

Ep #276: Embodiment (Part 1)



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With Your Host

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Welcome to *Feminist Wellness*. I'm Maria Victoria Albina, a master certified somatic life coach and functional medicine nurse practitioner. Together we'll regulate our nervous systems, learn how to live in our bodies and not just from the neck up, and nurture our perfect inner children using science and woo to help you understand the painful patterns in your life through a new and more loving lens.

Together we can make codependent, perfectious, and people-pleasing thinking a thing of the past. Join me in reclaiming your worth and embracing a life full of joy and fulfillment.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. I have been studying and working with the nervous system and somatics for over 20 years, which don't get me started on how wild it is that I've been doing anything for 20 years. But it's been like 20 years since I first threw myself across that dance floor at Oberlin College and learned about this mind-body connection in this really profoundly physical way.

In those 20 years, as I've been teaching my patients and my clients all about their nervous system and somatics, embodiment is a key concept that we keep coming back to. While it also gets thrown around an awful lot these days in these hashtag ways without grounding it in any way. So today we're going to talk all about embodiment. We're going to define it, investigate it.

And if you're an old hat to this and you're like, next, don't tune that dial to another channel quite yet. There'll be plenty for you to learn if you stick around, I promise.

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So what is embodiment? It's how we live in and experience our bodies, shaping our interactions with the world. It's about feeling bodily sensations and movements, integrating mind and body into a unified whole. This connection brings together the physiological, psychological and social aspects of our lives.

Embodiment reminds us that our bodies are not just objects in the world, but a vital source of our knowledge and wisdom and perception. And our bodily experiences are fundamental to how we see and understand the world.

In short, it means being present in your body, watching yourself and your body be. It's being at home in you, not just living from the neck up. And not obsessing over every internal sensation with a grasping energy, but rather being present to our whole self, body, mind, spirit, without attaching to it all overly. It's nuanced, for sure. And the more we practice it and sit with ourselves, the more it makes sense.

So you might be saying, okay, that's cool. Why would I want to be embodied? Well, because life is way more fun when you're present in your body. It's so amazing to have a body. To go all former hospice nurse on it, so many people I've loved no longer have bodies. And so I want to spend my time on this planet having a body and being really at home in it, being present in it in a real and powerful way in my own presence.

Embodiment also allows for choicefulness. When I am present in my body, I'm aware of all the small signals that tell me something is off. That could be signals of actual danger, lion's coming, or something not being right that I actually need to attend to. Or it can be the whispers from the past that I also need to attend to before they F things up in the here and now, here and now.

That is, when I am present and aware in my body, embodied in my life in this moment, I can feel the telltale signs that I'm getting 1 out of 10

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annoyed, irritated, angry, or that I'm checking out or disconnecting. Then I can decide to take control of the moment in the moment. I can choose how I want to respond to life, instead of letting my nervous system take over, leading me into reactivity, which is my nervous system's job. Choicefulness is the greatest gift of embodiment, and I am so grateful for it. And I cultivate it on the daily.

By staying attuned to our bodily experiences, we can enhance our self-awareness, improve our relationships and engage with the world more authentically. Our amazing bodies have all these incredible ways of telling us what's up through a sophisticated network of sensory receptors and nerve pathways that communicate back and forth with the brain, creating a continuous feedback loop that informs our sense of presence and our physical state.

This system includes proprioception, the sense of body position, and interoception, the sense of internal bodily states; hungry, ouchy, temperature, muscle tension. And these are both crucial for maintaining balance, coordination, and overall bodily awareness.

And this is why I'm always on about listening to your body's biological impulses, that I have to pee, I'm too hot, I'm getting antsy, because they are vital signs from within that can help us not only to know what's up, but to feel and be safer and more grounded in the world and ourselves. This system not only allows us to move and react to the environment, but plays a huge role in shaping our sense of self.

