



# Somatic Therapy

PROFILE

*Manuela Mischke is a somatic psychologist and author. She presented a workshop in Sydney organised by STARTTS and spoke to KAREN COLLIER.*

**S**omatic psychotherapy seemed to evolve in relative obscurity over the past few decades alongside other modalities, yet now it's being demystified through evidence-based research. Why do you think that is?

The mindfulness movement has brought with it an interest in learning not only how to work with our mind, but also with our body. You can't really separate mindfulness from the body. As soon as you slow down and tune into yourself, you start feeling sensations and emotions and you begin to feel the body.

There is a body-mind connection that has been there for a long time. That's why people are interested in somatic psychotherapy. We spend more time now being sedentary in front of our devices and we are not so in touch with our bodies, with our earth. Both body and earth go together in my view. When you are in touch with your body, you are in touch with the earth around you, with your surroundings and with every living organism. As a culture we are hungry for connection to the self and to our own bodies. People, especially when they have experienced trauma, are disconnected from their body. That's why mindfulness is so appealing. I think somatic psychology is a holistic model to heal ourselves, to do therapy.

**In your STARTTS workshop you spoke about "somatic intelligence". Can you explain what that is?**

Somatic intelligence refers to this innate capacity to know how to heal oneself, to the innate ability to access knowledge of one's own body, knowledge that comes from sensations. We all have an innate capacity for self-healing. What we have lost is the connection to the innate knowledge of self-healing, or somatic intelligence, because we don't normally tune into our bodies.

This is where mindfulness comes in. When we slow down and begin to open up our awareness, we begin to feel and sense our innate somatic intelligence coming forward, which may manifest through a sensation in the chest, a fluttering in the belly. "Soma" means the body. It's the body language that comes forward. When people go on retreats they have somatic experiences, although they wouldn't usually label it that way.

This terminology was coined by Eugene Gendlin a long time ago [to define] the awareness and knowledge of the body coming forward, the alignment of the body and mind. We all have this capacity. In very important moments of our lives we tap into somatic knowledge, somatic intelligence – the gut feeling – to guide us. Some like to call it intuition.

Somatic intelligence is innate in everybody, and we don't lose it: we just lose the connection to it. When we

experience trauma especially, our activation levels are so low that we lose connection to our somatic intelligence. But if we create conditions of safety, connection and compassion, the person will reconnect with it.

**You've trained with Peter Levine, the pioneer of Somatic Experiencing. What inspired you to explore this path early on your journey?**

I was very lucky to meet Peter when I was a graduate student and he was working with Marianna Ekberg. She had done some work in Latin America with survivors of political torture. She created a rehabilitation centre. We worked with survivors using a holistic model that included an acupuncturist, physiotherapist and us. I realised this was how trauma needed to be healed, because it is all in the body. I began to work with torture survivors and soon realised that talking about their pain wasn't enough to heal. While it was important, it was not enough to hear all the symptoms that they were experiencing, which were flashbacks, states of frozenness, night terrors and the classic symptoms of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. It sounds strange, but I kind of fell in love with the silent language of the body. I felt like I had a toolkit to help these people. I realised I really wanted to work with trauma, as that is where I wanted to make a difference.

**In your work with torture and trauma survivors, you realised as a therapist that trauma cannot be fixed. There's such authenticity in that. How did this realisation come about?**

I was working with a torture survivor from Nicaragua. She experienced somatic symptoms like neck pain and had severe disabilities and restrictions on her body because of the torture. I asked her if there was a childhood memory that was resourceful for her. And she said: "Oh yes, there was a mango tree that I loved sitting under." I said: "Go ahead and let yourself sit under that mango tree and see how that feels to you and your body."

She did so. She calmed down and was very peaceful. She said that under that mango tree, she had become immersed in that moment. She was silent. Then she said: "They could break my bones, but they can't break my spirit." I then realised that she was traumatised, scarred, damaged and in pain, but her spirit was intact.

I also realised there was something deeply spiritual or sacred about even the most gruesome of experiences. The trauma experience gave her a heightened understanding of life. Then I understood that trauma is, in fact, a much bigger and complex phenomenon. This idea that we need to "fix" trauma takes away the valuable insights, growth and sacred experiences that come from it as well. I realised a trauma survivor needs to come into



Left to right: STARTTS Clinical and Research Coordinator, Mariano Coello, Resource and Information Officer, Samira Hassan, Manuela Mischke-Reeds, Clinician Trainer, Moorira Mehraby and DS Counsellor / PO Hazaragi, Rohulla Rahimi Photo: Karen Collier, STARTTS

a relationship with all of those experiences to truly heal.

