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Somatic Strength Training: An Alternative to "No Pain No Gain"

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"No pain no gain" is a widespread approach in strength training classes and private training. Peeking into physical conditioning classes at my neighborhood gym on the Upper West Side in New York City, I would hear loud music with an unchangeable beat and trainers shouting out numbers for remaining repetitions. I would see participants who looked like they *had* to execute these movements. In the room with cardio machines, free weights, and gym equipment, for individual practice or sessions with private trainers, I would see people grunting, holding their breath, pushing themselves to lift heavier and heavier weights. I saw bodies rowing, running, or cycling on the machines, but mentally, these people seemed elsewhere: reading books, newspapers, text messages, or watching news or TV series.

Sondra Fraleigh, author and professor of dance and somatic studies, alludes to this phenomenon in her *Moving Consciously: Somatic Transformations Through Dance, Yoga, and Touch* (2015). In it, she describes characteristics of mindful movement practices, known in the field of movement studies as "somatics." Somatics is an umbrella term for methods that prioritize participants' physical awareness of bodily sensations,

inner perception of movement, mind-body contact, and emotional-physical wellbeing.

Fraleigh writes:

Body conditioning, training, and exercise programs are not the province of somatics. *Perception and consciousness are essential, as is creativity, transformation, and change.* To this I would add community building and service, though not everyone would agree. On a broad scale, awareness of the moving self in relation to others and in community is increasingly important to somatic studies. We don't discount the value of exercise and repetitive movement in dance training, or the use of machinery. These have a place and a purpose, but they are not somatic means. Moving consciously is the means of somatics. The goal is the same. Process is everything in somatics.¹

Fraleigh rules out “body conditioning, training, and exercise programs” from the domain of somatics. The use of strength training equipment and repetitive exercises have “a place and a purpose” in movement training but “they are not somatic means.” The latter are invested in “perception,” “consciousness,” “creativity,” “transformation,” and “moving consciously.”²

Indeed, pleasure, joy, creativity, and curiosity about how the body functions and how movement makes us feel do not seem to belong to the context of strength training and gym atmosphere. Indeed, “getting creative” while using dumbbells and gym machines is not a good idea, especially if the student has little knowledge of the body and how to handle resistance. Working with machines and free weights asks for precision, proper form, and correct execution to prevent injuries.

Even though “somatic” and “strength training” seem like an adversarial or impossible match, I want to make a bold move and show that there indeed *is* a place for a somatic approach to the body in the realm of strength training. Strength training, a sphere of physical exercise that focuses on the conditioning of the muscles, often with the help of free weights, resistance bands, and gym equipment, is a terrain rife for somatic potential, as mindfulness in relation to working with the muscles is relatively little explored.

Emerging Methods

Several recent methods are paving the way toward examining the potential of somatic awareness in strength training. Emily A. Francis, in *The Body Heals Itself. How Deeper Awareness of Your Muscles and Their Emotional Connection Can Help You Heal* (2017), sees attending to the muscles as a prime way to understand emotions. She notes:

In Western society, we view the muscles as our physical driving force, our source of strength – and not much else beyond that. The study of the muscles focuses on chemical makeup, origin, insertion, and functions... But do we have any idea that the muscles themselves hold a highly emotional part of our being? Do we know that our muscles can tell us very early on what parts of our emotional body needs to be addressed and treated?³

In her view, by learning to listen to the muscles, we can discover our emotional and physical problems sooner. She offers self-release exercises that target specific muscle groups and potential affirmations to accompany the exercises. Adding to stretches and self-release exercises an affirmation – such as “I am open to receiving and giving love

without attachment” or “I radiate kindness and compassion for myself and others”⁴ – can help center the mind on the area of the body that is being stretched or expanded and can bring about inner shifts in perception and wellbeing.

Lauren Kearns, in *Somatics in Action. A Mindful and Physical Conditioning Tool for Movers* (2017), introduces her method, Somatics in Action (SIA), inspired by Pilates, yoga, and dance.⁵ The method incorporates the Pilates principle of strengthening abdominal muscles to support postural alignment and balance, and yoga’s principles of physical alignment and energy channels. Kearns shows how to employ visual and kinesthetic imagery to improve muscular patterns and how to sense the muscles and bones through experiential anatomy. Participants learn how to feel the muscles from the inside out, rather than by only learning their anatomical names and seeing them in anatomy books.

