

UNDERSTANDING SENSORY MOTOR AMNESIA: A Combination of Focusing and Touch

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Thomas Hanna, philosopher and protégé of Moshe Feldenkrais, is the originator of the concept of Somatics, which has been incorporated into hands-on therapy as well as the verbal interactive therapies. He used a concept called “Sensory Motor Amnesia” to refer to the lost abilities to articulate physically because the client has lost the ability to feel into certain parts of his/her body. In my work with touch and verbal interaction I have found that what we call a lack of felt-sense in Focusing is directly related to the absence of somatic awareness in the body. We can approach this lack of awareness from two directions: We can work verbally with the client, using the steps of Focusing while not touching the client’s body. Or we can ask the client to notice which parts of the body does he or she notices are triggered as he/she works on a particular issue. We can then ask if it is OK to bring our hands or the client’s hands into contact with those parts of the body.

The next steps would involve drawing the client into more somatic (“I am aware that I am feeling that part and touching or being touched in that part of my body”) awareness. We can then have the client notice any physical sensations that he/she is aware of and report those to the practitioner. Next, we determine if she/he can discern those physical sensations. If not, we can start to have the client use proprioceptive tools to interact with the hands: for example, “Breathe into both hands, filling those hands with your in-breath, emptying those hands with the out-breath; now just breathe into one hand, then switch.” Then the client or the practitioner can report what the hands and body feel in response. There are whole lists of proprioceptive interactions that involve the mind of the client directly in bringing consciousness into that part of the body and increasing the client’s felt-sense to the fore. These interactions involve both the touch receptors on the surface and inside of the body (interoception). As the client becomes more articulate with his/her somatic awareness, she/he becomes more articulate with words, and hence able to participate directly with felt-sense.

What is amazing in this process is that the companion or practitioner, as it were, can actually feel the contact of the client’s proprioceptive interactions as well as the client’s growing ability with felt-sense and verbal description. Just as we mirror the client’s words in Focusing, we can also in-parallel, mirror the client’s somatic interactions with our hands and our words! We can affirm that we can feel the client’s direct engagement with our hands (or their own) because there is a warming and softening of the tissue as well as a flow of energy back and forth. Also amazing, is that as the client approaches insight or a felt-shift, both we (the practitioners) and the client can feel that change in tissue and perception approaching. We can feel it because the tissue in the body is accompanying the mental and physical changes.

This approach incorporates some of Hanna’s interactive steps that he would take with clients to revive their feeling awareness as well as their growing ability to relieve their

physical limitations and their “somatic amnesia”. What is different in this approach is that the client becomes more of an equal participant, both in feeling and interacting with his/her body. And by using proprioceptive sensing, the client is directly using his/her mind to feel with proprioception, rather than being mentally absorbed by a preconceived agenda.

For purposes of this article I will be using data from work with three clients, all of whom are dealing with paralysis of their lower body caused by spinal cord injuries. Each of the clients is different in respect to how much pain they feel, how much they can move parts of their lower bodies, the kind of treatment they have received, and their prognosis for recovery of motor function. Hanna believed that as sensory awareness is restored, motor function would follow. So far the results we are experiencing with those clients support Hanna’s hypothesis. Even if the combination of Focusing and touch only changes the client’s sense of direct interaction with paralyzed tissue, this would be a huge step forward away from using pain medication and TENS units to scramble pain messages.

Some examples:

Keiji is a 52-year-old male, who suffered a spinal injury at 16 years old when he fell out of a tree. His T12-S-1 was fractured and his left hip was crushed. He gradually taught himself to walk with crutches on fully inverted ankles. Keiji cannot use his motor nerves, but he has interoceptive awareness through his sensory nerves. And he has learned to use his sensory nerves to interact with my hands. For instance, he can breathe into any place in his lower body and create an interaction with my hands and those of my students. He can kick both of his legs, and he can move his feet in any direction. If I touch the tip of one of his toes, he can flick my finger with his toe. I taught his wife to work with him in a variety of ways. He has learned to reduce or eliminate pain by using interactive breathing into the pain, a pain-relief process that can be used by each of the other clients.

When I first worked with Keiji, he was sitting in a wheel chair with his feet — seemingly dead appendices — curled under his ankles and useless for supporting his body. I discovered that even though he could not move his feet or his legs, he had feeling awareness in each joint if I compressed his whole leg towards his hips. Also, if I tapped the surface of his tissue anyplace on his legs, he could feel the effects of the tapping. The next test was whether he could touch my hands through the surface of his legs no matter where I put my hands. Much to my surprise I could feel him touch my hands. But what was I feeling? His wife then touched the back of his head, and he could touch her fingers from inside of his body simply by bringing his felt sense to the surface and affecting a sense of touch. There are many other types of interactions that we have discovered along the way which could be replicated by the other paralytics.

Keiji Testimony: By taking sessions and bringing in my own awareness, the balance of my body has been changing. Since I have paralysis in my limbs, I have often hurt my neck and back due to using too much strength in those areas in order to support and move my body.

