

# Embodied Self

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SOMATIC IFS

## How does “*embodied Self*” differ from “Self”?

Self energy already is an embodied state. Dick Schwartz, in his article “The Larger Self,” tells us he first experienced the state he later came to call *Self* on the basketball court when his body just knew what it had to do. As he came to learn from his clients about Self energy, his therapy room replaced the basketball court as the main source of that feeling. He describes this state as sensations in his chest and abdomen and a vibrating energy running through his limbs. All the qualities used to describe Self energy—calm spaciousness, lightness, clarity, compassionate openheartedness—are experienced in the body and with the body. It is impossible to be dissociated from our bodies and be in Self energy. So why risk redundancy by including the adjective?

To the degree that language influences thought, the emphasis provided by the adjective *embodied* serves to amend our cultural legacy of exiling the somatic realm. Parts and Self are experienced in both body and mind. Using the terms *body* and *mind* separates the inseparable. So I add *embodied* to *Self* until we have transcended this dualistic paradigm, and I often refer to the *bodymind*, where both parts and Self are experienced.

The term *embodied Self* accentuates the understanding that Self is not an idea but rather a lived experience. Daniel Stern, in *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, writes concerning the formation of the self:

A crucial term here is a ‘sense of,’ as distinct from a ‘concept of’ a self or other. The emphasis is on the palpable experiential realities of substance, action, sensation, affect, and time. Sense of self is not a cognitive construct. It is an experiential integration. This sense of a core self will be the foundation for all the more elaborate senses of the self to be added on later.

Although Stern uses the term self to refer to what we in IFS call the internal system of Self and parts, his words call us to a transconceptual response to our parts. Parts speak through the bodymind in raw, elegant, primitive poetics. They compel a response that requires the listener to descend into the mysteries of his or her own bodymind. The kind of knowing, understanding, and compassion that arises from a full-bodied resonant listening has an authentic immediacy that is transformative.

## Embodied Self is our true nature.

In a state of embodied Self, we can take in, moment by moment, all that we experience in life, staying present to every sensation. Our cells, organs, and tissues communicate and collaborate with each other in an uninhibited complex dance. Grounded in the earth, connected to the infinite energies from above, communicating with the field of Self energy around us, we are responsive and resilient. Embodiment, like Self energy, can be viewed on a continuum from dissociation to full embodiment that is in a state of flux moment by moment.

The tools of Somatic IFS not only lead to but also describe the state of full embodiment: our cells hum with awareness, our breath is full and easy, our movements are fluid, our entire bodies resonate in connection. Our genetic makeup supports this state. We can find the qualities of wisdom and intelligence that we attribute to Self in every cell of our bodies. These innate capacities get inhibited and buried by the burdens that our parts absorb in our bodyminds. The five tools in combination with the IFS Model help us recognize when we are blended with parts that inhibit this innate capacity and find a way back to our true embodied nature. Bringing awareness to our sensations

and our movements reveals our parts, and the awareness itself also leads to embodied Self.

With a long, slow exhale, I turn my attention inward to scan my body for sensations. Of all the sensations I notice, I am drawn to a slight pain in my upper left sacral joint. At first I am distracted by sounds in the room, but as I refocus I feel a wave of energy up my spine and down my arms. My spine wants to move now, and I notice a place in the midback on the right that feels stuck. As I explore the depth and the boundaries of that stuck place, another rush of energy follows. My whole torso feels more spacious—my sense of the shape of my torso expands, and the boundaries get blurry. The whoosh of energy travels up the back of my neck. My shoulder blades drop a bit further down my back. My breath gets longer and slower, and my spine begins to move with my breath. I notice tension behind my eyes and at the base of my throat. As I stay with that tension, I feel a wave of energy, like an internal shower, flowing down my back into my pelvis and down the back of my legs. I continue to ride the wave of my breath. I feel alive, spacious, and oceanic. I say “I,” but this experience of sensation and movement shifting moment by moment is the reality rather than a concept of “I.”

Our innate capacity for embodiment is overridden in the face of life experiences that overwhelm our vulnerable systems.

Peter Levine, the originator of Somatic Experiencing® and author of the book *Waking the Tiger*, explains that humans are endowed with the same innate capacity as animals in the wild to respond to life-threatening situations, but that we humans block our body’s natural process of releasing the sensations and emotions and so develop the symptoms of PTSD.