As therapists I don't think we are there to fix anybody. We need to connect clients back to their somatic intelligence so they can tap into their own inner resources, learn how to calm themselves, use tools that can help, but also come into this deep understanding of why they are here and find their own connection back to faith or spirituality. Often people lose their faith or their spirituality because of the trauma they experienced. If we talk about fixing trauma, we are also taking away all these other insights about life, knowledge and depth. We are not in the business of fixing people, but of helping them connect to their own innate healing and wellbeing so that they can help themselves. That is the most powerful gift we can give to anybody.

**This realisation is a breakthrough in the way we can work with trauma in the future.**

I hope so. I'm not alone in this, a lot of people in the somatic world think that way. When therapists believe they hold all the knowledge required to help somebody with unimaginable trauma, it places them under an enormous burden. But how can they? They are just human beings too and don't have the answers. They may have some tools, some understanding, some research and some knowledge; that is all. It is too much [to expect] a therapist can fix someone. I don't think that's a good model of health and wellbeing.

**We might be on the verge of a paradigm shift in this regard?**

I think that is happening. A lot of people are realising that the traditional model is exhausting. That's why burnout and vicarious trauma is so common.

**Absolutely, we are experiencing a period where trauma is collective and all-pervasive – the influence of the media, global crises, natural disasters and the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Fear and uncertainty is assaulting our nervous systems, particularly in the most vulnerable groups we work with. What is happening in the mind and body when we are traumatised? You describe it as a “disruption of the organismic self”.**

With trauma, we lose the connection to our somatic intelligence because our survival mechanisms are wired for protection and connection. We want to be safe and survive first, so when we are under threat or when we experience trauma, our survival mechanisms are brought into the foreground. We want to flee, we want to fight, we want to freeze, we want to appease. We also focus on the relationships that are perpetrating against us so that we don't get hurt. It takes up a lot of our survival mechanisms. I'm connected with one part of my innate intelligence, which is I'm learning how to survive. That is also part of my innate wisdom. It is coupled with a lot of fear and anxiety and it potentially overwhelms and

dissociates me and so on. In those circumstances I don't have access any more to the more creative aspects of myself.

What I mean by "organismic self" is the somatic intelligence, like when you feel yourself, when you consult your own body for answers, when you are quiet and tap into your own inner resources and information. When you are stressed and anxious you react, you don't respond. Responding means you are considering: you are having a thoughtful reciprocity to whatever you are engaging with. But when you are in the fight, flight, fright, freeze mode you just react, you are not in touch with yourself and you usually make pretty bad decisions based on basic survival [instincts]. You also misread the cues of your environment. You move further and further into a disconnection with yourself, with others and with the world around you, then you see the world as a hostile place. That is what I mean by the disruption of the organismic self. You're not in tune with yourself any more, you are just in survival mode.

**In your work with fire-fighters in the US you described a trauma-informed technique you use, the process of "unlinking". How does this technique help treat PTSD, particularly in working with first responders?**

First responders build up anxiety and stress responses and need trauma-informed therapy. While first responders are really capable, creative and resourceful people with good hearts, they are also human beings and have limits. They need to learn techniques to release stress responses and access trauma-informed therapy, which in my view includes the body and mindfulness.

I presented a mental health awareness workshop to about 300 firefighters in Silicon Valley that included mindfulness techniques, somatic awareness and resourcing. I explained what they needed to do while on call and between calls. I taught them unlinking techniques [where] they have a moment of reflection to unlink from the tragedy they have witnessed or the people they had just served, especially if they witness a traumatic event or death. Then I asked them to slow down, breathe and say to themselves: "Your suffering is not my suffering; your emergency is not my emergency, your death is not my death. Thank you for letting me serve you in my role and I am unlinking from you now." Then I introduced an activity designed to help let go.

This is most useful because that moment of conscious awareness and conscious transition is huge, as it enables them to bring down their arousal levels and come back to their body rather than being constantly in that reacting emergency response. That is practising resilience.

Some mental health professionals working with first responders burn out easily because the events they experience are so intense. One person told me: "My

therapist got up and said, 'I can't deal with this any more' and walked out on him." The therapist may not have been trauma-informed and was not taking care of his or her own nervous system. Therapists must be trauma-informed to work effectively with first responders.

