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## **Touch, Movement, and Dance**

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Touch is a vital, sometimes imperceptible part of our daily lives, development, emotional and physical wellbeing, and our connection to others. We have different needs for touch and the intensity of this need can vary during different stages of life. The lack of touch in the care of infants or in older age can be detrimental to growth and a sense of wellbeing. Withholding touch in intimate relationships can feel excruciating and disconnect us from the body. Some of our deepest traumas of abuse, neglect, and violence – as well as our deepest and most moving experiences of human connection and healing – might involve touch. The Covid-19 pandemic was a reminder of the human need for touch and the emotional and mental difficulties that might arise due to restrictions placed on touch and social interactions.

In this article, I discuss the topic of touch in the context of somatic movement and dance. Is it worthwhile to incorporate touch and tactile awareness into one's movement practice? What would be the benefits of increased awareness of the sense of touch and how can we improve this sensitivity? Can somatic movement practices – practices that hone

participants' bodily awareness and guide them to notice their physical sensations – help us connect to the sense of touch?

### **Importance of Touch**

The sense of touch is the first sense we develop in the womb: the sense of sight, taste, hearing, and smell are developed later. In *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, Ashley Montagu calls the skin “the oldest and the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector.”<sup>1</sup> He argues for the importance of touch for mental and physical wellbeing and notes that for human beings, “tactile stimulation is of fundamental significance for the development of healthy emotional or affectional relationships.” For human development, the child needs to be handled, carried, caressed, and cuddled. The need for touch remains vital during our lifetime: touch is vital in affective and intimate relationships and benefits us in older age, reducing signs of irritability, forgetfulness, irregular eating, and depression. “Humans benefit from grooming and touch – in whatever cultural manifestation it is presented – at all ages,” notes Nina G. Jablonski in *Skin: A Natural History*.<sup>2</sup>

Julia F. Christensen and Dong-Seon Chang point out that physical contact triggers biochemical reactions in the brain. There is a release of messenger substances that make us feel good. “We feel affiliated or connected to the one we touch, or to the one who touches us. Dopamine and the bonding hormone oxytocin are just two of these messenger substances,” they note.<sup>3</sup> The experience of touch during massage or via caresses and reassuring pats reduces stress hormones and encourages the secretion of growth hormones. “In many social contexts today, especially the workplace, physical touching

between unrelated people is strongly discouraged, but the need for social touch remains. The popularity of office massage, head massages in hair salons, and the bewildering array of wraps, massages, and other spa treatments now available in many industrialized countries speaks of humans' abiding desire to be touched, even if we prefer to discuss the experience only in terms of improving our health or appearance," Jablonski writes.

Touch can be beneficial during sickness and can lead to measurable physiological benefits, such as "pain relief for cancer and arthritis sufferers, gains in peak air flow for asthmatics, increased lymphocyte counts for those with HIV and AIDS," according to Jablonski. Stimulating the tactile and pressure receptors in the skin stimulates the central nervous system, which prompts the secretion of endorphins and related compounds. "The result is both pleasure and relief, with measurable reduction of anxiety and stress levels and strengthening of the immune system, whose functioning is inhibited by high stress levels," Jablonski notes.

### **Touch and Somatics**

Dance and embodied movement practices offer many opportunities for touch. Somatic practices such as Body-Mind Centering, Continuum Movement, the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, and Nia dance, among others, incorporate self-touching and/or touching the other. Some practices might include brief elements of touch and hand-based healing methods, such as self-massage, Reiki, or tapping. In yoga practices and alignment-based methods, instructors might use their hands to gently guide the participants and their energy flow throughout the body. It is important that the instructors create as safe an environment as possible and give the participants the option of not receiving touch,

verbalizing their discomfort, and not engaging in touch-based activities. Involving touch is not suitable for everyone and some participants might be highly sensitivity to touch.

How touch is being perceived depends greatly on the intention of the person doing the touching. Touch can inform, educate, and convey support, safety, and healing, which are the main purposes for which touch is being used in somatic movement practices. Dance therapist and choreographer Marylee Hardenbergh noted in an interview with the author, “Touch goes to a certain part of the brain and it’s really important. To me there are two kinds of touch: one touch is a containing, reassuring touch. The other is more educational. For example, I might palpate someone’s scapula and have them learn where that is and how it moves.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, touch can also express or be read as expressing curiosity, sensuality, and desire, which is appropriate in an intimate context. Touch is a sensitive topic and dependent on the context.