Our embodied experiences lay the groundwork for our identity, weaving together sensory information and bodily signals into a coherent sense of who we are. The concept of self isn't just something we think about, it's rooted in our bodily experiences. When you feel your feet on the ground, your brain updates your position and balance, giving you a grounded sense of presence and connection through Mother Earth or Pachamama.

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The spatial orientation helps define the boundaries of our physical self in the world, contributing to our understanding of personal space and spatial needs and physical existence. I am me and I am here, along with interconnectedness, which opens a pathway to felt interdependence. We are here together.

Interoceptive signals like a fluttering in your tummy or a tightness in your chest offer real-time feedback about your internal emotional landscape. These bodily sensations are inseparable from our emotional experiences, informing our self-awareness and our emotional experience and emotional identity. Come on, who amongst us hasn't said, oh, I'm just an angry person? Oh, I'm just an irritable person. I'm just a happy person.

Also, for example, feeling a racing heart when we're anxious or a warm sensation when we're content connects our physiological state with our emotional state, shaping our perception of who we are in that moment. When we feel attacked or questioned, we might feel small or constricted in our bodies. And when we set a boundary and stick to it, we might feel more solid, grounded, expansive.

We're able to see how our thoughts and feelings line up with what our body is doing, remembering that our thoughts and feelings are not separate from our bodily experiences. They're deeply interconnected.

Embodiment is such a key part of who we are that we often use body-based metaphors to understand abstract concepts. For example, when we say we grasp an idea, we're likening understanding to physically holding something in our hands. Similarly, when we talk about feeling down, we're using a physical sensation of heaviness to describe sadness.

Embodiment is profoundly shaped by social and cultural contexts. Our bodies are not just biological entities, they are social bodies that exist within specific cultural narratives and societal structures that influence how we

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perceive and treat our bodies, how we move and interact, how we relate to self and others.

The intersection of embodiment with social constructs like gender, race, ability and socioeconomic status reveal the deeply political nature of our bodily experiences. Societal norms and expectations around gender and sex, for instance, impose rigid standards on how bodies should look, move, behave, who gets pleasure and in what ways.

These gendered norms are often deeply entrenched in patriarchal systems that promote and celebrate certain body types and demean others, perpetuating power imbalances and marginalizing those who don't conform, as well as dictating who gets to have which emotion and who don't, AKA boys don't cry. Patriarchy hurts us all.

The legacy of white supremacy and colonialism manifests in how melanated or racialized bodies and the humans living in them are perceived and treated. People of color often face hyper surveillance, discrimination and violence, all of which profoundly affect their sense of embodiment. And BIPOC bodies are often exoticized or erased within dominant cultural narratives, leading to a disconnection from their ancestral practices and embodied wisdom.

Ability is another critical access along which embodiment is politicized. Ableist structures and attitudes marginalize disabled bodies, dictating what is considered normal and acceptable. These structures create environments that are often inaccessible, both physically and socially, thereby excluding disabled people from full participation in society.

The pervasive notion that a body must be productive and autonomous to be valued overlooks the diverse ways bodies can exist and thrive and strengthens all of our painful, perfectionist stories about how we need to be to be valid, valuable, important, connected and cherished.

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By acknowledging and critically examining these political dimensions of embodiment, we can better understand the complex ways our bodies are situated within broader social systems. This awareness invites us to challenge oppressive structures and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of embodiment that honors the diverse ways people experience and inhabit their bodies.

Embracing this perspective is a radical act of reclaiming our embodied selves from the confines of societal expectations and affirming our inherent worth and dignity. Somatic practices are an important way to reconnect with our embodiment, focusing on enhancing body awareness and integrating this awareness into daily life, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to bodily sensation and movement to foster healing, self-awareness and personal growth.

Somatic practices also have the potential to foster collective embodiment and contribute to social change. As we engage in practices that enhance our bodily awareness and connection, we can develop a deeper sense of empathy and solidarity with others, which can be a powerful source for social justice as it encourages communities to come together in shared practices of healing and resistance.