The BodyLogos© Technique, developed by Broadway dancer turned Taoist minister and private trainer, Tammy Wise, in New York City in 1997, is one of the most comprehensive methods to date that brings somatic awareness to the realm of strength training. In this technique, discussed at length in *The Art of Strength: Sculpt the Body – Train the Mind* (2018), strength training exercises familiar from workout routines – squats, calf raises, chest presses, triceps extensions, biceps curls, hamstring curls, or latissimus dorsi pulldowns – are infused with a somatic, philosophical, and spiritual approach to the body that stems from Taoism. Participants learn how the principles of the Five Elements, Yin and Yang, and energy orbits, among others, could be applied to strength training. They learn how distinguish building strength from building tension and explore “how energy has the power to transform and heal our entire being” and how to

“integrate our emotional and spiritual selves into our exercise to deliberately release tension.”⁶

Exercising Somatically

What does it feel and look like to approach working with the muscles from a somatic perspective and what are the potential benefits of such an approach? Since I studied the BodyLogos Technique since 2008 and became a certified teacher in 2014, my experiences with somatic strength training are filtered through this method. I will use my training in this technique to convey what mindful strength training can look like.

When people look at me working with the gym equipment, they see someone who performs a large amount of repetitions at a slow, steady pace. Many of my movements look rather small and concentrated on particular areas of the body one at a time. Outwardly, my movements look like traditional strength training exercises. My face is calm, my eyes often closed or half-closed, and I seem highly aware of alignment. I seem to be in my own world but very much focused on what I am doing. I seem at peace, even relaxed, as I lift a pair of dumbbells in a “standing side lateral raise” targeting the shoulder muscles or press my torso up from a squat to strengthen the quadriceps.

In somatic strength training, performing conditioning exercises at a gym or at home is a time to tune in rather than “tune out.” We learn to notice and be present with physical sensations. As I lie on my belly, my hands making a pillow on which my head can rest, I bend one leg slowly from the knee and let the other leg stay long on the ground. I feel the weight of the pelvis and the pubic bone on the ground; I feel the weight of the sacrum and the tailbone; I feel the weight of the shinbone and the bones of the foot

of the leg that I bend from the knee. My hip flexor flattens under this weight and lengthens as I bend the knee.

As I perform this hamstring curl to shape the back of my leg, I feel the tightening of the hamstring muscle at the back but I also sense the opposite, the counter-action: the lengthening and the release in the front of the leg, in the quadriceps and the hip flexor. I sense a flush of energy right below the hip crease, in the area that habitually tends to tighten. With this flush of energy I sense, physically, the possibility of a new opening, an unexplored energy moving where there previously seemed no passage. I strengthen and tighten the hamstring, yes, but I also sense the potential and the energy of the release of the quadriceps. Time spent with strength training can be just as much about release and learning to let go of habitual holding patterns in the muscles as it is about building strength and sculpting the muscles.

As I do my abdominal crunches, with my back on the floor and knees bent, feet flat on the floor, I do not aim to reach a particular predetermined height as I lift my torso. I refrain from pulling with my head and neck. I rest the weight of the head in my hands, fingers interlaced underneath the head. I hold my head in my own hands and let it relax and become the weight that my torso lifts. As I keep lifting and lowering the torso, I soon notice that the abdominals start to quiver and make a sound that I can hear inwardly – it sounds like a purr or like a machine working. This is not a sign of weak abdominal muscles but rather a testament that I have isolated the muscle successfully, am focusing on it, and am learning to hear its distinct “voice.”

I continue. When I feel fully aware of the physical sensations – I am “in the body” or embodied – I ask one or several questions, to add more layers to the time spent with

my physical self. “What does it feel like to be me today? How do I feel inside my body, in my physical home? What do I sense in the center of my body, in my gut, today?” I let my mind linger on these questions and wait for answers that emanate from the body first. The answers differ. Through them, I learn to notice how each day is different, my emotions are different, and my levels of physical alertness or exhaustion are different. The exercise feels new each time even though I have performed it for years and years.

