

Mindful Body Awareness - Somatic Psychology

The Treatment of Eating Disorders at The University of Bern's Inselspital

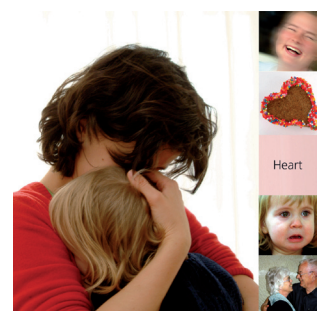
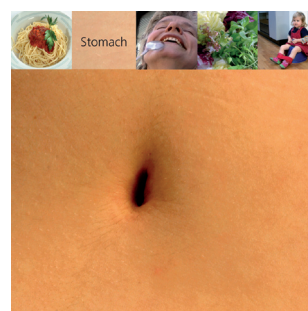
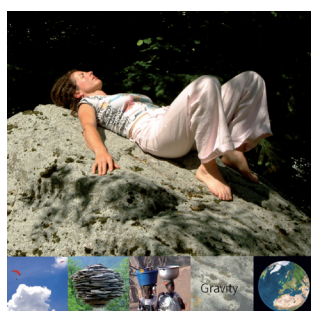
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"By endlessly fussing over my body, I ceased to inhabit it. I'm trying to reverse this equation now, to trust my body and enter it again with a whole heart."

Tilsdale, in: Foster 1994

Nowadays issues pertaining to eating, weight, figure and physical fitness are common preoccupations. A striking feature of our times is that we think a great deal about healthy nutrition, inform ourselves about all the ingredients a certain food might contain, and are often caught up in a constant inner battle over what is permissible, healthy, ethical and good for the figure. Often we are barely even conscious of facts such as where the food we eat comes from, that hunger and satiety are bodily sensations, that eating can be pleasurable and enjoyable, and that cooking can be a sensual experience.

At least in industrialized Western countries, eating habits are to a great extent dictated by factors such as time pressure, achievement-orientation, lack of exercise, advertising and unrealistic beauty ideals. Social factors such as general living conditions and in particular the demise of regular eating habits strongly contribute to eating disorders. "We believe that we meet our needs by either satisfying our craving for food or by forcing ourselves to repress it." (6) In so doing, eating has become less and less of a direct sensual experience. Mindful body awareness makes it possible to start experiencing this sensory level – our body signals and basic needs – again. Cultivating "inner knowledge" of our bodily, sensual, emotional and mental states of being and focusing on our bodies and ourselves in an accepting manner are helpful responses to the demands set by our present situation.



Awareness of Feelings

Already at the time of reform education in the 1920s, Elsa Gindler was struck by the lack of connection to concrete sensual perception and the human isolation that ensues. "We are so full of unrest and noise, and we never really devote ourselves to one thing at a time; our heads are always somewhere in the past or they are directed to what is to come, so that it is sheer coincidence if contact with people or things takes place." (10) This pioneer of somatic psychology observed that even though her pupils moved with momentum and grace, they lost all their freshness and vitality once the lesson was over. "In any case, that made me stop and think. How much more important it would be to bring people to the point where they can feel energized and relaxed during their daily work! Suppleness not to be able to do gymnastic exercises but rather as a physical condition that you always have! To be able to relax not in relaxation exercises, but rather in daily life when things get difficult!" (11)

Today we call this field of study mindfulness-based emotion and stress regulation. Over the past eighty years concepts such as Somatic Psychology, Somatics or somatic learning have been elaborated for a wide range of methods, techniques and practices. (5) All of them share certain common traits: they all improve awareness of sensations even though each of them has its own specific approach; they are all based on human physiology, in particular the nervous system, and they all study the connection between body (substance) and consciousness (the flow of information). Some of the time they are combined with contemplative practices stemming from various (often Eastern Spiritual) traditions, such as for example Buddhist mindfulness meditation, Yoga or Qi Gong.

The Mindful Brain Recent Neurobiological Evidence

Basic assumptions underlying Somatic Psychology have actually been confirmed by brain research. Experiences are always concomitantly anchored and neurobiologically coupled with each other on a cognitive, emotional and physical level manifesting as mental, emotional and physical reaction patterns. In fact, not only strong feelings such as sadness, anger or joy are closely connected with bodily sensations. Every experience, including our thoughts, are connected to physical sensations. (2) Every experience is structurally rooted in the brain. Since the human brain is characterized by enormous plasticity, changes in the ways we feel, think and act are theoretically possible. New experiences can build new neuronal connections or replace old ones. (8) Our experience of the world and ourselves is shaped by how we perceive our own bodies and our senses. However, greater awareness does not necessarily have a positive influence on our health unless it is in combination with a self-compassionate and mindful approach. (7) Mindfulness means waking up from a life that had been switched on automatic, and becoming open and receptive to the resonance of our life. Studies on interpersonal neurobiology show that mindfulness training has an immediate effect on the growth of those brain functions that are responsible for our relationships, our emotional lives and our physiological reactions to stress (14) According to this research, mindfulness training results in greater inner flexibility and responsiveness – two important goals in the treatment of addictive and anxiety disorders which are often observed in combination with eating disorders.

