

Open camera or QR reader and scan code to access this article and other resources online.



# “I hate my body”: Somatic Movement Practices and Body Image

Hiie Saumaa, PhD

Struggles with weight and body image are a part of many people’s lives. In a recent study by Frederick et al., approximately one-fifth of men (18%) and one-fourth of women (27%) reported being very-to-extremely dissatisfied with at least one of the aspects of body image in their study.<sup>1</sup> Troubles with fitting the narrow beauty ideal of a slim, toned, “attractive” and “desirable” body is a reality for many women. Extreme standards of feminine thinness negatively affect teenage girls’ and women’ perception of their bodies and can lead to eating disorders, anorexia, bulimia, and body dysmorphic disorder. “I hate my body,” “I am fat,” “I feel clumsy,” “I will never look like these other women,” “I am not desirable,” “I don’t belong,” “I hate my belly,” “I am too thin and look like a stick,” “I have terrible cellulite on my thighs,” “I am not beautiful”—these are some of the thoughts that might be running in the mind of someone who struggles with body image and body shame. These thoughts can have many causes, including experiences with movement and the body in the past—such as the derision of others or feeling incapable of performing certain activities in gym classes.

Can mindful movement classes help us improve or accept our body image? If so, how? How to encourage a person who has a troubled relationship with the shape and size of the body to try out a somatic movement class? Can mindful movement classes help someone feel better in the body if they associate the body with anguish, disappointment, and struggle? Many people turn to exercise with the aim of losing weight: can somatic movement practices, some of which are aerobic but many of which focus on gentle movement and body awareness, respond to this goal?

## Body Shame and Body Positivity

Luna Dolezal, in *The Body and Shame*, notes that body shame is a “shame that arises as a result of some aspect or

feature of the body.”<sup>2</sup> Body shame can concern some element of the body, such as the size of the belly, the shape of the legs, or the color of the skin, but shame can also be linked to less obvious physical aspects such as comportment or behavior, clumsy movements, stammering, or feeling physically weaker and less capable than others in sports activities. Scholar Celine Leboeuf notes that body shame refers to the “seen body”—“the body as it is perceived or imagined to be perceived by others.”<sup>3</sup> It is an “emotion that arises when one inhabits the real or imagined negative perspective of others on one’s body.”<sup>3</sup> Body shame can be restricting and limit one’s life: it “must be overcome for life to have the possibility of dignity and fulfillment,” as Dolezal observes.

Kaia Kiik, a visual artist and a participant in my mindful dance classes, noted in an interview with the author that after she gained weight due to anti-depressants, she noticed how people began to treat her differently. “When you gain weight, you lose your credibility. People started to view me as less capable professionally, even though my professional life has nothing to do with my weight. You have to work harder to convince people. It is harder to live in a society as a fat person. For example, beautiful clothes are made for thin people.” She has difficulties committing to a movement practice because she feels left out, unable to complete the session in full, and struggles with negative self-talk.

Body positivity is a social movement to accept one’s body, regardless of its size, shape, gender, skin tone, and physical abilities. Leboeuf points out that this movement has been often understood as an effort to celebrate diversity in bodily aesthetics and to expand narrow standards of physical beauty. In her view, body positivity should not only expand physical standards of beauty, but help people celebrate aspects of embodiment such as bodily pleasure and bodily abilities. Body positivity should be about our emotional relationship with our bodies: “Much of our lack of love toward our bodies originates in deep feelings of shame. We often hate our bodies because

we are ashamed that they do not live up to the standards of beauty or expectations concerning bodily ability,” she notes.

“Body positivity should also be predicated on developing an inner appreciation of beauty,” Leboeuf points out. “A positive relationship to one’s body may be premised on a number of aspects of one’s physical self: its beauty, its abilities, and/or its capacity as a source of pleasure,” she remarks. One solution to bodily alienation and feeling cut off from the body as a source of pleasure would be to appreciate the body from within. “Such an appreciation of the body could be cultivated through activities such as physical exercise, sex, or forms of meditation that take as their object bodily sensations,” Leboeuf highlights.

