



Being Fit for Complexity

How our somatic awareness can help in these complex times

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In an era when we spend so much of our time looking at screens on our devices, we can forget that we have a body until we remember that we need to do something to take care of it. Then we walk, run, ride and take notice of what we are eating or feel guilty that we are not doing any of those things until finally we go back to thinking about job or our family and working out how to problem solve for the latest challenge that we face, and our body recedes into the background of our awareness again.

This is the kind of somatic awareness we all have, and it's called interoception. Most of us notice that we are tired, hungry, thirsty, restless or anxious, and we try to alleviate that discomfort. We notice that some things feel really good in our bodies, and we try to maximise those. We interact with our somatic awareness to increase pleasure and avoid or decrease pain. Our bodies are constantly in communication with our brains to regulate and motivate. (Guyenet, 2019) We also use interoception to track our movements and spatial orientation, and we constantly use exteroception to perceive sights, smells, sounds, tastes and touch sensations. We all have some level of somatic awareness.

We are less aware of the neuroception that is constantly happening within us that tracks the ways our autonomic nervous system responds to cues of safety, danger and life threat from within our bodies, in the world around us, and in our connection to others. (Dana, 2018) This system that evolved when our environments were much simpler and the threats much clearer are also fine-tuned during our early years with our care givers and the people around us. These systems helped us to develop a sense of who we are and who we are not. Now that the world we live and work in has increased in its complexity, this system can be on overdrive, constantly scanning to assess whether we are safe and whether we belong.

By becoming increasingly tuned into these systems and learning how to interact with them more consciously, we can become more fit for the complexity we live in, and this can have many benefits. Improving our somatic awareness can help us decrease the stress we experience by living our complex lives, and it can also help us transform ourselves, to unfreeze in our most stubborn self-limitations, and to be an active part of our own ongoing development.

When I was in my early thirties, I had 3 small children and a busy partner on a fast career trajectory whose career required us to move towns and cities regularly. I was studying psychology while working for a not-for-profit and feeling increasingly burnt out. I didn't know how to renegotiate my life because I was too busy just living it. It is hardly surprising that I felt depleted and it was my body that screamed at me loud enough that I started to take notice and took some time out to move back towards wellness. That journey introduced me to many somatic modalities including applied kinesiology, energy psychology, Reiki, Focusing, and meditation of many kinds. I also started to learn about the way trauma lives in our bodies and how our bodies can help us heal it. I love science and the scientific method, and many of these modalities that I was exploring were outside the science and neuroscience that I was learning about in my psychology degrees. And yet they seemed to offer a way into understanding myself and others that many medical and therapeutic methods didn't offer.

Becoming more somatically aware also helped in my parenting role. As my eldest son explored how to push past every boundary that we set, I started to feel the inadequacies of my parenting toolkit until I added some somatic moves to it. I started to ground and centre myself when he challenged my authority, I started to fully inhabit and be present in my body to let him know somatically that I meant what I said and that I also loved him. This combination of presence and positive regard had an instant positive effect on his behaviour, and this encouraged me to explore this somatic awareness further. I was also becoming well and finding more purpose in all of my roles.

I started paying attention to what my body was feeling in different situations. When did my body tighten up and want to run, when did it get butterflies of joy, and when did it shut down in an attempt to keep others out? When was what was happening in my body and energy congruent with my thoughts and when was it not? During this time, my sense of self was also changing. I was no longer orienting outwards to significant people and belief systems in my life to decide what to do and how to view myself. I was starting to be the driver in my life, looking to myself first for wisdom before checking in with other sources. I didn't know it then, but I was developing what Jennifer Garvey Berger calls Self-Authorship. (Berger, 2013). I went from feeling constantly ungrounded to regularly feeling like I had a centre of gravity and an energy source within my lower abdomen that could energise and guide me. I started to know what a "deep yes" felt like, what "a definite no" felt like and what an "I don't know" felt like in my whole self.

It wasn't all smooth sailing of course, development rarely is. Pockets of somatic awareness remained hidden, often relating to challenges from childhood or from current relationships or challenges that weren't quite ready to lose their power. This journey of wholeheartedness (Brown, 2010) continues, and one thing I know for sure is that it would have been a far tougher journey if I had relied only on my thinking or even my emotions to get me to here. Recently I had a tough decision to make. I had been on the leadership team of Cultivating Leadership for three years, enjoying how we were exploring ways that acknowledged and worked with complexity while also scaling the organisation. I knew that I needed to adjust my ever-increasing workload to make more room for healthy practices and for my work passions, and I wasn't sure how to do that. I decided to look for a somatic

“deep yes” to guide me in the options that I was considering. The one that sat most comfortably in my body was the option of giving six months’ notice to leave the leadership team and to explore what leadership felt like in other areas of our ecosystem and I am happy to report that this decision is working out well so far.

Neuroscience is providing us with continuous discoveries about how the body and the brain are inexorably linked, and this ever-increasing knowledge is expanding its influence into many areas of our lives. Amanda Blake outlines these discoveries and what they mean for improving leadership in her articles (2009) and book (2018). Daniel Siegel (2009) explores what they mean for psychotherapy and medicine. But what does all of this have to do with being fit for complexity?

The way we think of complexity aligns with the way we think of complex ecosystems where the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. A fancy car is very complicated, but you can take it apart, and if that is your expertise you can understand how it works and put it back together again. A rainforest, on the other hand, is complex and while experts may be able to understand particular species within that rainforest, it still needs to be viewed as a whole interwoven system in order for it to be really understood. Humans and the way we interact within ourselves and with each other are more like rainforests. There are so many interrelated aspects that we need to be respectful of the whole and watchful for the patterns that emerge that are greater than the sum of the parts.

Outer complexity refers to all the complex interrelated dynamics influencing a situation or challenge that we are involved in. Our inner complexity refers to the many different systems that interact within a human to make us uniquely us. Of course, these also interact with each other, and one of the ways we become aware of this interaction is through our soma. Many of the ways our bodies and nervous systems react to complex challenges happens outside our awareness. We walk into a room full of people and within a fraction of a second, we are sensing and evaluating whether we are safe, whether we belong and where we are in the hierarchy. This often all happens without our conscious awareness, and it happens in our whole selves in the conditioned sub systems of our psychobiology and in our identity - i.e. the system of self that we imagine ourselves to be, which is constructed and defended by our somatic selves (Silsbee, 2018). Increasing our somatic awareness not only helps us to become mindful of these sub-conscious patterns, it also gives us more ways to nudge the system of us and the systems we are part of in order to be and act in complexity friendly ways and move towards the changes we want to be a part of.

Practical ways that we can increase our somatic awareness (Coughlin, 2019 & Silsbee, 2018):

- We can tune into our internal experiences and stay present with them to see what we can learn
- We can start to recognise the signals that inform us that we are defending an identity in unhelpful ways
- We can learn to regulate our inner state and have a balcony view of our identities in order to make choices on how we let the outer or inner complexity influence us
- We can gain information on what matters to us and learn to embody it fully and start moving in the direction of these relationships and roles.

- We can experiment with ourselves and with others to learn what moves the system within us or the systems we are in towards the changes we want to see.

When we harness our somatic awareness and work with it, we add a powerful tool to our life and leadership toolkit, and complexity becomes something to live in flow with rather than something to swim upstream against.

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