

Somatic Awareness

by Susan McConnell, MA, CHT

SOMATIC IFS

TOOL #1

Awareness of our bodies is fundamental to Somatic IFS. Somatic awareness is the first of the tools that make up the pyramid and the foundation. As the base, it is the largest, not only in terms of size but also importance and the amount of time we use the tool.

All the other four tools rest and depend on somatic awareness. They flow organically from awareness and lead to an experience of Embodied Self. With somatic awareness,

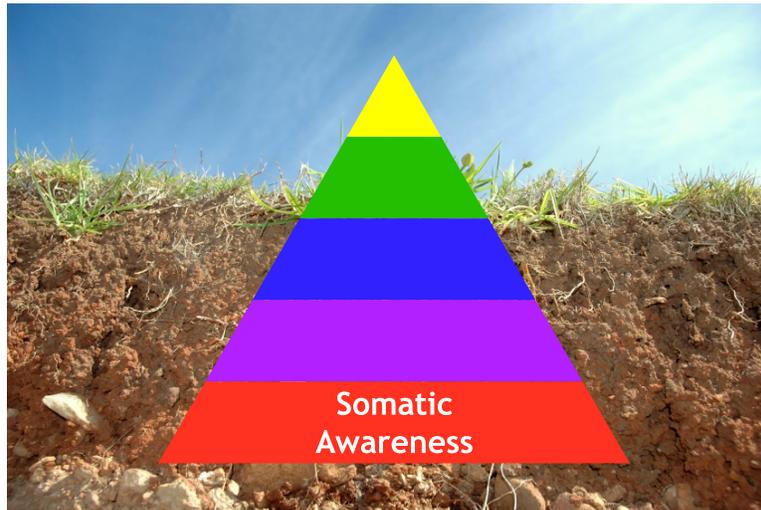
we can be conscious of our breath, our body is available as an instrument of resonance with another, our movements will be integrated and coherent, and our touch can be an open, sensitive channel of communication.

Somatic awareness is our birthright. As I hold my newborn granddaughter, it seems to me she is only aware of her body sensations as she roots for the breast, yawns, sneezes, cries, and sucks on her fist. She is aware of temperature, sounds, and textures from her skin receptors, and she responds to them with her entire body. Her eyes seem to be looking inward. By the age of two months, she has begun to expand her awareness to include the outside world as she smiles and sticks out her tongue in response to the faces I make.

For many of us, it is this interaction with the outside world that begins to limit our inherent capacity for awareness. The wounds that happen to our vulnerable, open systems happen to our bodies. The wounds eventually scar over with layers of protection,

and these are also in our bodies. Our protective parts find ingenious ways to try to keep somatic states out of our awareness. Cut off from our sensate experience,

we are cut off from our deepest knowing, from our sensual pleasures, from our relationships with others, and with the natural world. At our core, we long to regain intimacy with our bodily experience and to explore the intricacies of communication of our tissue, viscera, bone, and fluids.



IFS offers a powerful method to heal the nearly inevitable dissociation from our body awareness that occurs during our lifetime, even the extreme dissociation that occurs as a result of extremely harmful situations. Simply having a willingness to be aware is a place to start. A client many years ago taught me about how to begin the process. We acknowledged her dissociation as a necessary and even brilliant response to her trauma. Then she was able to notice the tip of one small finger for 5 seconds before she was flooded with feelings. We slowly reassociated her awareness of her body. Eventually she was able to restore her awareness to her entire body and notice the sensations she liked and those she didn't.

Awareness implies Self energy. Awareness evokes Self energy. When, in any given moment, a part is dominating our lives and we bring awareness to that fact, it's as if we have brought a ray of light into a dark room. Awareness that we are withdrawing, or that we are speaking critically, opens the door to options other

than spinning our wheels. When we bring awareness to that set of feelings and behaviors, curiosity can follow, and more internal space is created.

We can begin with scanning our bodies and noticing what is easily in our awareness and what is less in our awareness. We enjoy the sensations that are there and get curious about the places in our body that are harder to notice. We find the parts that contribute to the blocks, the numbing, and the dissociation. We discover how they accomplish their jobs. We learn that they believe they are protecting us. We appreciate them for this important work, and we may learn what happened for them to believe they had to do this cutting off. They may admit they are tired of it and would long to not have to do it. It is hard work to block such an inherent, powerful capacity as our body awareness.

We explore whether it is truly safe now to shift this bodymind organization. Parts may be willing to trust in a little body awareness for a little time, like the client I mentioned above. We may discover more of the story as the block lets go slightly and other body sensations or feelings emerge.

If we can stay with sensations over time, we notice that they change. Often the sensation lessens—the muscle tension releases and may be replaced by pleasurable sensations of tingling or warmth. Or the more vulnerable parts may want to express through different body sensations. They may get stronger as they notice they are finally being listened to and want to “talk” louder and longer. We can ask the sensations to stay at a tolerable limit, reassuring them we won’t

ignore them. Staying with sensations alone, and asking the associated emotions, thoughts, and narratives to hold off, is helpful when the client is on the verge of being flooded or overwhelmed with the hurtful situation from the past.

In addition to bringing our awareness to the body, the body also has its own capacity for awareness. When freed from the burdens it carries from trauma and attachment wounds, our body is a wonderful resource for awareness.

Every cell of our body hums with awareness. Each organ has its own awareness that communicates with other awarenesses. There are the organs of perception—sensory receptors of the skin, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and musculoskeletal proprioceptors. In addition, each of our 80 trillion cells is busy exchanging information and communicating with other cells, with the larger systems of the body, and so on, ad infinitum. Each cell knows about connection, one of the qualities of Self. Through the act of breathing, each cell is connected with the outer environment in a continual exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. The proprioceptor cells as well as structures in each cell, which have an awareness of the action of gravity and our relationship to our vertical alignment, help us feel centered and grounded.

Each of the trillions of cells in our body contributes to a larger field of Self energy that we always have available to us. Simply connecting with some aspect of our body—our spine, our feet, our pelvis—can help us access this Self energy when our parts are taking over all the energy of our mind.