Dancer, educator, and choreographer Tal Shibi pointed out that in somatics, dance, and bodywork, participants have a permission to receive and give touch that is often not available in other contexts. As infants and young children, we hopefully receive a lot of touch from our caregivers. At some point, touching becomes less prevalent and moves to the realm of romantic life or is limited to occasional hugging and patting on the back between family members. “In bodywork, somatics, and dance, touch gets another realm of permission that is not existent in other arenas of society. We can try touch in a dance workshop,” Shibi noted in an interview with the author.<sup>5</sup> For people whose jobs do not involve touching others, there is no other channel for expressing somatic or neutral touch. “Dance and somatic movement bring this type of touch to the surface,” Shibi said.

## **Experiential Anatomy**

Experiential anatomy is one somatic method where touch is central. In experiential anatomy sessions, participants learn about the functioning of the muscles, the bones, and the joints by touching and moving the body. In these sessions, participants experience their anatomy through touch and movement, rather than only via pictorial images in anatomy books. For example, participants might be touching each other's shoulder blades to develop awareness of the structure and movement in this part of the body. They might trace the edges of the scapulae and hold the hands on them as the receiver of touch moves his/her shoulder blades up, down, together, and apart. The external touch helps us feel these parts of the body more clearly.

This awareness of how the bones and muscles work in relation to each other is then taken to movement. The more we know about how our bodies move – how the ball and socket joints function, how the spine includes the neck – the more articulate we can be in our movements. “The more articulate we can be, the more polished our tool is. To me, the body is the tool for being alive,” said Marylee Hardenbergh, dance therapist, choreographer, and experiential anatomy instructor, in an interview with the author. “Moving from the awareness of the body creates for me a very deep level of movement where even if I am trying to emulate a dance teacher in what she/he is doing, I have patterns where I know what is happening inside my body. I feel it a lot more deeply,” Hardenbergh added.

## Contact Improvisation

When we think of touch, a common image that comes to mind is that of one person touching the other with his/her hands. It is less common to think of touching with other body parts. Contact improvisation is an improvisational partner dance where the movers stay in constant contact through touch. The movements do not unfold only through hand to hand contact but any part of the body can be in touch with a part of the other person's body – shoulder to shoulder, head to shoulder, thigh to back, pelvis to pelvis, to name a few.

Through contact, the dancers negotiate giving weight, their responsiveness to each other's movements, and moving together in space. The dancers are "sensually expanding the field of the body's awareness in proprioception – the body's awareness of itself and where it is in space – and the ability to receive information," Shibi says. "This practice starts to awaken different parts of the body so that the skin becomes much more awakened."

Contact improvisation typically unfolds between two dancers but one can also explore the contact between one's body and the ground, a wall, or any surface. We can use surfaces such as the floor or walls or a chair to give us feedback about the body and the space. The whole body can be trained into understanding touch as a language. We can extend "touch" to refer to how different parts of the body are in relation with the ground or the objects. For example, a practitioner might focus on training his/her sensitivity through the back by rolling against the wall and sensing what is happening in the body. When I sit, I can feel how my pelvis is touching the surface of what I'm sitting on. I can feel how my feet are touching the ground.

When we bring awareness to the ways in which our skin and different parts of the body are in touch with our space and the environment, we increase our bodily awareness

and become more alive to the sense of touch. We realize how the outer environment and the surfaces that we touch influence our alignment, how we feel, and also give us information about the body. For example, I might have difficulties feeling my shoulder blades – are they up, down or rounding to the front? When I am on the ground, I can feel the contact that my shoulder blades are making with the ground: I can envision my shoulder blades much more readily through this direct kinetic feedback. It is easier to feel certain parts of the body by feeling the surface underneath it. Surfaces offer us sensory feedback that we can use to feel more deeply connected to the body.

### **Touch in a Somatic Dance Class**

Most of the somatic dance methods such as Nia, SuryaSoul, Tamalpa Life-Art Practice, 5Rhythms, and JourneyDance or dance therapy practices do not include touch as a constant element throughout the class, as in contact improvisation or other partner dances, but they might include elements of touching the self or other participants. In warmup and cooldown in particular the participants might hold hands on their body, give a self-massage, hold one another's hands in a circle, hold one hand on the back of one's neighbor, or sit back to back and gently sway side to side or front and back.

