

2016  
Volume XVII Number 4

# SOMATICS®



**MAGAZINE-JOURNAL OF THE MIND/BODY ARTS AND SCIENCES**

*40th Anniversary Issue 1976 - 2016*

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MAGAZINE-JOURNAL OF THE

MIND/BODY ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume XVII

2016

Number 4

SOMATICS is sponsored by the Novato Institute for Somatic Research and Training

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# Touch, Somatics, *and* Psychotherapy,

## Part 2: A Paradigm of Touch

By Laura Fuller, MA, C.Ht, MFT Intern

**T**he foundation for this series is the belief that psychotherapy needs the body. An understanding of the body in its aspects of the physical, transcendent, personal, and interpersonal may be what rescues psychotherapy—care of the soul—from behavioral management. Part one, *Why Depth Needs the Body*, positioned the body to include the physical and symbolic, arguing the necessities of depth psychotherapy and somatic psychotherapy to each other. Depth (the symbolic, archetypal, transcendent), without the somatic (physical, cultural, contextual, experiential), risks a retreat into analysis and avoidance of the world. The somatic without depth risks a mechanistic view in which the body is brought into therapy, but is treated as machine.

Part two, *A Paradigm of Touch*, considers touch both philosophically and literally. The absence of literal physical touch, and the fears that often accompany any proposal of therapeutic touch in psychotherapy, must be seen as significant. Philosophically, *A Paradigm of Touch* is contrasted to *The Logic of Separation* (see below) and dualism. It represents a fundamental shift to a stance that embraces the truth

of interconnection of all elements of environment and self, is “hands-on,” experience-near, and socially engaged. Together, the taboo against therapeutic touch and a disconnected, experience-distant approach define a field that is often *out of touch* and potentially colludes with the forces of division that contribute to dis-ease.

As somatic tools become more common within psychotherapy, a fundamental shift is required. In this view, somatic psychotherapy is not merely a set of techniques, but represents a whole other paradigm. If this shift is not made, somatic tools will fall into structures that are based in the logic of separation, missing a potential for healing for the individual, and also for the system itself. This consideration is also timely as current social, cultural, political, and environmental conditions can be seen as expressions of the Paradigm of Separation—disembodied logic, and disavowed flesh.

The truths of the body have been glimpsed on many occasions. They erupt from the shadow bringing forth information: of untenable pain, and also of its remedy. Yet these understandings have been repressed because acknowledging them would mean that

profound changes need to be made. There is an organizing effect of locating the pain. Rather than the pain being nebulous, all-consuming, not understandable, or worse yet, seen as “just the way things are,” its source as the pain of separation can be known. A parent might say to a crying child, “Look, there’s the scrape. I see the blood.” The pain then becomes locatable, and finite. It becomes understandable, meaningful, and, most importantly, healable.

### **The Logic of Separation**

A distance from the body exists in psychotherapy, demonstrated particularly in the taboo against touch. A therapist may say to a client, “Your story touched my heart,” “I will hold it in confidence,” or “I hold you with respect”; however, such physical acknowledgements often remain symbolic. In some situations, instances of casual touch in psychotherapy are so rare that they stand out disproportionately. A single handshake analyzed for months, the rare and stuttering hug—this is how foreign the body has become. For fear of sex, vulnerability, or death, for dominance of intellect, or desire to control, from religious, social, and political

ideals, from carefulness founded in fear, the living physical world has been placed in the collective shadow. The body and the earth are calling to be embraced.

“Cogito ergo sum” (“I think therefore I am”) (Descartes, 1637/1998, p. 18). The logic of separation is sometimes referred to as the Cartesian split or Descartes’s error, as the French philosopher, René Descartes, summed up this philosophy of division in his 1637 treatise, *Discourse on Method*. This logic that philosophically divided mind from body and reason from emotion became the foundation of the scientific method, and the model for the way things are dealt with in society. It was crystalized in Western thought beginning with Plato (*Doctrine of Idea*, 427-347 BCE) and formalized into systems of logic and structures of language by Aristotle. Twentieth-century philosopher Alfred Korzybski saw Aristotelian structures of language and logic to have profound impact on the structures of society and the human body. In the introduction to *Science and Sanity* (1958, first published in 1933), he wrote, “In Aristotle’s system as applied, the split becomes complete and institutionalized, with jails for the ‘animal’ and churches for the ‘soul.’ Now we begin to understand how pernicious and retarding for civilization that split is” (Korzybski, 1958, p. xxxviii).

