

# Healers on the Edge



## Somatic Sex Education

edited by Tara Green, Caffyn Jesse  
and Mehdi Darvish Yahya

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## CONTENTS

1	Introduction Cassie Moore	1
2	Transformative Touch Caffyn Jesse	7
3	Developing Greater Capacity for Pleasure Through Somatic Sex Education Meredith Reynolds	15
4	Loving Touch: My Journey with Somatic Sex Education Jen C.	21
5	Somatic Sex Education as a Pioneering Reclamation Modality Christiane Pelmas	27
6	Soul Songs Quynh Phuong Nguyen	39
7	Chronic Pelvic Pain Kristin Lang	43
8	Somatic Sex Education: Applications in the Gender Galaxy dr. liam "captain" snowdon	51
9	The Best and Safest Gift Vulnerability Warrior	59
10	Perfect Touch: Using Touch to Heal Trauma and Neglect Mehdi Darvish Yahya	65
11	Naysha, the Wounded Warrior (a case study) Mehdi Darvish Yahya	75
12	Unwinding Sexual Trauma Roi TurPin	85
13	Your Home Cosmo Meens	91

14	Porn Addiction is Real Corinne Diachuk	93
15	Unwinding the Bondage of Patriarchy in the Body Katie Spataro	101
16	A Journey to Mysexual Erin	109
17	Making Somatic Sex Education Sexcessible for Every Body Shauna Farabaugh	117
18	A Spectrum of Erotic Empowerment: Assessment for Practitioners and Clients Caffyn Jesse	127
19	Let our Healing be Shame-Free Sara	133
20	Expressive Erotic Play: Creative Rituals for Erotic Embodiment River Frey Drosera	137
21	Somatic Sex Educator Contributors	146

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The profession of somatic sex education developed out of the Certified Sexological Bodywork program that is offered around the world under the leadership of Joseph Kramer. Betty Martin created complementary teachings on empowering consent that form a foundational aspect of practice for many somatic sex educators. The work of Staci Haines, Peter Levine and Pat Ogden informs the profession. Other important teachers in the field include Elfi Emaya Dillon Shaw, Ellen Heed, Annie Sprinkle and Betty Dobson, plus many of the contributors to this book.

The Somatic Sex Educators Association, including members, students, past and present directors, and the teaching team for the professional training, is a community that provides an atmosphere of dynamic learning and sharing to guide us in co-creating this field.

A special thanks is owed to our courageous clients, who risk great vulnerability in seeking their integrity, and who motivate us to practice a profession that is daring and deeply ethical.





## INTRODUCTION

by Cassie Moore

We need sexual healing. We are in profound, desperate need of mindful attention and care for our intimate lives. We are deeply hurting, individually and collectively, but we don't know where to take our sexual wounds for mending. We are sexually abused, traumatized and disempowered. We are disembodied, fragmented and disconnected. We are dissatisfied, but we aren't really sure what we actually want, or what is even possible. We don't know where or how to find out, and we are discouraged from asking. We certainly haven't been given any compasses or roadmaps. What we have been given is reproduction-focused diagrams of ovaries and testicles, and minimal, if any, information about the pleasure aspect of what happens, "down there". We've been given shame.

It is this enormous need for sexual healing, and the dire lack of awareness about the ways it can begin to occur, that motivated the creation of this book. People need to know what is possible. They need to know how to nurture their sexual selves and bring much-needed healing to their intimate lives. Further, they need knowledge of and access to skilled practitioners who can guide in that process.

Who are these skilled practitioners? They are somatic sex educators, and this anthology seeks to serve as a representation of the wide spectrum of possibilities for healing that they provide. They are

working ethically and bravely on the edge of social acceptability, pushing past the walls of conventional therapeutic modalities. They work with diverse populations to help address issues ranging from sexual trauma to pornography addiction to chronic pelvic pain.

Less than three years ago, I was one of the many who had no idea that somatic sex education even existed, even though I had a master's degree in counseling and years of experience in human helping and mental health. I had no inkling of the transformative path I was about to stumble upon.

At 35, I had just moved back to my home city to begin a private practice in counseling. I was starting from scratch, with no money and little hope for an immediately financially successful private practice. In order to get on my feet financially while maintaining time for building my practice, I decided to venture into the underground and enticingly lucrative world of sex work. I created a pseudonym and a private persona and began offering erotic massages while maintaining my above-board personal and professional identity with all but a few close friends. I concurrently operated two separate practices: one for counseling, and one for erotic touch. But what started as a juicy way to make some extra money evolved into something much greater: a healing practice that felt like a calling. I felt the unexpected power and value of the non-judgmental space I held and compassionate touch I provided. I could sense the stories and experiences of my clients in their bodies and genitals. I could feel them unfold and relax into vulnerability and trust, and allow themselves to soften into authenticity. I was at the intersection of sex work and healing practice, and I needed to know more.

I searched erotic healing modalities online, and inevitably discovered the existence of somatic sex education. I was refreshed to find an established, legitimate and ethical sexual healing modality that was inclusive of erotic touch. As a full body sensual touch provider, I already felt empowered by and proud of what I provided, but I was also keenly aware of negative cultural attitudes toward sex workers, and I knew I couldn't shout my excitement for my practice from the rooftops without judgment and consequences. It was profoundly affirming to discover an erotic touch practice that wasn't relegated to underground realms. I felt validation of what I sensed intuitively in my erotic work: that a healing space for the sexual being which included touch was valuable and transformative.

## INTRODUCTION

Although somatic sex educators have an established professional association, standards for certification and a clear code of ethics, some cultural shifting and education needs to occur before the profession is accepted into the mainstream. It is my hope that widespread awareness of the unique value of this healing modality can be increased, and the seeking of body-based support for sexual difficulties can become the norm.