How can Mindful Body Awareness be Trained?

Attention is an innate capacity that every human being has. When we speak of attention, we are describing a very basic life experience, namely the conscious perception of objects, situations, thoughts and bodily sensations. Our attention is in constant motion, oscillating (swinging and moving) back and forth between our inner selves and our surroundings. To be attentive is an inherently human quality that accompanies and guides us throughout our lives. It is not an ability we have to invent or acquire. All we have to or can do is to consciously develop this quality and use it for ourselves, our well-being and our health. The first step in this process is to foster an awareness of this ability (3) For example, clients are told to direct their attention to bodily sensations or to the way they are breathing and to become aware of what they perceive. A core element of effective guidance is that it is based on acceptance. Mindful attention is non-judgemental and well-meaning.



Mindfulness is an Essential Inner Attitude

The “safe container” in which training takes place is a core element in cultivating mindfulness. By embodying mindfulness herself, the therapist creates an open, accepting, respectful and compassionate context, which, the psychotherapist Carl Rogers, for example, referred to as “unconditional presence”. For the therapist it is essential to experience, practice and embody mindfulness herself.

Mindfulness training is not a kind of relaxation training method or a new technique to suggest certain states. Instead, it is a practice or an approach to awareness training which strives to teach patients to “accept the fact that even though the phenomena they are consciously aware of at the present moment, including all their thoughts – regardless of whether they are negative, unpleasant or pleasant ones –, suppositions, sensations, adverse feelings such as fear, panic, greed, anger, sadness, hopelessness, desperation or disgust, physiological and endochronological reactions, and impulse reactions are there, they can still be changed and the underlying conditions can be perceived. The inner attitude of an attentive, friendly, interested observer is conveyed, which is not identical with these phenomena.” (12) So, on the one hand, mindfulness training involves acquiring the capacity to become aware of every moment and on the other, it involves developing this ability to such an extent “that it will lead to a completely new kind of relationship with our life that will result in deep inner wisdom” (9).

Fear of Losing Control - Dissociation From The Body

People with eating disorders fear losing control of their feelings, their needs and their reactions. The bottom line is that they fear losing control of their lives. They confront this fear by making a conscious effort to control themselves even more. They formulate goals, plan, wish, hope and then lose control. They binge and feel guilty about gorging on food they would otherwise not allow themselves. Or they seem to be perfectly in control but lose themselves in obsessive dieting. These patients often oscillate between these two conditions. This kind of control leads to feelings of guilt and shame, obsession, fear, alienation and isolation. Yet even

though it is so obvious that people with eating disorders suffer due to these destructive coping strategies, why do they often engage in them for years? Excessive eating, substance abuse, hunger and self-inflicted pain anesthetize or repress feelings like sadness, disappointment or anger and their subtle resonance in the body. By initiating such behavior, patients usually unconsciously escape from emotional pain they feel incapable of dealing with. In order to calm themselves down, they construct the dream of a life with an ideal figure and a perfect body; a life that would be better than their present one in many if not in all domains. Although these coping strategies had originally been developed as a method of protecting themselves against emotional or physical stress, a destructive pattern eventually emerges. "Addiction is not so much the use of substances or a behavioral process as it is a movement away from our direct body experience of the real world. When we vacate our bodies, we get away from any sensations, emotions and mental states that we find threatening. We get out of touch with ourselves in order to avoid directly experiencing what is going on. Addiction is an out-of-body experience, pulling the plug on our connection to ourselves and the world."(1)