Psychotherapy, as it has become, imbues this split in the belief that the mind can be addressed without the body or spirit, in the position of social disengagement, and in the application of an experience-distant scientific method. The myth of objectivity and the desire to position psychology as only a hard science becomes problematic when the full extension of the paradigm of separation are seen. In *Psychoanalytic Treatment: An Inter-subjective Approach* (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 2000), experience-distant orientation is explained:

“A basic and largely unchallenged philosophical assumption that has pervaded psychoanalytic thought since its inception is the existence of an ‘objective reality’ that can be known by the analyst and eventually by the patient. This assumption lies at the heart of the traditional view of transference, initially described by Breuer and Freud (1983-95) as a ‘false connection’ made by the patient and later conceived as a ‘distortion’ of the analyst’s ‘real’ qualities that analysis seeks to correct” (p. 4).

The irony is that, by imagining the observed to be unaffected by the observer, the observer is given considerable power. In being believed to see reality, the observer can come to conclusions and decisions about the observed and thus can significantly affect the observed. Philosophical division allows for one facet to dominate the other and for the disregarding of essential elements of experience. The structure is vertical, hierarchal, and has the possibility—or even purpose—of dominance. Within the logic of separation, the body and nature are seen as objects to be controlled, as machines and commodities to be adjusted and possessed. Embodied experience of life is colonized for the sake of function. In *The Myth of Psychotherapy: Mental Healing as Religion, Rhetoric, and Repression*, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1979) stated that the idea of objectivity “not only conceals the complex moral and political character of psychotherapy . . . but actually flies in the face of the very real fact that the psychotherapist often belittles, censures and judges his patient, and that he may, indeed, go further than this by stigmatizing him with socially destructive psychiatric diagnostic labels and imposing involuntary hospitalization on him” (p. 3).

#### Trauma and Division

One interesting analysis is that the sort of division, primacy of intellect, and inability to see the connection of harm here and harm there are actually symptoms of trauma. It is possible to interpret society as it is as a system locked in a cycle of re-traumatization. Fritz Perls held that any disease is the result of a person alienating something that is organically theirs and so disrupting function (Perls, 1973, pp. 118-119). A depth-somatic psychology would say this is what is happening on a global level, and that healing cannot come without a reintegration of the body and earth. Division is a result of trauma: “The separation of body from self, and by extension the separation of body from mind, is an adaptation to distressing life events that are experienced physically” (Kepner, 1987, p. 29). And it is also a cause of trauma as it leads to the acting against another and thus against the self.

The pattern of division is also observed physiologically. In *Mindsight* (2010), Daniel Siegel noted the pervasiveness of defenses where “our mind

uses the brain to defend us from pain” (p. 124). The implications go further as the brain not only defends from the immediate pain, but from whole categories of information. A part of the brain called the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) crosses the boundary between the cortical areas associated with thinking and the limbic areas associated with feeling. It also regulates awareness and attention in general. This suggests that disconnection from one’s own body and emotions diminishes the ability to notice evidence or sustain attention outside of one’s own existing patterns.

In many theories, what cannot be metabolized is walled-off in some way. In *The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit*, Donald Kalsched (2008) explored how trauma creates a retreat to the intellect. This individual defense parallels collective retreat into analysis and inattention to the impact of actual physical experience that has been the trajectory of psychotherapy since the rejection of the seduction theory in 1906. The body and the earth have been cut off, placed in the shadow, and distanced from awareness. They are considered dangerous—and rightfully so—because the wisdom has been forsaken. For therapists divided from their own bodies, touch is the location of unexamined shadow material. Their own trauma, unmet needs, violence, aggression, or collapse are there as well as their sensitive, sensual, spiritual, and most tender and beautiful parts.

If and how to use touch within psychotherapy are different questions; they are choices that require as much discernment as any word or act. The solution cannot be to continue to push the body into the shadow, nor to utilize touch without skillful investigation. What is needed is a whole new paradigm that will allow for the healing to begin. It must be seen that the logic of separation, denial of the body, and tabooing of touch are not universal. Sexualization of touch and absence of the body in healing of the soul are recent phenomena with a traceable history. These ideas are bound by culture and time, reflecting a particular set of beliefs that are not helpful. The question of whether to use therapeutic touch in psychotherapy should simply be a question of theoretical orientation. However, the resistance to the use of touch is indicative of a view that is the source of a great deal of pain.