## Somatics

Cultivating a positive relationship to one’s body, honing one’s inner perception of beauty, sensing the body as a source of pleasure, and turning the focus from the outer gaze to inner sensations—these are some of the guiding principles of somatic practices. Somatics is an umbrella term for a range of movement practices that help participants connect to their inner world through movement and the body. The term “somatics” was coined by philosopher and Feldenkrais Method practitioner Thomas Hanna. In his 1986 article, “What is Somatics?,” Hanna emphasizes that the soma is the body perceived not from the third person point of view, outwardly, through someone else’s gaze, but from within, by the first person.<sup>4</sup> “It is immediate proprioception—a sensory mode that provides unique data,” he says.

In somatic movement classes, participants search for ease, joy, pleasure, healing, creativity, self-expression, and emotional connection to movement. We explore what the body can do, how it wants to move, and what types of movements speak to us and feel needed at different times. “Move your own body’s way,” “move in ways that feel good to you,” “be you,” “there is no wrong or right way to move” are some of the mottos of somatic movement practices. In somatic movement classes, we learn to notice physical sensations—such as warmth, tingling, tightness, comfort, quivering, pleasure, ache, and a surge of energy, to name a few. By noticing physical sensations, we learn to read, connect to, and understand the body and what it is telling us at a particular moment.

These principles of connecting to participants’ own needs and preferences and creating a space where they can explore their body and emotions through movement differ from the methods used in classical “technique” classes such as ballet, modern, or jazz dance classes or folkloric dance classes. In these, the goal is usually to learn a particular dance technique and choreographic patterns. Somatic principles also differ from many fitness and exercise classes where the aim could be managing or losing weight, burning calories, performing strength exercises to achieve a certain type of body, an outer look, and to feel and look fit and strong. In these classes, the inner connection to the self, emotions, and the imagination are typically not foregrounded.

## Somatics, Weight Loss, and Body Image

Somatics classes do not as a rule focus explicitly on weight loss. Many practices, such as the Feldenkrais Method or the Alexander Technique, use little outer movement and emphasize finding more easeful ways of moving and reducing habitual holding patterns in the body that create tightness and strain in the muscles. While these alignment and physical awareness based practices might not necessarily help with weight loss, they can help improve participants’ body image and contribute to an overall sense of wellbeing. These methods help us find a more aligned posture: an easeful, relaxed, grounded, flexible way of standing, moving, and performing daily activities not only reduces tightness and constant aches but helps participants feel more confident, relaxed, and at ease mentally and emotionally.<sup>5</sup> These aspects can help counter body shame and body hatred.

Other somatic practices, such as Nia, SuryaSoul, Shake Your Soul, 5Rhythms, and Gaga, are fully or partly improvisation-based dance classes where participants can explore their own ways of moving. As a rule, somatic dance classes are mindful and tend to be gentler, slower than fitness dance practices such as Zumba and there is more room for individual expression. These classes can be gentler or more vigorous depending on the individual’s own choices, the instructor’s suggestions, and the choice of music. Somatic dancing, like any other type of dancing, can be a calorie-burning activity. Indeed, as Julie F. Christensen and Dong-Seon Chang point out, “Dance is an aerobic sport—that is a sport that revs up our ability to burn fat. In a one-hour dance class we burn on average 330 calories—that’s as many as in thirty minutes of cycling.”<sup>6</sup>

In my clients, I have seen that the encounter with a somatic dance practice where they can move in ways that are pleasurable and where they feel safe and not judged, brings about changes in their body shape. A somatic dance class helps participants feel able to do movements rather than worry about looking a particular way or performing complex choreography. Students can easily fall in love with dance and want to do more of it and take better care of themselves. Weight loss might not necessarily be a particular goal but surfaces as participants bring more emotionally fulfilling and liberating dance movement into their lives.