With Jack’s method and following his suggestions, I don’t need to hurt my body and I feel my overall balance, and the movement and feelings in my legs are changing, although

little by little. Even though I can't move my body very well, I am able to continue bringing my awareness into my body without burden and very little pain.

With appreciation, thank you very much,

Keiji Y.

Keiji's wife Noriko: I can feel his body become soft as he brings his awareness into my hands. For instance, even when my touch is very subtle in the area of his ankles to his toes, his tissues soften as he brings his awareness gently into my touch. In general, the same softness occurs when I touch other parts of his body.

From my experiences, although he needs some external tactile stimulation in order to feel, I can sense that it is he himself who is softening his body. Bringing in his own awareness has given us a feeling of 'freedom', in which we can do whatever we like to do without anyone else's help. So, this work has been very powerful for him.

The method of bringing comfortableness where there was pain can be continued (self-practice) and will grow more wellness in body and mind.

Thank you, very much appreciation to both of you,

Noriko Y.

Takako is a 70-year old female whose spinal cord was severed by a bullet 24 years ago. I first saw her because she was experiencing tremendous pain in her upper legs. First, I tested to see if her pain was reduced if I decompressed the muscles of her upper legs by compressing the fibers towards her pelvis. She had been maintaining a half lotus position with her legs propped on a wheel chair seat each day for long periods of time. Since the leg muscles were not moving, I figured that not only were they atrophying, but they were also getting very poor circulation. When I shortened her upper thigh muscles, she felt immediate relief. I then taught her to breathe into her pain at the same time as she compressed her patellas towards her hip joints on each leg. She was able to create her own relief. Next we worked with her feeling awareness in her joints by compressing into her ankles, knees, hips, and low back. In each place she was able to feel those compressions and interact proprioceptively with my hands. Finally, with the new-found sense of feeling in her legs, she could sit on the table and swing her legs and kick my hands hard wherever I placed them. None of this was supposed to happen.

Takeko first session feedback: I felt at ease right from the beginning of the session, and I was surprised that I could move my knee-caps and touch my painful thigh area without much pain at all. Also, deep breathing in and out in that area, and in my chest area, made me feel really good.

Honestly speaking, I didn't feel that I understood very well what you did with the tablework, or your explanation for why my pain went away. So, I asked Darcy to come to my house to help me go over what you did in my first session. I tried to practice on my own, but I wasn't so successful. I am requesting to see you, if possible for more sessions.

Darcy, Takeko's helper: Before Takeko came for the sessions, she was suffering acutely from pain and spasm in her upper thigh muscles. She had been on heavy pain

medicine, which was injurious to her health. She experienced little or no movement in her legs and was wheelchair bound. Through Jack's sessions, she became aware that she could actually stimulate movement in her lower legs and ankles on her own, by massaging her upper thigh spasms, lengthening the muscle fibers, and giving the muscle tissue new blood flow. This technique appeared to reduce cramping and spasms, and was useful at night while sleeping, when the pain and spasms could be more acute. She consequently developed, based on Jack's input, her own set of moving exercises, becoming more confident in actually moving muscles in her legs.

Tim, a 67-year old male, fell off of a roof almost a year ago. I saw him in the hospital, and I tested each of his legs by compressing the soles of each of his feet towards his hip joints and low back. He could feel the compression in his ankle, knee, and hip on the left leg, but only in the hip joint in the right leg. In each place he could feel my hands as I asked him to breathe into my hands. He got more and more proficient with this practice after he returned home from the hospital. He also was able to enter any place of pain by describing to himself what the pain felt like. He was able to create a somatic interaction with the pain using his breath and awareness. As I was working with Tim, he was also getting some physical therapy in which the PT was trying to get him to strengthen the muscles where he had some feeling awareness, but because he had almost no motor nerve function, he would become very frustrated. But eventually, as he has kept on using his ability to feel into and interact with the sensory nerves, he has started to develop motor nerve function using his sensory nerves. Hanna believed that, because the motor nerves and sensory nerves are so closely wired together, they could serve complimentary functions. My experience with Tim and the other two clients confirmed that there certainly could be some truth to that proclamation.

Tim Testimony: This is my experience with presencing and Jack Blackburn. Jack possesses a unique sensitivity and approach that has guided me as follows:

For many months Jack has been helping me gain back feeling-awareness from a bruised spinal cord and crushed vertebra. After my fall from a rooftop I was paralyzed from the waist down.

I was very impressed that after only 3 of Jack's sessions I had feeling awareness and movement in those areas damaged by the accident. This ability remains true for me even though my spinal cord linkage is still non-functioning in those body parts. By becoming present I can feel that more and more new signals are getting through.

In my opinion Jack is pioneering groundbreaking research. The results are an increased range of motion, better circulation, and reduction of edema. What is amazing is the restoration of feeling awareness, even in areas of my body where feeling was absent for many years. My overall mood is elevated since I am able to use these techniques by myself. I am healing myself with Jack Blackburn's unique help.

In gratitude to Jack, sincerely,

Tim F.

