

Mindful Movement

by Susan McConnell, MA, CHT

SOMATIC IFS

TOOL #4

Movement is the unifying bond between the mind and the body, and sensations are the substance of that bond.
—Deane Juhan

Mindful movement brings Self awareness to spontaneous gestures and movement styles to witness, access, and unburden parts. This fourth tool of Somatic IFS also includes re-embodiment of early developmental movement patterns associated with trauma and faulty attachment, and encouraging movement practices that foster and stabilize Self energy.

Although I am not trained in Dance Movement Therapy, I have been privileged to study with several people from whom I have learned about movement—Susan Aposhyan, Susan

Harper, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Amina Knowlen, and Pat Ogden, as well as IFS therapists Barb Cargill, Gina Demos, and Francine Passias. My experiences with these teachers, my academic study, and my clients have shown me that movement—moving with mindfulness—is an essential component of Somatic IFS.

My eight-month-old granddaughter, Sadie, is my most recent movement teacher. Applying my knowledge to my observation of her motor development has been fascinating. I was present at her birth and was awed by the power of her spinal push—head to tail and tail to head—as she worked with and pushed against the uterine contractions to birth herself.

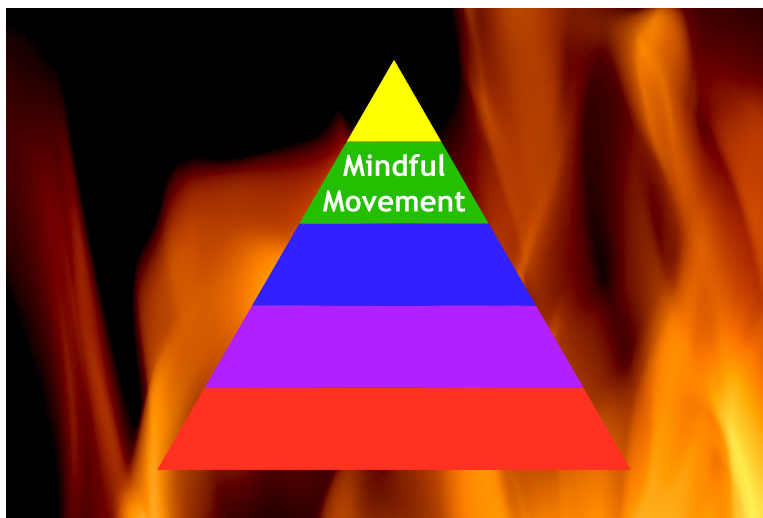
Her original grounding was through her navel—her point of connection to Life itself and her sole

source of nourishment. The sense of core Self is experienced by the infant at this early stage of life. Cohen believes that this development begins in utero and is supported initially by the motility of the cells through the process of cellular breathing, and also by the organization of fetal movement around the umbilical centre in the navel radiation pattern. The infant experiences, through movement, a basic sense of

being a unified whole, with separate parts that are both differentiated and connected.

Sadie's first task was to learn to breathe and to suck and swallow. The first motor nerves to myelinate are the sucking nerves. She practiced these movements in utero.

At first, her body movements seemed mostly random, radiating from her core. She gradually gained increasing control and coordination over the gross movements of her trunk, legs, and arms. I noticed the various movement patterns of her limbs as they developed from homologous to homolateral and then to contralateral movements. I observed the infant movement patterns that Cohen describes—yielding, pushing, reaching, grasping, and pulling—which she says underlie the secure passage through the stages of psychological development and the emergence of the sense of self. Daniel Stern also describes how the sense of an “emergent, core, subjective and verbal” self develops out of the intimate reality of bodily sensation and expression—which is movement.



As Sadie learned to sit up, the sitz bones of her pelvis became an additional source of grounding (assisted by a fluffy diaper). Over the next few months, she learned to support this newly integrated spinal core upon all fours. Cohen says that the crawling patterns, which are initiated by yielding weight into and pushing out of the ground, facilitate ego development by embodying and strengthening muscles. Crawling creates a bounded sense of self as the infant engages with weight, earth, and gravity. All of these movements that Sadie approaches with the same urgency as her birthing are developing her perceptual relationships, including spatial orientation and body image, and the basic elements of learning and communication.

With clients who have experienced trauma and attachment wounds in utero or during infancy, working with the internal family in an embodied way offers an opportunity to directly enter the preverbal matrix of the parts' experience. IFS recognizes that certain qualities are "lost" when a part absorbs burdens. These qualities in very young parts are imbedded in the body's systems. As the early movement patterns are reenacted, the associated memories and emotions may be accessed, allowing for witnessing and unburdening of the parts. In Somatic IFS workshops, I have led participants in reembodying the basic developmental movement patterns to access the burdens and restore the underlying sense of unity of Self. We begin on the floor as infants and experience both ontogenetic and phylogenetic movement development. We play frog and lizard, we roll and crawl, and happily suck our thumbs.

Mindful Movement can be employed at every stage of the IFS process. Movement can access the part, help the part unblend, enhance the relationship between Self and the part, witness the part's story, unburden the part, and assist with the integration and completion phase of the IFS Model. The movements that can be addressed with Somatic IFS include spontaneous movement, habitual gestures, protective stances,

and frozen/blocked impulses. These movements and gestures are generally outside of our awareness. We bring awareness, exploration, and mirroring to facilitate the IFS process. Specifically, we invite the client to notice the movement and any impulse to block or inhibit the movement. With permission from the part that is blocking, we encourage the movement to sequence through the body to completion. A movement may originate in the core of the body and sequence to an end point—the head, tail, or any of the four limbs.