## Inner Connection to the Body

Somatic movement classes can help people who face body image issues because in these classes the focus moves away from the outer gaze – how other people might see us – to inner connection to movement. Moving from the inside out means that participants first connect to, imagine, and sense their own body. Online classes are beneficial because one can turn the video off and have a private experience with movement while still being a part of a community. Many in-person classes are held in places without mirrors as well. These choices take off the pressure of seeing oneself in movement from the outside.

Half-closing or fully closing the eyes as one dances in a safe place and moving inner awareness to some part of the body—such as the heart, the pelvis, the spine, the feet—can also help establish and maintain an inner connection to the body.

Eirene Arholekas, an expressive arts practitioner, visual artist, and a participant in my online Nia classes, noted in an interview with the author: “One key is to not be a spectator. Not to look at your body from the outside. I don’t want to see myself in action. I want to feel my body from the inside out. When you start getting people connected to inside out not outside in, then they start paying attention to what comes up, to how it feels, to just get comfortable in their body without judging. It’s kind of like developing self-acceptance from the inside out. And then slowly you get used to being in motion and you start liking it. And slowly it tells you where you need to go. A lot of insights happen to me when I’m dancing.”

As one starts to move in these ways, with an inner connection, one might hear the judgmental messages of an inner critic. As Kaia Kiik noted, “Other people’s opinions do not matter to me as much. What I hear more strongly in my head are my own voices. ‘I am fat. I am clumsy. These movements do not fit my physical condition. Dance is for dancers and I am not a dancer.’” Making peace with this voice that demands for perfectionism and puts one down when things do not unfold as expected is an important part of the healing journey in somatic practices that is not often addressed. A constant redirecting of focus to what one is *able* to do and reprogramming the inner voice to comment on positive aspects—such as “I am proud of myself for showing up to class. My legs are strong. I am noticing a sense of beautiful fluidity in the movements of my arms. I am starting to feel a bit more sensual in the movement of my hips”—give the practitioner a sense of pride and start creating a positive emotional connection to the body.

Elisabeth Osgood-Campbell, a somatic movement educator and instructor of Tamalpa Life/Art Process and Continuum Movement, noted in an interview with the author that somatic movement practices that emphasize and make use of natural resources can provide support in healing body image issues. “Sensing contact with the ground/Earth element, and connecting with resources in the natural world through imagery can be a lovely starting place for people who are dissociated from their bodies,” she noted.<sup>7</sup> She added, “Moving subtly with the image of water in a gentle stream, for example, may free up motion in their bodies that they might not be able to access otherwise. Over time, a sense of trust for messages of the body (which have often been denied for years) may grow slowly. Also, a recognition of our bodies as part of the natural world may ease the pain of feeling ‘unacceptable’ in human social and cultural contexts that force such a narrow view of women’s beauty and body size onto people of all genders.”

## Releasing Trauma

Getting in touch with emotions and trauma experiences around the body is important for people who have experienced

shame about how they look or move. According to many accounts, traumatic memories can stay embedded inside the body until we begin to release them through movement, voice, and touch.<sup>8,9</sup> While many somatic practices are not necessarily designed to help people with trauma, participants often comment on the therapeutic effect of these practices.<sup>10</sup> Somatic movement educator Odelia Shargian noted in an interview with the author that “a lot of things come up when you decide to take a stance and be visible to yourself and to other people. It’s a way that almost contradicts the way we were hurt. When we do that it’s bound to happen that trauma wants to be addressed. Making space for that and process the emotions, the grief, the anger, the fear, all the things that live in the body and keep the trauma in place because the body stores the trauma and records it.”

Eirene Arholekas noted in an interview with the author that releasing trauma and negative self-images is an important part of somatic dance classes for her.<sup>11</sup> “I’ve always had issues with the body. As a girl and going through puberty and adolescence, I would be the one who’d sit out in gym. I’m good at breaking things academically and intellectualizing. I was a disembodied mind for many, many years. And I wasn’t connected to how I felt about hunger ... I didn’t know when I was really hungry and when I was not. I was eating emotionally most of the time.” She would often start crying for no apparent reason in somatic dance classes. “I bury things in the body. When I dance, something just comes up, wells up, like lava that comes from deep in the ground. Most of the time, what comes up tends to be negative. It tends to be something judgmental, hurtful, self-hatred for the body and what it looks like. My being trapped in what weighs me down in the body.”