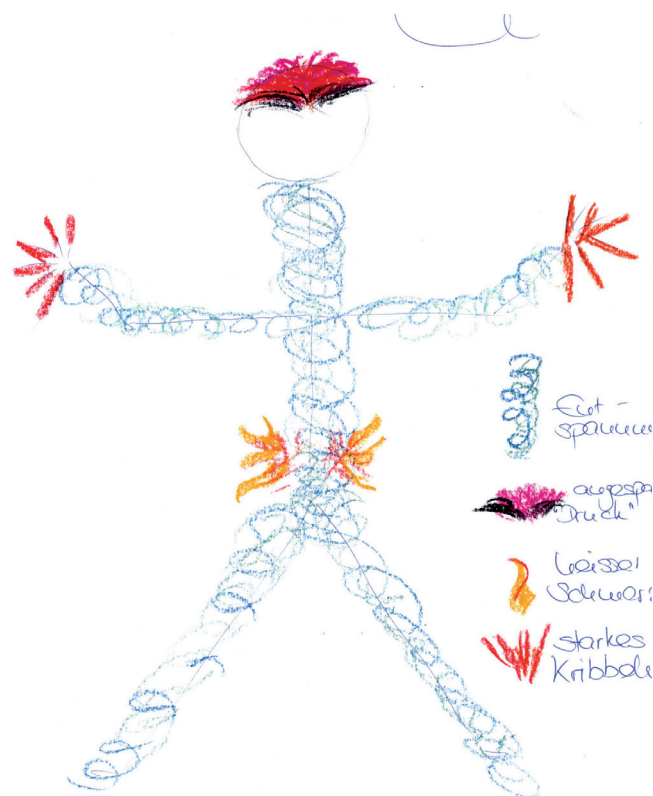
Being Present in The Body – Regaining Control

Mindful body awareness leads people in exactly the opposite direction, namely back to the capacity to experience the here-and-now with all its sunny and shady sides. It demands of patients courage and friendly discipline, and tends to resemble more a careful exposure to stress than a relaxation exercise. Yet whoever decides to practice compassionate self-observation, experiences that even adverse feelings such as anxiety or pain are bearable if the connection to concrete sensory sensations is not severed. Patients become aware of the fact that their feelings, sensations and thoughts constantly change. They learn to listen respectfully to their bodily signals, and they discover ways of choosing between perception (stimulus) and reaction, which in turn reduces stress and regulates emotion. What seemed to be overwhelming, can be out into place; what seemed to be uncontrollable, can be taken charge of and thus experienced. The meta-level of mindful perception thus creates inner space which is the decisive factor. Regaining one's body, learning how to perceive it from within in a proprioceptive sense is an essential part of the treatment of eating disorders. The Latin word *proprium* means "one's own", and *capere* means "to take charge of". By becoming aware of myself from within, I take charge of myself, I get a sense of myself. That is how I can start having feelings such as self-acceptance and self-confidence. A young anorectic patient expressed this in the following way: "I started to experience myself more intensively. That's how I became a person again." (13)

Patients' Experiences

Finding the way back into their body helps people to get back into touch with themselves and their environment, boosts their self-confidence, and paves new ways of constructively dealing with physical and psychological stress and limitations.

Mindful body awareness helped a young woman suffering from bulimia to regain self-confidence. "At the very beginning of therapy I didn't have the feeling that I had a problem. I didn't notice that I had a body. My head was thinking, but I wasn't aware of what I was touching. I've learned to sense where I am. I didn't use to respect myself. In learning how to sense myself, I've found support for ongoing physical and emotional self-respect. Now, whenever I'm nervous, I put my hands on my belly. That helps me a lot. And when I do that, I become aware of the fact that I do exist." (13)



A girl suffering from anorexia succeeded in realizing how skinny she actually was thanks to an enhanced awareness of her body and was as a result able to gain the strength to correct her distorted body image: "Simply accepting my body has given me another sense of what it means to be normal. In some ways I had two different perceptions of myself. I felt fat but at the same time I could sense my bones. There was this mental tension between the feeling and the sensation. Before, I didn't believe it when people told me that I was skinny. But sensing my own bones was something I had really experienced, and I thought maybe I have to change something after all." (13)

A patient suffering from obesity reported the following: "Since I pay attention to my bodily sensations, I notice that I start feeling pressure in my stomach that might sometimes really hurt when I am upset. I have gradually discovered that I can only start to try and do something about what upsets me, when I am aware of these physical signs, when I pay attention to what it is that bothers me and give this feeling space to begin with. I've also learnt to say "No" to say that something annoys me or that I simply don't want something. I used to just eat and didn't feel either my body or that I was upset."



After having done a body awareness exercise, an obese young man described how his inner emptiness felt, that his longing and his sadness felt like a big inner hole, and that he had a great yearning to have a relationship. "If I wasn't in this therapy group, I would be binge eating and would feel terribly ashamed afterwards and sometimes even wish I was dead. Now I'm so worked up and at the same time I feel so alive and I dare to talk about my wishes and my desires".

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drawings pages 3 and 4, sketches from patients after bodyscan exercises, Silvia Fiscalini (2010)

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