As I prepare myself for biceps curls – with resistance bands or free weights – I make sure that elbows stay stationary, that I feel the presence of the abdominal muscles holding me up, that I sense the ribcage placed evenly over the pelvis. In other words, I sense my alignment. As I bend and unbend the arm from the elbow, holding the dumbbell, I connect to its weight. I feel the contraction right in the belly of the biceps muscle. I think about the function of the biceps muscles: they flex the arm so that we can bring with our hands closer to ourselves – our face, our mouth, our mind, our imagination, our hearts – what we need, what nourishes us. I let the mind move to this new territory of explorations: “What do I need in my life at this particular moment? What do I want for the future? Can I sense the energy of that which I am pulling toward me, into my life, like I am pulling toward me this dumbbell in my hand?” Some days the answers are clearer, almost like thunderbolts. Some days less so. Some days an image rises instead of a particular direction or insight. All of this I treat as information, as knowledge that my body provides and the mind seeks to access.

Moving on to the chest muscles, I lie again with my back on the floor, knees bent and feet flat. I sense my shoulder blades on the floor and the weight of my pelvis and head. As I take hold of the dumbbells, turn the palms to face one another and carry the

weight above the center of the body, until the palms meet. I sense how the chest muscles lift as I perform this “chest fly.” I gently lower the palms toward the floor but do not let them rest on the floor. As I continue this exercise for several repetitions, I sense my chest – and my heart – lifting and lowering, lifting and lowering. “Toward whom and what does my heart move? How does my heart feel? Safe, excited, vulnerable, confused, timid or bold?” I try to keep the powerful muscles of the back and the arms and shoulders working to a minimum, so that I can get familiar with the nature of the chest muscle and hear the voice of the heart.

Clients’ Experiences

I have witnessed changes in many of my clients’ wellbeing and approaches toward the body when we started to work out somatically. To recount one case, my client, in her late 60s, had a strong dislike for conditioning. Her preferred method for exercising was dance: dancing filled her with joy and energy, whereas strength training felt laborious and boring. “I hate my core,” she would say. Sit-ups, performed to her former private trainer’s relentless counting of repetitions, were a dread. She did not sense her abdominal muscles and that area of her body did not become more toned, no matter the number of the sit-ups.

Little by little, I started to include some strength-training exercises into our weekly sessions. “Let’s make friends with your core,” I said. As we were doing the abdominal exercises, I drew her attention to sensations – “what do you sense and where? Can you feel release somewhere in your body as you contract the abdominal muscles? What does the contraction of your lower abdominal muscles feel like?” Or “Can you feel

the weight of the head in your hands as you lift the upper body? Maybe relax your head, your mind and thoughts?” Sensing and verbalizing sensations was familiar to her from our somatic dance training practice. Tracing sensations helped her feel connected to her body, at home in her body, which is what she yearned.

Once she felt comfortable with tracing sensations as she executed strength training exercises, I added an invitation to use the muscle conditioning time for meditative contemplation. As we were strengthening the hamstrings, I would say, “The hamstrings are at the back of the body. We can’t quite see them but we can feel them. They help us move backwards in space. Can we use this time to contemplate the past and gratitude for the foundation our past has given us for the current moment?” On some days, we directed the contemplations toward the particular task ahead that day. As she was performing bicep curls, I would ask, “What do you need for your day ahead, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually? With each bicep curl, is it possible to feel that you’re drawing that something into your experience for today?”

My client started to like strength training. She was able to use her imagination and her ability to trace physical sensations. She would come up with rich images for what she felt inside and outside. She did not “hate” her abdominal muscles anymore. As one way to make friends with her body, she found original names for different body parts – the core would be “Cora,” for example. “I have a new appreciation for the center of my body as an integral part of me, not just a reluctant muscle,” she noted. Getting to know the different muscles – through sensing contraction and release, through touching the muscles with her hands, through realizing how unique and different each muscle group is – made her feel like she was learning about her body in a new way. These muscles had

always been a part of her but she had little somatic, sensation-based knowledge of them before.