At times she would start physically punching her belly in the class until at one moment she had a new insight. “I said to myself that the belly *is*, especially for women, the source of life. It is the source of life, it’s the womb, it’s the center of the world. It is where everything starts. And the belly is your core. It’s where you start. It’s where everything starts. And I have to stop and start loving that part and physically embracing and caressing the belly and accept it. It is flabby and it’s got stuff on it because it’s the vessel for life and hating that very core of you is self-destructive.” Through somatic and expressive movement practices Arholekas has been able to detect and release negative images about the body that have been internalized. “To be able to tap into and release these negative images so that I can deal with them on a conscious level ... the insights that the body gives you if you start paying attention to it, they’re shattering. So much is buried in my body. And movement becomes the process of unbearing it. And it’s liberating,” she adds.

Making peace with the body in its current shape is another part of the healing journey.<sup>12</sup> We might experience a feeling of loss for the kind of body we used to have—slimmer, more agile, more flexible, less marked by the passage of time. “I want to have my body back. I cannot do fast movements anymore. I want exercises that would lead me back to the kind of body that I had,” notes Kiik, commenting on her experience

of gaining 14 pounds in one year around 10 years ago when she was on anti-depressants. “The body is not letting go of the weight,” she pointed out. The compassionate approach found in somatic movement—where there are no judgments, standards of perfection, performance, and competition—helps us by connecting us to the body and a sense of movement, so that we can start moving, no matter how big, small, or “calorie-burning” these movements are.

## “Embodied Acceptance”

Somatics can educate us to develop self-acceptance through movement. Acceptance, most of all by oneself, but also by the community, can be healing and liberating. Odelia Shargian, creator of the practice “Embodied Acceptance,” sets acceptance as the focus of her classes.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis is on process: some days we find self-compassion more readily than others. She recounted her first experience with somatic movement classes: “For the first time I engaged in movement in a free form way, not in anything structured. I was in awe. I didn’t know I could move in this way. There was so much richness and expressiveness in the movement. It took me by surprise that it could come out of me,” she noted. In her classes, she wants to create a safe environment where people who do not typically see themselves as “dancers” and struggle with their bodies can have a similar experience.

Shargian’s practice is inspired by her own experiences with body image. She worked hard all her life to look thin, struggled with an eating disorder as a teenager, and as an adult went through weight cycling: she would lose weight but then gain it back with extra weight. She said, “I was hungry. I was obsessing about food and what I was going to eat next and my mind was preoccupied with these things and I felt like I didn’t want to put my energy there. I felt like I had a sense that I might not be able to be thin the way that I want to or the culture is pushing me to want to be. That meant that I would have to learn how to accept myself fully. I have to accept how I look and that I am not thin.” Underneath the choice of allowing herself to be what the body wants to be she discovered complex questions of worth, belonging, and doubts as to whether she would be accepted and loved by the world. She decided that it is not up to the others to tell that she was okay, started learning about intuitive eating and Health at Every Size, which is a framework that moves the focus out of the weight question and looks at different aspects that contribute to a healthy person.

“Embodied Acceptance” focuses on finding a way to make movement right unconditionally—there’s no wrong movement and there are no rules about movement—which can be challenging for many people. Shargian pointed out that many people have a disordered relationship not only with food but also with movement. In childhood, we move around for the purpose of movement: “There were no calories to burn or muscles to tone. We did it because we loved it. This joy of movement is inside of us, it is how we learn and develop psychologically and cognitively. At some point all these

messages get ingrained and internalized that if we move it has to be prescribed. We have to go to the gym and work out for 45 minutes. And if we don’t do the specific regimented exercise then it’s not counted as movement, it’s not worthwhile.”