Laura is a client who has benefitted from this embodied approach to her internal family. In the last year, she radically changed many of her addictive behaviors. She has lost a good deal of weight and is off some of her diabetes medications. In spite of these improvements (or because of them), in a recent session she reported feeling paralyzed—unable to continue on this course of behavior change. I invited her to experience the paralysis while she was sitting with me. She accessed a young part that felt scared, alone, and powerless. She heard another small voice that said it would be good to stand up and move around, but to move felt dangerously assertive and powerful for the first part. The first part eventually allowed her to stand up, and Laura began to move, quite stiff with fear. She cried and said this is how it feels every time she makes the choice to eat the right foods and not eat the wrong foods, as if she has to change a switch in her brain.

To integrate this shift, I reminded Laura of a session the year before when she made the decision to choose Life. There were more tears. I suggested she find something in the room that represented Life, and mindfully move toward that. She moved toward the object and held it tenderly in her arms for several silent minutes. She reported that her fear was calmer. It felt different from when the fearful, paralyzed part is pushed away by parts that are choosing new behaviors. She invited her guides to be with her. She realized that

when she takes the initial extremely hard step to get off the couch, she inherently chooses Life, and she can trust her body to lead the way. She could imagine that her brain was being rewired. Since that session, it has been easier for her to turn on the switch, and it stays on for longer periods of time.

A session with my client Anne is another example of working with parts through mindful movement. Anne is an accomplished, successful corporate executive, wife, and mother with a complex and difficult early history. An exile was expressing itself in her body as a collapse—being pulled down from her solar plexus, while a manager was resisting that impulse and taking a strong, independent stance that pushes through, accomplishes, and achieves. We oscillated between the impulse to collapse and the opposing upright posture. As she inhaled, she extended the front of her body, and as she exhaled, she moved into the collapse and flexed the front of her body. Both parts of the polarization felt understood by Anne through witnessing the movement. We appreciated the upright protector that has served her so well, and learned that it is very, very tired and can't keep up the resistance. The exile's collapse was taking over in her body and in her system. Anne allowed that movement to sequence to its endpoint as it curled up in fetal position. She stayed in this position as she accessed a part that knew she was not wanted as a baby and that blames herself for her neglect and abuse. This exile wanted her to curl up and die. The part felt Anne's compassionate presence toward her and knew that she was wanted by Anne. Eventually the pressure to curl up released. Anne uncurled and no longer felt the pressure in her solar plexus to collapse. She felt ease and calm in her body. Her life is moving toward more balance as her protector no longer needs to battle against the desire to give up and die.

With both Anne and Laura, the parts were telling their stories through movement, and these stories were witnessed mindfully. Movement may be the only way

the part can tell its story. A part's movement story may have been blocked and frozen in the body's structure—impulses to run, to hit, to kick, to bite, to reach out, to suck, to hide, to cry, to cringe, to speak, to look. With permission from a polarized part, we bring intentional, deliberate movement to the block to free up these frozen impulses, completing the sequence, allowing for a physiological unburdening and restoring the original qualities of Embodied Self.

We ask the meaning-making and story-telling parts to wait until the movement has been able to be fully expressed and witnessed, and has come to completion. Often the meaning, the emotions, and the story associated with the relevant phase of development emerge during the mindful exploration of movement. Spontaneous unburdenings are frequent as we bring mindfulness to the movement. The movement pattern is embodied more fully, and the sensorimotor pathways are restored. Expression of unburdened parts that have restored qualities of freedom and joy anchors the transformation. Simply inviting our clients to move through space with these new qualities of body and mind integrates the shift into daily life.

A regular practice of mindful movement can increase capacity for Embodied Self energy. Martial Arts, Yoga, Alexander Technique, Pilates, and Feldenkrais are some structured mindful movement approaches. Yet we may not need to join another class. We may just need to commit the time to noticing mindfully the movement already happening in our bodies. Our bodies, even in relative stillness, are always moving. The fluids of our bodies each have their own rhythm and are pulsing with various frequencies and paces. Every organ is pulsating with its own energy. Every sensation we feel is a movement waiting and wanting to happen. We can start with our grounding—our navels, our pelvic floors, and our feet. We let go of the tension in our mouths and ask the cortical parts if they are willing to relax a bit. We notice the sensations

and invite them to move, breathe, rest, and sound. We notice impulses throughout our bodies to reach, push, pull, yield, and grasp. A regular embodiment practice of attending to sensations and allowing them to move and sequence through to a completion is a beautiful practice for enhancing Embodied Self energy and is a gift we can bring our clients.

Resources

- Cohen, Bonnie Bainbridge. *Sensing, Feeling and Action*.
Contact Editions, Northampton, MA, 1993.
- Juhan, Deane. *Job's Body – A Handbook for Bodywork*.
Station Hill Press, Barrytown, New York, 1987.
- Stern, Daniel N. *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*.
Basic Books, Harper Collins, 1985.