In addition to greater knowledge of and connection to her body, my client developed better posture and awareness of her alignment. She started to sense the muscles and the bones as integral in how she holds the body. She learned to make a distinction between the sensation of ease that accompanies an aligned posture and the sensation of tension that accompanies muscular holding patterns. She complained of imbalance and fear of falling before: in our sessions, she learned to sense the soles of the feet and to use the power of the inner thighs, the gluteal muscles, and the abdominals in finding her stability and balance. Through back exercises where the shoulder blades move together and apart to strengthen the back muscles, she became more aware of the mobility of her shoulder blades: as her shoulder blades learned to move slightly closer together, her chest and her heart were able to open and her shoulders to move back from their previously slumped-forward position.

In addition to these improvements in posture and physical awareness, my client and I experienced another gift of mindful strength training. Seven years into our working together, my client was diagnosed with throat cancer. She had to go through the difficult time of accepting this condition, preparing for the medical intervention, going through chemotherapy and healing. In this challenging physical and emotional state, she did not want to stop exercising altogether. Connecting to her body was more important than ever during this time, where a more common response, perhaps, would have been to stop any additional movement and save energy. She was physically too weak to dance. Strength training in the manner of “no pain no gain” – with the goal of performing a certain

number of repetitions, without any connection to the actual physical, emotional, and spiritual state of the person – would have been unthinkable. The mindful, compassionate approach to the muscles that we had developed before the cancer diagnosis helped my client not to ignore her body during this difficult time but to stay connected to it. Somatic strength training practice met her where she was at: the practice adapted to her needs. It allowed her to connect to her inner strength even during the time when she was physically and emotionally fragile.

Conclusion

In somatic strength training, the outward form of bodily movements does not need look strikingly different from the exercises we learn to perform in gym classes. But *how* we approach this time spent with the muscles can be remarkably different: the added somatic layer teaches participants to attend to physical sensations and emotions and to use their inner eye and imagination toward greater wellbeing and a more nuanced connection to their inner world through movement and the physical self.

As we learn to work this way, over time, the characteristics and the potential messages of the different muscles become more distinct from one another. It feels similar to learning to distinguish between the voices of the different instruments in a symphony orchestra. We train the mind to listen to the body, to be present with the body, and to translate its nonverbal messages into verbal forms. Strength training becomes a meaningful time to connect to the body, emotions, and perhaps even the spirit or the inner guiding life force. If we foreground the potential somatic dimension of strength training, we discover a valuable source of knowledge that emanates from the physical self.

Somatic strength training exists and is one way that participants can increase their physical awareness, coordination, alignment, and connection to the inner self, among many other somatic practices, such as ideokinesis, the Feldenkrais Method®, the Alexander Technique, Nia, and Mind-Body Centering. One of the goals of somatics is to help participants become more embodied or present in their bodies during their time away from the gym or the dance studio as well. The ability to tune in and see the body from the inside out is likely to carry over from strength training sessions into the rest of one's day and life. The time spent with free weights and exercise machines does not have to be about struggle and exhaustion: relaxed strength, release, and meditative calmness offer alternative paths.

Medical professionals can encourage their clients to consider learning more about somatic strength training – not only for the benefit of bone health, better posture, increased vitality and physical strength, but also for the gift of an embodied understanding of their emotions and access to physical wisdom that can aid them with their current state in life. Somatic strength training can help us not only during times when we feel healthy and well but also during times of difficulty and health or life challenge – during times when we feel like what we lack is strength. Somatic strength training can offer us a way to stay connected to our physical and emotional wellbeing and give us not only outer but inner strength.

Hiie Saumaa, PhD (Columbia), is a dance writer and movement educator. She writes about interconnections between dance, language, somatics, embodied knowledge, and imagination. In 2018-2019, she was an inaugural fellow at Columbia University's Institute for Ideas & Imagination in Paris, France, and in 2017, she was a fellow at the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She has taught at Columbia University, New York University, The University of Tennessee, and Paris College of Art. Dr. Saumaa is completing a book on the multi-artistry and creativity of the choreographer Jerome Robbins. Her publications have appeared or are forthcoming in *Dance Research Journal*, *Dance Chronicle*, *The Journal of Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities*, *Somatics Magazine/Journal*, and *Routledge Companion to Dance Studies*, among others. She is a certified instructor of Nia dance, The BodyLogos© Technique, and JourneyDance™, and teaches classes and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, creative movement, expressive arts, meditative strength training, and somatic awareness.

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