the beautiful ways to manage their own adult minds, reparent their inner children, and live from the neck down, somatically engaged and embodied. Join us. It would be a delight to have you there.

Alright my beauty, let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart if you feel so moved. Bring your awareness to your beautiful breath. And remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon.

If you've been enjoying the show and learning a ton, it's time to apply it with my expert guidance so you can live life with intention, without the anxiety, overwhelm, and resentment, so you can get unstuck. You're not going to want to miss the opportunity to join my exclusive intimate group coaching program, so head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to grab your seat now. See you there. It's going to be a good one.