## A Paradigm of Touch

Since long before recorded history, healers have practiced the “laying-on of hands” (Field, 2003, p. 13; Montagu, 1986, p. 270). Until recently, touch has been an integral part of healing, regardless of whether disease appeared in the body, mind, or soul. “Healing” means wholeness and the reintegration of body, mind, and soul towards this wholeness is necessary at this time. A paradigm of touch is a full embrace of our most human elements of emotional, spiritual, and physical needs. It is a decision process that is in alignment with the heart and the earth, rather than carried by intellect alone, and an acknowledgement of interdependence of all aspects within an individual and in life as a whole. The organization is horizontal and rhizomatic. It represents a fundamental shift to an extreme experience-near, inter-subjective stance and dissolution of the idea that objectivity is what heals. While there are roles, boundaries, and theories, the therapist and client are seen as equals.

Within this paradigm, “touch” might refer to actual physical touch used skillfully. Or, when therapeutic touch is not utilized, “touch” is used philosophically to describe the stance of the therapists as they observe their clients in their wholeness and power, while holding an understanding of environmental and social contexts at play. Taboos other than touch would need to be broken as well: looking at the roles of nutrition, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, oppression, and poverty. We would need to look at the way people are born, the way they die, and everything in between. Regardless of whether or not physical touch is used, within a paradigm of touch, the therapist understands that—outside of pathology and its temporary delusion—there could be no distance: contact is always present and touch is always deep. Because of this, therapists must be ready and available with their entire beings: flesh and soul.

### Experience-Near

In *Scattered: How Attention Deficit Disorder Originates and What You Can Do About It* (2000), physician Gabor Maté wrote, “But what if illness is not a separate category, if there is no line of distinction between the ‘healthy’ and the ‘nonhealthy,’ if the ‘abnormality’ is just a greater concentration in an individual of disturbed brain processes found in everyone. Then perhaps there

are no fixed, immutable brain disorders, and we could all be vulnerable to mental breakdowns or malfunctions under the pressure of stressful circumstances. We could all go crazy. Maybe we already have” (p. 24).

Perhaps one reason touch and the reality it acknowledges brings fear to many psychotherapists is that it dissolves the comforting divisions. Healthy and sick, sane and insane, therapist and patient—and perhaps most powerfully—accepted and disavowed experience within the therapist. In a paradigm of touch, these lines come into question and the places where there is a cutoff rather than a true integration are exposed. This is not to say that there should be no diagnostic categories, or tests of reality. There would still be a strong contract of roles within the healing relationship. What soften are the power dynamic as identity and objectivity as the foundation for science that, for some therapists, have given a sense of control.

Within a paradigm of touch, there is an understanding that, though a particular role is taken on for the healing of another (one is the therapist, one is the client), we are equals and we are all in it together. “Experience-near” is a subjective approach where the clients are viewed as being in the best position to understand their situations. The therapists should see the purpose of their training as to support them in seeing forces influencing the client that may have been obscured from view, but not see themselves as the authorities to define the problem. The therapists’ own personal healing as well as the healing that comes to them through opening to each client is as important as anything learned in a book.

The magic of the mirrors of clients becomes clear in a paradigm of touch. Each bodymind is a microcosm of the request for healing by the whole and a mirror for current re-membering within the therapist herself. In the current belief system, to even acknowledge that a therapist heals through each client is taboo. A paradigm of touch dissolves the belief that a therapist could help another based on intellectual information alone. It enters a more shamanic reality where all elements of life go together.

The distance-based roles of client, psychotherapist, and supervisor within the paradigm of separation can potentially serve to protect therapists from

their own feelings of shame, loss of control, and powerlessness, and may serve as ways to avoid going on their own journeys of healing and from participating fully with life. The development and formalizing of psychotherapy has been largely about the addition of boundaries and experience-distant approaches. For some, a carefulness has taken over. For others, it takes the form of distance through objectification. The antidote to these is not recklessness, but rather is a full embrace of life. The paradigm of touch would keep some of the boundaries that have been helpful in the development of psychotherapy. But other boundaries might be dissolved, coming closer to its more personal and socially engaged roots.