In her view, the first step for someone who needs to bring more movement into their lives is to find movement that connects them to that original joy that we felt when we were little. “There’s no one kind of movement that’s better than the other. If you like going on walks and that gives you pleasure, then that’s what you do. If you like cleaning your house, that could be another form of movement. It doesn’t even have to be a dance class. You can just play some music that you like and dance around in your living room. Make it a very low pressure experience for yourself and detach all the rules around movement.” “Once people show up in a movement experience like the movement experience that I offer, I try to make it a very inclusive environment and I think that the fact that I’m not thin anymore—I show up in the body that I have today—is giving people permission to also show up in their body if their body is not ideal. Seeing bodies, different diverse bodies in a movement space is key,” she notes.

## Conclusion

Somatic movement practices can help people with body image and body hatred problems in several ways. The tempo and speed of somatic movement classes are typically slower and the movements gentler than in fitness classes. Participants can alter, change, tweak the movements that the instructor offers or come up with their own movements in a free dance. The focus is on finding movements that feel right and pleasurable. There is no judgment and a sense of competition in these classes. The emphasis is on inner connection to the body and movement.

These aspects allow participants to start connecting to the movements that they are *able* to do and over time, in a safe environment, build positive emotions about movement and the body. Over time, participants learn to prioritize feeling good in the body over the need to have a body that matches a certain ideal. We learn the importance of doing movements that help us feel happier in the body.

The key is to be patient and to find a movement practice that one connects to emotionally and physically. One does not have to start with an hour-long class. Five to 10 minutes of dancing per day is already a great goal. Nia dance, a practice that is inspired by martial arts, dance, and somatic practices, offers 20-minute sessions as well as special programs that are slower and gentler than traditional Nia classes. Why not find some like-minded people and approach a teacher for a special group series or start a small dance or movement group on one’s own, for example online? Practitioners of integrative and complementary therapies can aid by helping develop awareness of somatic movement practices: many people simply do not know that there are somatic dance practices where one does not need to be a “dancer” or to have a “dancer’s body.” ■

---

## References

1. Frederick D, Garcia JR, Gesselman AN, et al. The happy American body 2.0: Predictors of affective body satisfaction in two US national internet panel surveys. *Body Image* 2020;32:70–84.
2. Dolezal L. *The Body and Shame: Feminism, Phenomenology, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015.
3. Leboeuf C. What is body positivity? The path from shame to pride. *Philos Topics* 2019;47:113–128.
4. Hanna T. What is somatics? *Somatics* 1986;5:4:4–9.
5. Saumaa H. Improving posture and alignment with somatics. *Integr Complementary Ther* 2022;28:88–92.
6. Christensen JH, Chang D-S. *Dancing is the Best Medicine: The Science of How Moving to a Beat is Good for Body, Brain, and Soul*. Vancouver, Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2021.
7. Elisabeth Osgood-Campbell. Online document at: [www.elisabethosgood.com](http://www.elisabethosgood.com) Accessed August 23, 2022.
8. Van der Kolk B. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015.
9. Levine PA. *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010.
10. Saumaa H. Dance therapeutics: Movement as a path toward healing. *Altern Complementary Ther* 2019;25:238–240.
11. Eirene Arholekas. Online document at: <https://greekamericangirl.com> Accessed August 23, 2022.
12. Saumaa, H. Practicing gratitude and compassion through somatics and dance. *Altern Complementary Ther* 2021;27:79–83.
13. Shargian O. Online document at: <https://embodiedacceptance.com/embodied-acceptance> Accessed August 23, 2022.

---

**Hiie Saumaa, PhD**, is a dance writer, scholar, and somatic movement educator. 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, mindful strength training, and somatic awareness. Her work explores interconnections between dance, somatics, embodied knowledge, health, creativity, and imagination. In 2018–2019, she was an inaugural fellow at Columbia University’s Institute for Ideas and 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, Paris College of Art, the Catholic University of Paris, Emlyon Business School, and l’Institut Mines-Télécom.

---

To order reprints of this article, contact the publisher at (914) 740-2100.