**You have spoken openly about your own burnout cycles. Did you also find that vicarious traumatisation was something that you were never taught?**

It has not been taught. Even if they talk about self-care, they talk about it after you have seen the client. Back when I was trained, nobody even said what self-care was. At the time nobody was giving therapists the necessary tools. Now we talk about being trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive. When you are on the front line of human suffering you underestimate the contagion aspect of trauma and anxiety. We are wired to inform each other from one organism to another when there is a danger and the way we do that is through fear and anxiety. So when somebody in our group and our herd gets anxious, we all feel it and it resonate with us. When we are around people who have unprocessed trauma, as therapists we activate our own nervous system all the time when we respond to it. So our body feels it and suddenly we are tired or feel anxious at the end of the day, we are no longer tuned in enough in that moment.

I went through many burnout cycles. I was lucky that I had the somatic tools and meditation practice to restore myself, and it was really through my own burnout cycles that I started to experiment with mindfulness, movement and breathing practices. I started to put myself back together and help other health professionals as well. Continual movement helped me the most. By doing these practices you get stronger, then you connect yourself with the deep resources of earth and spirituality and your own connection with life. It becomes a very unshakeable connection. That is exactly how I feel it. It makes you strong. If you don't do these practices, you burn out.

**I read that you felt "the darkness of humanity" descending upon you at that time. How did you overcome that?**

This is when it became very dark, I learned what political torture meant, that some human beings were inflicting unimaginable suffering on others. I lost faith in humans and I lost the connection to my own body. I felt frozen and became fearful. The teachings of the Dharma helped me. The first noble truths, the part that says "human life is suffering". I started to contemplate it. At the time, I was exposed to some Buddhist teachers. That was helpful to me. Also just doing the movements where I began to breathe, slow down and tense my body and I felt a connection with myself again. I had to rebuild that kind

of trust in my own organism, the somatic intelligence we were talking about earlier.

I did mindfulness and movement practice. I immersed myself in spiritual teachings to understand the larger connection of how trauma fits into human life. Then I was inspired by my clients. If a client can sit across from me and say “they can break my bones, but not my spirit”, that was a turning point for me because I realised, “wow, if this person can survive that, then I can go through this darkness too”.

### **That motivation really honours resilience doesn't it?**

You go through one of those dark cycles and you come out more resilient, gain more skills and more understanding. Then I began to accept that trauma was very much part of life. I needed to fully embrace it, because I think when one starts as a young health professional, we feel we need to get rid of trauma. We need to fix it. No, we can't because it is very much interwoven into human life. There is suffering and there is non-suffering and they are completely interwoven with each other and we need to completely embrace it. I think that realisation helped me a lot and it was a deep acceptance. I am still helping to heal the trauma. It is very much part of my mission in life, but I am also accepting that it is there.

### **Could you tell us about the Hakomi method you practise and teach?**

Hakomi is a mindfulness-based somatic psychotherapy based on principles such as a body-mind holism, non-violence, organicist, mindfulness. It looks at how the person is organising their world, their reality on all levels of experience, how they put their thinking together and how they experience their body and emotions, then what they believe about themselves, the world and how they relate to it. Then we look at what limiting beliefs a person has about themselves or the world. An example is when someone says “I'm not safe in the world” or “I can't be loved for who I am”. That's the belief system. We look at belief systems through experiential work ... we call it the unfolding process. It is an inquiry into the present-moment experience done in mindfulness.

### **You have had 25 years' experience working with people from different cultural backgrounds. Is the Western model and worldview in relation to healing applicable across cultures?**

The body is a cross-cultural experience. We all have a body. That's helped me work with cultures where there was a language barrier, because the language of movement and body is universal because there is a nonverbal language. But I do think we have to be mindful about importing

our Western ideas to certain cultures. Sometimes we impose ideas of health and healing onto cultures that might not be appropriate because they experience healing in a different way. They have to go through ritual – for example, in East Africa healing takes place through dance and song. And if you take a chair and I sit down and say: “tell me what you think, what you feel”, they would say: “What? This is not the context in which I experience spirit health or healing.” That is a very Western idea, sitting down in a room and closing the door. Sometimes trauma needs to be healed in community, not just through the one-on-one Western model.

### **It is also about connection, isn't it?**

It is totally about connection, absolutely. And connection is what heals. It is about warmth. It is about the rhythm of connection. It is about the body.