By grounding social movements in embodied practice, activists can sustain our efforts and build more resilient and interconnected communities. And while modern somatic practices and movement, like what I teach, can be really helpful and life-changing, we need to give credit where it is rightly due, which is, of course, to indigeneity and cultures based in embodiment practice like dance, movement, breath and meditation.

The colonization and globalization processes have disrupted these practices, leading to a disconnection from embodied cultural heritage. By integrating somatic practice with traditional practices, communities can reclaim their embodied wisdom and strengthen their cultural identity.

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As a primary care NP, I know just how much the Western medical system treats our bodies like they're a machine to be fixed. Somatic practices challenge that really painful, disruptive medical model, instead promoting a view of the body as an integral part of the self that holds wisdom and potential for healing.

This perspective invites a more holistic approach to healthcare that recognizes the interconnectedness of physical, emotional and psychological well-being and is so needed in our medical system.

I'm always going on about nervous system education and how wildly important it is. And that is because our nervous systems play a pivotal role in embodiment, serving as the primary interface through which we negotiate our interactions with the world, especially through the autonomic nervous system, which includes sympathetic, fight or flight, and parasympathetic, rest and digest, within which live ventral, vagal and dorsal.

And understanding that this is fundamental in regulating our bodily states in response to both external and internal stimuli helps us to understand ourselves. A deeper understanding of how the nervous system operates not only illuminates our capacity for embodiment, but also connects profoundly to our psychological and emotional health. Cue the more you know, right?

So let me back it up and say that the main reason I love nervous system education is because it helps us to step out of our painful old stories that tell us that we are broken, that something is wrong with us, that we need fixed when we have big reactions to life.

Remembering that those reactions come from a nervous system that thinks we're two years old, five years old, 10 years old, that is living in the past and is reacting now, all of that is super helpful for me and my clients and helps me to bring in more compassion, curiosity and care, not just about my own knee-jerk reactions to life, but about other people's too. It helps me

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to give others the grace, which is a vital part of community-based living and interdependence.

And so when I can remember, oh, it's my nervous system, I can pause. I can investigate my neuroception. I can regulate my nervous system and can step into that choicefulness so I can respond instead of just react.

Zooming out, like we do here, reminds us we don't all neurocept the same way. Neuroception is a term introduced by Dr. Stephen Porges PhD as part of his polyvagal theory, and it refers to the nervous system's ability to detect cues of safety, danger and life threat in our environment without conscious awareness.

For individuals, and more so communities, continually exposed to social and environmental stressors such as racial or gender discrimination, poverty, violence, growing up in families dominated by emotional outsourcing, codependent perfectionist and people pleasing habits, the nervous system's threshold for perceiving threat and alerting, saying that's scary, that's dangerous, may be lower, leading to a chronic state of fight or flight response. AKA if you're a woman who's used to getting catcalled, you walk around cities on higher alert than some dude might.

So too, anyone with a history of trauma can spot scary feeling things or things we believe to be scary so much more often much quicker than folks without that trauma. When I remember all of that, it helps me to be kinder to myself and the people around me and reminds me that true healing involves not only individual healing practices, but also comprehensive changes in social conditions that perpetuate community level stressors.

Advocating for environments that enhance safety and social connection can help shift collective neuroceptive responses, promoting healing and resilience on a larger scale, underscoring the need for policies and practices that foster safety, dignity and belonging for all. None of us are free until all of us are free, right? Right.

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Finally, and shifting a little bit from all that heavy as we close out, play is a fundamental aspect of embodiment that often gets overlooked in adulthood. Engaging in playful activities is crucial for maintaining a vibrant and healthy connection to our bodies, whether through sports, dance, creative arts, or just being a silly little goose with your pets or people you love or strangers at the park.

Play allows us to explore and express ourselves physically, offering a deeper sense of embodiment and the release of pent up stress and tension within the body. Studies show it's hard to think mean thoughts about yourself when you're dancing to Gloria Estefan, playing tag or making sandcastles. But seriously, play can release pent up tension and promotes the release of endorphins, which are our body's natural stress relievers.