Instead of discharging the energies of overwhelming experiences through our bodies, we wall them off. Our parts develop beliefs and behaviors in response to them. We go through life driven by our parts’ sense of who we are and what the world is. We reject anything that

doesn’t fit and hold onto that which does. The embodied experience is repressed.

Every part of our body is involved with this repression—our muscles, ligaments, bones, cartilage, organs, blood, lymph—every cell. We tense up so as not to see or feel what we can’t digest. The undigested experience is stored as cellular burdens, which further inhibit our embodiment. Increasingly, the body is unable to perform its genetic function, which is to take in the totality of its experience of reality. We go through life in a more or less disembodied state, missing half the show. We vaguely know we are missing something, and we search for it in all the wrong places.

The good news is that our bodies also hold the key to healing from the trauma and restoring our state of embodied Self. The session below illustrates this.

### **A case example**

Donna came to me when she was exhausted from searching in all the wrong places. Rejected by her birth parents and then abused by her adopted family, as an adult Donna was depressed and trapped in an abusive relationship. Her system included a number of impressively high-functioning parts that kept her wounded parts at bay...for awhile. That’s when she came to me for therapy.

As she enters my office, I notice that her body is tense, her face seems frozen, her eyes are dull. She recounts her history to me as if no one is listening to her. When I inquire about what is happening in her body, she tells me she feels nothing. Our work together is characterized by oscillations between dissociative states and disconnected verbal narratives on the one hand, and flooded feelings on the other. As our relationship develops, the dissociating part gradually steps back and allows her to feel the other protectors in her bodymind. She notices the tension and holding all over her body as she talks about her pain.

One day she feels a slight trembling all over her

body. At first her protective parts are concerned that she might shake into little bits, but I am internally celebrating. I explain to her that the protective parts that had walled off the painful sensations from all the hurts are responding to our attention. As they trust us, they relax their stranglehold on all the stored fear, grief, and anger. These energies that had been shoved down are finally able to be released through the shaking of her body. She allows the trembling to continue until it has run its course. When the trembling slows, a light comes into her eyes, she is sitting relaxed yet upright, and she is smiling.

Donna's experience of embodied Self is similar to what is referred to in Sensorimotor Psychotherapy as "the window of tolerance." She feels her parts lining up on either side of her as she sits in this window—exiles with their fears and worthlessness on one side, protectors that have worked so hard in so many ways to keep her out of her feelings on the other. She tells me that in the past, there had been "no room in the middle." Each side thought the other side was all there was.

Now Donna is in the middle. I delight in seeing her sitting there—smiling, grounded, connected, and calm. She listens compassionately to each part, one at a time. She speaks to them all as a group. I can almost see the parts looking up at her in wonder and trust. They now look to her for guidance, reassurance, comfort, leadership—everything they missed out on and have been trying to get in all their destructive ways.

As Donna more fully inhabits this place in the middle, she is learning she can speak for her parts in her life—not in the disembodied voice of a Self-like

manager, but in an embodied way that includes the flavor of the part she is speaking for. She practices this within our relationship, and the next step is to bring this embodied Self-leadership to her relationship and to her wider world.

Donna's part that had been judgmental of her dissociation came to appreciate that her body knows exactly how to deaden the overwhelming sensations, how to control her breath so she can still live without feeling too much, how to hold on until help and hope arrive. Once the help arrives, her body can spontaneously release everything her parts have held in her tissues and in her cells. Her parts, instead of battling with each other, can rest in embodied Self energy. She can begin to live the powerful, loving, connected life she was born for.

### **Embodied Self is a spiritual state.**

Like Donna, as we move beyond our personal narratives and simply let life be just as it is, we are on a spiritual as well as a psychological journey. Our often labyrinthine journey of body, mind, and spirit toward oneness is an unending series of discoveries and transformations.

The state of embodied Self is a spiritual state, and the five tools of Somatic IFS are also a spiritual practice, connecting us to the Divine. Awareness, breath, movement, resonance, and touch are paths to spirit in many spiritual traditions. Rather than an obstacle to attaining the "higher" spiritual realms, becoming fully embodied is crucial to the spiritual path.