From a Focusing perspective what is going on here? First, all three clients were able to direct their awareness into different parts of their bodies and create proprioceptive interactions with the sensory patterns they are feeling. Prior to being able to use their sensory awareness to interact with their own felt sense, they each were feeling overwhelmed by pain and emotions of hopelessness and despair, which was also affecting their primary relationships in two cases. When they learned how to come into their sensory patterns and experienced how those interactions relieved their discomforts, each felt a greater sense of enthusiasm and curiosity to pursue these new approaches in their lives. The partners and friends of all three learned to duplicate many of the hands-on approaches I had developed with them. All of those approaches involved somatic interactions with bodily sensations and their own or practitioner's hands, resulting in greater and greater control over their movement ability as well as urogenital and bowel control. Pain has become a presencing signal allowing more access into a doorway of parasympathetic confirmation (relaxation response) rather than sympathetic withdrawal (fear response). This is a very profound shift that has large implications for everyone suffering pain, as the pain signal itself seems to be the key.

In Focusing it has been established that clients can use their felt body awareness in order to connect with various issues, be they physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual, that may be arising in their lives. Because they are able to develop a feeling sense and affirm a linkage to a particular issue, they can process an issue while paying attention to their bodily reactions, a process which seems to provide a forward motion. These interactions between issues and bodily response can produce a confirming felt sense in awareness that leads to better clarity, a better understanding, a better direction, a new insight. In traditional Focusing one does not use touch in order to establish a link to the body experience. This traditional approach may establish a useful vagueness in which the Focuser is sorting through various possibilities of issues and feelings to approach. The addition of touch whether by oneself or a practitioner makes the Focusing process more perceptible.

One way of proceeding with this approach is when the Focuser is able to locate the part of his or her body that is sensorially triggered by the issue at hand and then using touch, whether it's the client's hands or the practitioner's, to create another channel of sensation that can parallel the felt sense forming. As one who has been trained to use touch in my work with clients, one thing that amazes me is how I can feel whether clients are really bringing in their conscious awareness somatically. What am I feeling and how is it being communicated through the bodily tissue, mine and the clients? The early researchers in Focusing found that their successful clients were checking in with their bodily feelings before arriving at an answer or conclusion. So in the example of paralytic clients above, one thing that is quite unique is the lack of feeling awareness in the lower parts of their bodies — and yet — the same tools that have allowed me to feel the degree of a client's conscious awareness were available with each of these persons and enabled each of them to control muscle spasming, create pain relief, attain increased movement, obtain a direct sense of participation in their sessions, and achieve a growing sense of active participation in their lives.

So here are a few facts that may help us relate Focusing to these outcomes. First is the fact that the bodily sensorium is accompanying everything that happens in our lives whether we are awake or asleep. That sensorium is what can give us feelings of aliveness

and participation in every moment. Another fact about the body is that it only exists in the present moment. Every sensation in the body, whether it is accompanying an action that clearly is happening now or a memory or story of past experiences, is also happening now. All sensations that are bodily generated are anchored in each now-moment. If we train our minds to pay attention to those bodily sensations as they occur, we are learning to experience what I call body NOW presencing. This is exactly what is happening between Focuser and practitioner when they are interacting with one another through their bodily senses.

Another factor, which may be playing a larger role than we know at this point, is the emerging theory that connective tissue in the body is a vast communication system which is faster, more dependable, and much more attuned to consciousness than our brain-neural forms of communication. These new studies may be proving that we have only scratched the surface of what we call consciousness. One example of what I am talking about is the recent films of ever-active fascia in living tissue. These fibrous webs form a vast, ever-changing latticework, which weave together every cell in the body in such complexity that we are totally baffled by its ever-present state of change and adaptation. Many researchers are now speculating that this latticework is responsible for the many complex mixtures of thoughts, feelings, and awarenesses, which we commonly call proprioception, instinct, intuition, or anticipation.

Contrary to any expectations I had when I started to work with paraplegics, there seems to be no barrier to growing parallel function and deepening bodily awareness, and as surprising perhaps is the fact that these changes can be perceived and participated in from both directions, as client and practitioner, who are both able to share a state of shared presence.

I believe that by bringing touch, which is our most powerful sense, both inside our bodies (a new form of self-Focusing) and the surface of our bodies, and combining touch with proprioception and palpation and body NOW presencing awareness, we can enter a whole new realm of implication and self-discovery.

And the body, the lowly body, is providing our access to a wholly different form of conscious communication and joint participation with everything alive, what the Buddhists call *sentience* or *beingness*. I believe that no matter what issue we are dealing with, there is always sensory accompaniment in the body unless we are anesthetized. Once we are able to locate the sensory accompaniment, we can learn to use body NOW presencing to interact with those sensations. We are then entering a state of awareness that allows us to access that which is implicit in the moment. Another way of putting it is that *in presence*, the body is also involved in processing the issue. And both persons, client and practitioner, can feel it happening, and both are being affected. Each of these clients could also process by themselves when they would bring their touch into the area in question. By so doing they were able to create a presencing interaction between their inner awareness; proprioception and their outer awareness; palpation.

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