In Nia dance, which includes easy-to-follow patterns and free dance, we might set a simple repetitive pattern into the feet and use the arms for free expression and touching. We might put the hands on the chest, the belly, the low back, the crown of the head as we dance; we might brush one arm and the torso and the legs with the other hand as we move or slide both hands down the thighs toward the shins with the knees bent in a standing position. We might pat or drum the body with the feet still or in movement. These self-

touches can feel sensual, healing, energizing, supporting: participants can choose their own intent for the touch. To develop whole-body touch awareness, instructions for free dance explorations could involve “feel how the feet are touching the floor,” “touch the ground with different body parts,” “move the feet with the hands on the pelvis.” The instructions can be more abstract as well, such as “let the music touch the skin of the body” and “feel the air touching the skin as you move through the space.”

Somatic dance classes might include sections of partner dancing that involve touch. For example, one dancer might put his/her hand on the other person’s shoulder and gently direct the other person’s movement, without insisting, without pushing the person to go in a certain direction. “If you can get nuance with giving information and not insisting on it then that can be a very interesting way for the hand or any other part of the body acting as the hand developing sensitivity. I can imagine my elbow having the same sensitivity as the palm. That kind of intentionality starts to get interesting because you can work with another person in nuanced ways. And a lot of it is invisible intention rather than ‘I really want you to go here,’” Shibi notes.

Simple movements that involve touching the other person, such as holding hands in a circle at the end of the class, can help participants with their emotional wellbeing and promote a sense of belonging. Sitting back to back with a partner and gently swaying to the side or front and back or humming to the music – these seemingly simple actions, often used in dance therapy and somatic dance modalities, can make participants feel supported: we take in the connection with another human through the entire back. “We leave the class after having had some human connection – somebody gave some attention to the body where the subtext for the body is ‘you’re important, you’re valued, you’re not isolated.’ ‘I’m



connected to other human beings.' That is pretty huge in terms of overall sense of wellbeing in the world," Shibi noted.

### **Touch in Somatic Strength Training**

If approached somatically, strength training and stretching offer multiple avenues for tapping into the benefits of touch and developing tactile sensitivity.<sup>6</sup> In my somatic strength training and stretching classes, I use self-touch to activate awareness in different body parts, akin to the methods of experiential anatomy. For example, before doing a biceps curl, I might ask the participants to put their opposite hand onto the biceps and slowly bend the elbow and lift the arm. I ask them whether they can feel what is happening inside the muscle and whether they can sense how the muscles reach the peak state of contraction gradually. We then take a weight or an elastic band and perform the exercise. Mental awareness stays in the area where we are working more easily once we have touched that part of the body.

In an exercise for quadriceps, we lie on the ground with the knees bent, legs together, and extend and bend one leg repeatedly. I encourage the participants to put the same side hand on the thigh and feel through the hand what parts of the thigh muscles are moving and which ones feel quieter. This knowing and exploring through the hand is useful also in the areas of the body where the contraction might be harder to feel. In a chest press, the back muscles and the arms can easily overpower the subtler sensations in the chest muscles. To help the participants find and feel the muscles, I ask them to slide the fingers toward the armpit of the other side, the hand over that side of the chest, and slowly lift and

lower the working side arm. After activating this awareness, we proceed with the exercise with the band or the weights in the hands.

Touching the muscles or the bones as they work or stretch raises awareness of what is happening inside the body and how the body works. It brings the mental attention to the bodily experience and activates curiosity about our physical experience and helps us befriend parts of the body about which we might feel judgmental. As one of the participants put it, "The palpation is great. It helps awaken the kinesthetic sense, and it feels good, too." In the words of another participant, "Self-touch is the logical counter movement to the internal touch of muscles and bones during movement. When we are doing gentle movements our bones massage the muscles and tendons from inside. I feel that mostly with my shoulder blades. Self-touch gives me a sense of caring about myself. It also focuses the mind on specific areas that may be difficult to picture in the mind."

At the beginning or the end of the class, I often use self-massage and holding of the hands on the body. I help students develop trust in the healing power of their own hands: I ask them to bring the hands to the head or the belly and, without thinking, trust that the hands will know what to do – to massage in circles, up and down, or to gently drum or tap, for example. We might end the class relaxing on the ground, feeling the weight of the bones and the muscles. I guide the participants to put the hands on the belly or the heart and feel their connection to the body as they inhale and exhale. This holding of ourselves with our own hands can calm the parasympathetic nervous system and help us feel grounded and at peace.