### **Your presentation at STARTTS underscored concerning statistics about the prevalence of anxiety in the global population. What is prolonged stress doing to our nervous systems, the way we live our lives today? And how can non-clinicians also apply somatic practices in their daily lives to deal with this stress epidemic?**

First is the recognition that this is what we are facing. Then there is the option of participating or not in this kind of stress culture. We all have a choice not to, a conscious choice. Now, there is also an addiction, because we get a dopamine hit when we check our social media and so on. In moderation, that is fine, it makes us feel connected, but studies show that if we are on social media too long it has an adverse effect. It depresses us and makes us more anxious. The issue is not if we should or shouldn't be on social media, but it is in the context of understanding the stress it can cause. Not all stress is bad, but we need to learn to begin to treat our body like the earth. We are rough on our bodies. We begin to respect it when we ask simple question: what do I need? What do I sense? We can all do it, we don't always need an expensive gym membership class. Everybody can lie on the floor and feel their breath. Everybody can take a moment. I have heard clients say that they can't meditate, but they can take a time-out moment sitting in the sunshine. It is about recognising that we live in stressful, over-informed times, though we are treating it as if we had no choice: but we do have choices.

### **What was your experience like, studying at the Naropa University [in Boulder, Colorado] at the time Tibetan Buddhism was being exported to the West after Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, fled Tibet into exile? What kind of foundation did that training give you?**

*When you are in touch with your body, you are in touch with the earth around you, with your surroundings and with every living organism.*

I have been so lucky. I was very young, 25, when I went to Naropa University. It gave me every foundation in my life. I had also studied movement, dance and knew there was a deep connection with the body through movement. Mindfulness was the next logical exploration. I was very interested in the inner life, I knew that it was giving me something that I couldn't get from the outside, so I needed to go inside of myself.

My training [at Naropa] was rooted not just in meditation practice, but also on the contemplative outlook of life. It was also about considering choices and having a reflective and contemplative mind. I think that was so critical, as was the inquiry into experience itself, why am I here, how am I experiencing it? Those kinds of questions were just priceless, and that is where retreats come in now, where people are so hungry for retreat time. That's why people like studying mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn and Jack [Kornfield] made it very popular. People want peace and quiet, and a path back to themselves, they want to understand how they can come back to themselves. We recognise that we are all stressed. There is a collective recognition the way we are going is not good, but a lot of people just don't know how to get back.

**Unlike then, there's now evidence-based research into the therapeutic benefits of contemplative practices.**

Yes, it is wonderful that we have that evidence and all the effective neuroscience. The Tibetans have had this evidence for a very long time, too. They have very detailed maps and practices [a spiritual technology]. For Tibetans, the meditation practice is medicine and every Indigenous culture has some similar practice. Dance is the same. Our Western minds have not valued them. It comes back to [European] colonisation and the rejection of deep wisdoms of health and healing, which we are now beginning to recognise. Psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy draws on indigenous wisdom.

**From your perspective, what are the key differences between Western psychology and Buddhist psychology?**

Western psychology concerns itself more with the mind and Buddhist psychology looks much more at the interconnection of mind, body and experience, with a focus on present moment experience. Western psychology concerns itself a lot with the past; Buddhist psychology references the past, but is concerned with the present. How do I live now and what choices am I making? Of course, the past informs the present and the future, but change happens in the present. Buddhist psychology points us to a kind of wisdom that we can discover in the present moment. But I also think the marriage of Western and Buddhist psychology is very powerful, we can take the best of both worlds. There have been a lot of advances in Western psychology that we should not negate.

**Somatic psychotherapy may be the future of healing the entire person, or organism, in the treatment of trauma and stress disorders. What do you see in the next few decades?**

What I really would love to see, especially for the treatment of trauma and stress disorders, is a multimodal approach that we learn from all of these approaches – from neuroscience, Western psychology and research, but also from Indigenous wisdom and somatic psychotherapy. I really hope we can open up not just the conversation, but also embrace this deep understanding of all those modalities. Human beings are complex, we are multidimensional, so trauma is also a complex disorder. We need to have a multimodal and also an inclusive approach not just the whole person, but also the cultural person.

I don't think there is one approach that treats trauma. I'm sometimes dismayed when I hear people saying, "I have the one method for trauma treatment". The search for good trauma treatment means we all have to bring our wisdom together. That's what I hope, because somatic psychotherapy tries to do that in a small way. I think trauma can be treated with somatic psychotherapy, because it holds the piece of the body.

**What would your advice be to psychology students today?**

Learn through the body, don't just learn through books. Be informed, do research, learn many methodologies. Don't be just faithful to one, but learn through your own experience and trust your own experience. Learn through your own body. That is huge, and it's not done enough. ॠ