This physical relief is not just beneficial for our bodies, but also our minds and helps to clear mental clutter and promote a sense of relaxation and well-being and helps us to be the partners, parents, children, lovers, workers, friends we want to be in the world. Play also enhances creativity. When we play, we enter a state of flow where time seems to disappear and we become fully immersed in the activity at hand.

The state of flow is fertile ground for creative ideas and solutions to emerge. And this was known in indigeneity, where dance is a vital part of ritual and ceremony. For example, a way to do this in your day to day life is to play with art supplies without a specific goal. That can lead to unexpected and beautiful creations as the mind is free to explore without the constraints of structured thinking.

Same with unstructured movement and free dance, which I do with all of my groups every single week because it's that important. This creative freedom can spill over into other areas of life, enhancing problem solving skills and innovative thinking. It's why Silicon Valley, like there's Legos everywhere at all of the tech firms, right? Right.

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It reminds us of the joy of being alive and the pleasure of moving our bodies without a specific purpose other than to have fun, which is liberatory in and of itself. They help us to reconnect with our inner children who instinctively know the importance of play for overall well-being.

Importantly, play is not just about individual benefits. It also strengthens social bonds, whether it's a friendly game of soccer, a collaborative dance session like we do at Anchored on the Somatic Studio or a group art project, it helps afford connection and foster a sense of community.

In essence, play is a powerful tool for cultivating embodiment. It encourages us to be present in our bodies, to explore our physical capacities and capabilities and to express ourselves freely. By making time for play, and it can be two minutes a day, we can enhance our physical health, mental well-being and overall sense of joy and connection in life.

Embodiment is a multifaceted concept that integrates psychological, physiological and social dimensions. It's about the way we inhabit and experience our bodies, how our physical presence shapes our interactions with the world and how our bodily experiences influence our thoughts, emotions and identity.

From the way sensory inputs and bodily signals create a feedback loop, informing our sense of self to the profound impact of social and cultural narratives on our embodied experiences, understanding embodiment requires a holistic perspective. Recognizing the historical and cultural context that have shaped our current understanding of embodiment, particularly the influence of mind-body dualism, colonialist narratives, is essential or we're just looking at less than half the story.

By reclaiming and integrating these diverse perspectives, we can move towards a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of what it means to be embodied.

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I love talking about embodiment because it's truly the most life-changing thing in my practice. Reconnecting me with a sense of choicefulness in my body, reminding me that I don't have to be subject to the whims of my nervous system and old traumas. Instead, I can gently scan my body, know what's up and can make choices instead of throwing dishes or saying mean words to myself or others.

I can pause, breathe and can decide instead of feeling like a reaction machine all of the time, which I absolutely have felt like in the past. In the next part, we'll delve deeper into how emotional outsourcing, codependent perfectionist and people-pleasing habits impacts our connection to embodiment. We'll explore practical ways to reconnect with our bodies, fostering greater self-awareness, emotional regulation and overall well-being.

Stay tuned for more insights and actionable steps to enhance your embodied experience, and I'll say your overall experience of being a living human on the planet.

Thank you so much for joining me. I love nerding out about all of this with you and I love having you here with me. If you're curious about how you can work with me, check out the Somatic Studio, my 12-week Somatic Nervous System Education Program. It is such a blast. Don't worry, of course we dance. You can learn more at VictoriaAlbina.com/TSS The Somatic Studio. Can't wait to see you there.

All right, my love, let's do what we do. A gentle hand on your heart, should you feel so moved. And remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world.

Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Feminist Wellness. If you want to learn more all about somatics, what the heck that word means and why it

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matters for your life, head on over to VictoriaAlbina.com/somaticswebinar for a free webinar all about it.

Have a beautiful day, my darling, and I'll see you next week. Ciao.