## **Emotional and Transformative Experiences with Touch**

Touch that we experience in a movement or dance session can awaken and put us in touch with our emotions and thus be an important part of our emotional wellbeing. Someone else's touch can bring a release to a deeply held trauma or soften some tensions inside of us that we were not even aware of.

Hardenbergh recounted how an exercise that started as an experiential anatomy experience led to a deep emotional release. The participants, a group of 11 women, were learning about their shoulder blades and how the spinal cord receives data: the data from the body to the brain comes in through the back of the spinal cord. Hardenbergh introduced the participants to the idea of receiving from the back. "When I think of that, I imagine being touched from behind and it's a different level of awareness of the whole body and especially the back and the spine."

In the exercise, one person would stand and the rest of the participants would touch her back. The people who were touching would breathe together, led by the instructor. The person who was being touched was being instructed to receive as much as they could. "It was very touching. It was very important. And for some of the women, it brought them to tears because they were so used to taking charge and not receiving in such a safe – not only was it safe but the whole group, each of us had at least one hand on her back. There was that sense of being contained and receiving, which was beautiful," Hardenbergh noted.

In her dance therapy sessions, Hardenbergh used the idea of a "nurturing corner." There was a corner where the clients would go sit with the therapist with their back to the therapist and be held, for reassurance and calming. "They would come in, with their back to me and I would hold them for as long as they want, for one minute or five minutes. There's

the educational part where I am trying to teach the person how to move from their trochanters. I might touch their trochanters. I think that's different from the sense of holding and containing," she added. Feeling a body part or the entire body being held by someone and sensing trust can help us let go and relax on a deep level, in the mind and the body alike.

### **Conclusion**

To become more aware of the sense of touch, one can start by noticing touch in one's everyday life. What are you touching as you are reading this article? Are you holding something in your hands, such as a smartphone or a hard copy of the journal? What is the information about these objects that you are taking in through the hands? What parts of the body are touching the surface you are sitting or lying on? Are your feet touching the ground? Are you aware of how your clothes are touching the skin? The air touching the skin? Touch is imperceptibly a part of each moment of our lives.

To activate the sensitivity in the skin and awareness of touch, one could bring more awareness of touch into one's daily activities. Shibi recommended feeling the impact of the water on the skin when taking a shower and self-massaging the feet, the low back, and any other areas of the body with a coconut oil or almond oil. Hardenbergh suggested putting on lotion in front of a full-length mirror in nude, to be with the body both visually and through the tactile sense. "Touching and caring for the skin all over is such a great way to say, 'Hi body, I'm here with you. I care about you. I'm sending you my loving intentions,'" she said. She recommends giving oneself a big hug, holding it, and then changing the arms: "Give yourself a hug and feel, I'm accepting myself just the way I am." "I can be loving to my thigh,

my low back, my knee. It is giving the body the message, 'I am here. I support you. I accept you. I love you.' And the body goes, 'Ahh, thank you!' Our skin can receive the message of acceptance through our hands," Hardenbergh notes. Via our hands, through the skin, we can communicate with the body.

A movement practice helps us develop the sense of touch further. The goal would be to find a way where self-intimacy through touch and sensation, on the one hand, and the body in movement, on the other hand, can inform themselves. The self-intimacy, the connection to one's own body and its sensations, is the basis for a somatic movement practice. Somatic movement methods are excellent for developing tactile awareness: in somatic movement and dance practices, we develop the awareness of what is happening inside the body when it moves or stands still, what sensations are present in the bones, the tissues, the muscles, the organs, and how the movements affect us emotionally. Touch gives us information about our sensations.

Self-touch or touch received from others is one way for us to come into sensations and to feel the multiple layers of being human. Through touch, we feel the skin, the muscles, the fasciae, the bones, the organs, the nervous system, our thoughts, our emotions, and our deep need for feeling connected to others and to ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Montagu, A. *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Jablonski, N.G. *Skin: A Natural History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Christensen, J.F. and 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.

<sup>4</sup> For courses and additional info, see

<https://www.globalsiteperformance.org/about/about-me/> Accessed on November 29, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> For courses and additional info, see <http://talshibi.com/> Accessed on November 29, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Saumaa, H. *Somatic Strength Training: An Alternative to 'No Pain No Gain*. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, 2020, Vol. 26, No. 1, 19-22.

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