In depth psychotherapy, there is the retreat into analysis. In behavior management, there is the retreat into function. In both cases, this dividing off can operate as an escape from the truths of the body that include emotions, death, lack of control, and a beautiful degree of diversity that will not completely fit well into boxes. Behavioral management and control applies not only to clients, but even more so to therapists, placing unreasonable burdens of responsibility for things that should not be controlled and little request at all for human presence. When safety is equated with distance, both the client and therapist are stripped of their humanity, preciousness, and power.

### Diagnosis and Archetype

The shift to a paradigm of touch would mean a different way of seeing symptoms and treatment. It would prioritize a full embrace of the humanity of both the client and the therapist and physical, social, and environmental contexts. Mental disease would no longer be seen as a disorder of an individual mind, but as a resultant functioning of the whole system. Like archetypes, diagnoses are an emergence of similarity in organization of energy. From a collective perspective, individuals experiencing these disorders are the bearers of a symbol, holding a particular piece of the collective shadow, and messengers bringing clues of the healing needed by the whole.

This is where the somatic-depth frame comes in. Diagnoses as archetypes expose both physical and metaphysical truths. The most physical considerations of the body, behavior, and structures of society are related to the most esoteric and ethereal elements of

energy. In the way that dis-orders cross cultures and time, they speak to timeless truth about the experience and tasks of being human. However, in the way that they become prevalent within certain cultures and groups and at certain times, they represent an aspect of the collective shadow and a lesson that must be learned by the whole.

In truth, we are always whole; however, psychological illness involves the experience of division, loss, and a contentious relationship between the soul and its surroundings. Awareness may seem distant from the body, may fragment, or the body may become a cage, obstacle, or distorted lens. In any case, illnesses are a call for a more thorough integration—on both a personal and collective level. Through symbolic sight, these dis-orders reveal challenges and divisions that affect everyone, not only those who carry their labels. In seeking context, personal, collective, and environmental trauma must be considered as a possible root of all diagnoses.

The consideration of diagnoses as archetypes should not be mistaken for romanticizing or making poetic very real and personal pain, but rather is for the purpose of properly locating the problem. In the element of being “hands-on,” somatic-depth psychology would seek to remedy the physical causes equally as seeing the symbol. A person with a diagnosis could thus be seen as a participant in the unfolding of a larger story—an initiate—rather than a carrier of a permanent biological truth. It is both a wound and a potential. Treatment of the client would be as individual as the personal story (rather than formulaic or based on labels), and the sense of participation in something larger could bring a sense of respect, opportunity, and compassion.

### Hands-On

In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, originally published in 1933, Wilhelm Reich (1942/1970) asked a question of the professions that shape society:

“What are you doing in a practical way to feed the nation, without murdering other nations? What are you doing as a physician to combat chronic disease, what as an educator to intensify a child’s joy of living, what as an economist to erase poverty, what as a social worker to alleviate the weariness of mothers having too many children, what as an architect to promote hygien-

ic conditions in living quarters? Let’s have no more of your chatter. Give us a straightforward, concrete answer or shut up” (p. xvi).

This statement is an intense demand for a hand-on philosophy. Functionally, psychotherapy most often does go towards these ends, though it rarely addresses the problem at its source. While Reich was involved in the individual treatments of patients, he was also involved in programs of social welfare. He saw the structures within the physical body and also within society in general. From the myth of objectivity comes the belief that the therapist must be a blank projection screen for clients. Similar to touch, the concept of “hands-on” is described as a literal application and as a philosophical shift. Like all touch, this approaches a higher degree of self-awareness and also of compassion. It may not be the perfectly clean and identically repeatable protocol fidelity that creates the healing and joy, but the honest, messy, striving human.

In terms of the distinction between “hands-on” somatic therapy and “hands-off” somatic therapy, it is true that much can be done in bodily awareness through words alone. It is most important that the philosophical foundation of touch is in place. However, the tremendous resource that comes in therapeutic physical contact when combined with psychological process is why hands-on techniques should have a place within psychotherapy.

In some way or another, it is clear to most psychotherapists that the body must be addressed in some way. The more that is learned about the nervous system, the more clear it becomes that, while insight is an important step along the way, actual healing comes through the visceral experience of the antidote. In *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), Bessel Van der Kolk wrote of this regarding trauma: “We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but usually it is not enough” (p. 20). Actual physical experiences are required to restore a visceral sense of control (p. 31). This most compassionate therapist most certainly works within the paradigm of touch, but still the taboos hold firm. In this beautiful book he mentions basically all possible ways of addressing the body in psychotherapy, yet somehow with the exception of touch.

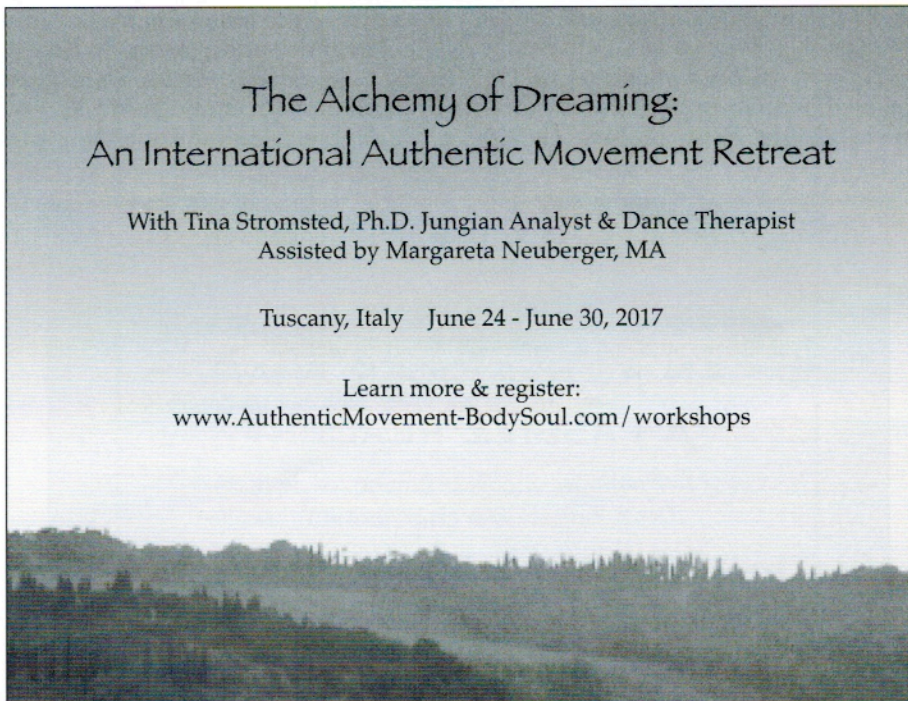
In addition to the nervous system regulation and release that comes from physical contact, and the contact with process that would not otherwise be accessible, much healing of deep implicit memories has to do with contact between self and world. Physical touch can give the experience of this at a level deeper than words. True boundary and connection (rather than cut-off or enmeshment) can be felt and learned and progress can come in the exploration of what that feels like or has felt like in the past. What is the quality of contact with the world? Invasive, abra-

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sive, excluding, distant, cold—these are the traumas to be healed. Further, the transfer of much of this information to begin with comes through early touch in the nonverbal years. It is the potential for re-parenting and repairing this fundamental self-boundary that gives both the potential for containment and strength of self *and* the potential for actual contact and love.

**False Laws and Disembodied Logic**  
Intellect disconnected from the body is liable to make decisions against the body. Some psychological disorders express the split, dividing the world too harshly. Some people become stuck in the fantasy or in the practicality. Others bear the anger of knowing their largeness and being placed in a box that is too small. There is a degree of necessity that the structures of society and of self limit our wholeness. However, when these limits are based on false laws so abstracted from the natural course of things, it makes sense that a psyche would rebel. While there must be healing of the individuals bearing the dis-ease, the actual problem lies in the false laws and disembodied logic that they are, in one way or another, railing against. Alexander Lowen observed, “The pace, the pressure and the philosophy of our times are antithetical to life” (1975, p. 29). Something is off, and the truths of the body bring the remedy.

Reich wrote, “Fascism can only be crushed if it is countered objectively and practically, with a well-grounded knowledge of life’s processes” (1942/1970, p. xvi). In twentieth-century Europe, the rise in fascism was paralleled by a rise in formal study of somatic healing. As the problem came

to a boiling point, the antidote stepped forward too. It is arguable that we are at a similar place right now. The logic of separation is not just a common lens of duality, but an expression of division that is supremely dangerous. Social, political, and religious systems have become so distant from real laws of nature and balance that they are at risk of creating more and more harm in attempts to solve division with more division. It also becomes very difficult to even imagine that pain has cause and could have an end.

“When individuals have been taught silence and accommodation by the institutions around them, the outcome is a sense of fatalism about life conditions. The way things are seems inevitable. One’s failure seems one’s own fault. Desire for different ways of being in relation to oneself and others are crushed by a sense of oneself as powerless” (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 25).

“To the degree that orders are linked to the way the body is inscribed, and to the degree that the link is sealed by the rules of silence, the first stuttering questions of those orders must always begin by breaking the seal and speaking about the body” (Hyde, 1999, p. 172).

In situations where the needs and wisdom of humanity have been denied and obscured, confusion comes in. This is the importance of locating the pain. As sources of oppression are externalized and trust in sensation regained, an internal sense of power can be rebuilt. We must address the body. The current rise in fascism in the United States and around the world also happens to come alongside an increase in somatic understandings. While mostly in hands-off ways, the body is



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coming into psychotherapy. Within this opportunity, the hope is that somatic tools are not only appropriated by the system as it is to help people cope with the pain of current situations, but might bring with them the shift to a paradigm of touch and facilitate a deeper change.

### Teachings of the Flesh

Pain is one truth of physical existence. There is pain in death, sickness, and birth. There is the pain of change. There is the pain of hunger that leads someone to seek food, and the pain that causes the hand to pull out of the fire. Some pain is part of life and growth, but some pain is a message that something needs to change. The pain of separation is placed in the latter. This belief alone reflects a major philosophical shift. A deeper expression of the logic of separation is the belief that God is separate from human, and heaven is separate from earth. Following from this are beliefs in a primary longing that is impossible to fulfill. Duality set up by The Fall. But what if this is not true? What if the sense of separation is a symptom of trauma and the self split against the self? Through change, we could begin to become whole.

What is required is a shift to honoring the teachings of the flesh and spirit rather than false laws and disembodied logic. The somatic-depth frame would look at the physical needs of embodi-

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ment and also a connection to spirit that can relieve the fear or greed. So, what are the teachings of the embodied life? It has physical needs: clean air, water, food, and environments and it does best when connected to these things. It should be handled gently enough, given good-enough safety, and given care when injured. It needs love, freedom to move, softness on which to fall, and permission to be messy and imperfect. It needs time and support to feel. Embodied life teaches of tremendous diversity and infinite variation and ways of being. It teaches unity and interconnection: What is done to the body impacts the soul, and what happens to one group impacts everyone. It also teaches of forgiveness, resiliency, and an incredible capacity to heal.

Working within a paradigm of touch asks more of the therapist, but gives more as well. Beginning to shift to a paradigm of touch and to integrate the lessons of the body and soul may be almost invisible from the outside as therapists start to open up different parts of themselves and of clients. For some psychotherapists, it may simply begin with a deepening of their own healing and a shift in the supervision they seek and give. Shifting to this paradigm might also be very visible as it positions therapists to be able to see the pains resulting from the systems as they are. Some might begin to speak out more and create change. Beginning with the field of psychology itself, therapists will call out where their field is complacent in pain.

There is no demand for touch in the paradigm of touch, just permission to consider. Most therapists will still work just with words and within the walls of their office, but they may show up with a little more of themselves. The desire here is simply that psychotherapy remember itself to be a most human form. In the logic of separation, the mind goes to therapy, the soul goes to church, and the body goes to the gym—where do we go to be whole? It is possible that psychotherapy can be this place, a place for the wise welcome of all of our parts. 🐾

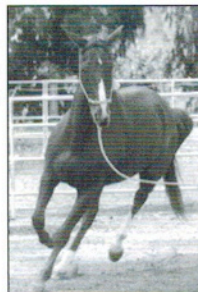
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## EQUINE HANNA SOMATICS®



**Equine Hanna Somatics® (EHS)** is an adaptation of Hanna Somatics for horses.

Like humans, horses experience stress and develop chronically contracted muscles. Equine Hanna Somatics is a hands-on procedure for teaching horses, horse riders, and horse handlers the voluntary, conscious control of the neuromuscular systems of horses suffering muscular disorders of an involuntary, unconscious nature.

Ranch visits, private sessions, and workshops  
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