My piqued interest in somatic sex education eventually led me to an intimacy educator workshop facilitated by a highly respected somatic sex educator and an inspiring visionary, writer and educator in the field. Over the course of less than a week, I participated in a profound journey along with a small number of women and men from various parts of Canada and the U.S. We became embodied, we explored, we shared and we touched. We encountered personal demons and shame. We learned to provide touch with a full heart, and ask for the exact touch that we wanted. What seems on the surface to be so simple, to identify touch desires, communicate them, and have them be compassionately met, is so deeply revolutionary and transformative. I could feel the change unfold on a cellular level.

The workshop was co-facilitated by a therapist and somatic sex educator with special interest in using touch to heal trauma. I experienced trauma in my very early childhood, and despite extensive counseling and a lifetime of attempts to move toward health, I still carried a deep sense of sorrow and brokenness in my body, and a profound sense of shame. During one of our practice sessions, I was paired with him as a client. Through guided touch, words and presence, I felt a huge, unexpected release of sorrow and shame, and a shifting toward safety and wholeness. After the workshop, I had a strong sense that I needed to continue working with him, as I felt that the work we did had finally begun to provide the meaningful sexual healing that had eluded me.

I proceeded to work with him intensively over five consecutive days. During that time, I felt myself shift from deep shame, fear and helplessness toward empowerment, confidence and an increased sense of wholeness. He guided me continually in tuning into my body and being, and not turning away from the emotions, images and sensations I found there. I learned to identify what I wanted and ask for it clearly and confidently. I experienced my voiced needs being acknowledged, honored and met, and it was deeply restorative and

transformative for me. I know that this level of change would not have occurred in a more traditional therapeutic container. The element of compassionate, safe touch that included my sexual body, guided fully by me, provided a unique and powerful context for repair.

I feel deeply grateful to have discovered somatic sex education, and the compassionate, skilled and brave practitioners to be found there. It is these practitioners who made me feel at home in the world as a passionate provider of erotic touch, and who have taught, mentored and worked therapeutically with me to heal old, pervasive sexual wounds and deeply held shame. It is these practitioners whose voices are represented in this anthology, along with clients' voices. As these contributors share their knowledge, ideas, work, vision and passion, may their words enlighten and inspire, and guide you closer to your own sexual healing.





## TRANSFORMATIVE TOUCH

by Caffyn Jesse

Mary was a neglected child who was sexually molested by a neighbor from the ages of six to thirteen.<sup>1</sup> She was isolated and ashamed of her experiences, and shy and lonely in her teens. In college, she began to feel more open to making friends. As she learned about the widespread existence of same-sex passions and gender alternatives throughout history and around the world, she became curious about both her attraction to women and her gender identity. With great courage, she shared her inquiry with a new friend. Two days later, she was violently raped by three men who aimed to punish and correct her deviance.

When I met Mary she was almost forty. Years of supportive talk therapy had helped her stabilize mentally and emotionally, and function despite the legacy of trauma and neglect. But when it came to sex, Mary's hard-won stability unraveled. She was unable to access genital feeling, alone or with others. Even thinking about sex made her feel profoundly unsafe. Her nervous system would become dysregulated, as she experienced panic, nausea, confusion and dissociated numbness.

Cultural and personal experiences surround sex with stress, danger and neglect, not only inhibiting the ecstasy that is possible, but

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<sup>1</sup> These stories are amalgams of several stories, with names and identifying details changed to protect client confidentiality.



generating opposite effects – our cells are bathed in stress hormones and neurochemicals that damage the nervous system and actively obstruct pleasure, learning, happiness, connection and sexual response. Changing self, culture and community begins with changing our bodies' unconscious processes, so we can shift the fear-based patterns grooved in our own autonomic nervous systems. With this recognition, the profession of somatic sex education was born.

Somatic sex education utilizes the new science of the brain and nervous system as a basis for expanding sexual happiness. With awareness of neuroplasticity we understand that the whole nervous system is continually changing – either learning and growing, or contracting and becoming inhibited. Just as muscles grow when we work out and atrophy when we do not, the brain and nervous system grow and evolve with more enrichment and diverse stimulation. We can create new practices and form new habits, including the habit of sexual happiness. We can expand erotic possibilities with positive experiences of physical pleasure. We can repair damaged attachment systems with experiences of feeling cherished in our sexuality, and encouraged and prized for who we are as erotic beings.

Somatic practices are body-based exercises and experiences that allow each person to open an inner dialogue with their autonomic nervous system function. We offer coaching in conscious breath, movement, mindful masturbation and extended erotic touch in a container of safe professional relationship and caring community. Individual somatic sex education sessions are places to practice feeling and expressing desires and learning efficacy and empowerment in the erotic realm. Practitioners and clients form a community of practice that celebrates and cultivates the erotic for personal and social change.

When Mary first came to work with me, we began with exercises that helped her access a sense of grounded safety, and to regulate her nervous system so she had more choice. Breath, pelvic floor activation and working with sound and movement helped Mary learn to self-soothe and self-regulate her autonomic nervous system. She was then able to pay more attention to erotic images and feelings, and to gradually build capacity for self-pleasure. With patient practice in feeling and effectively expressing her Yes, No and Maybe, she began to feel connected with her choice and voice, and to trust her own empowerment.

We worked for many hours with the question ‘How would you like to be touched?’<sup>2</sup> Mary gradually began to feel and express what her body wanted, and to track this from moment-to-moment. As she practiced requesting touch, exploring, and changing her mind, Mary began to gradually open to what she described as the “yearning of her soul”. At times this felt frightening, destabilizing and intensely vulnerable. The safe container of professional practice with a trustworthy, caring and educated practitioner was essential for Mary to be able to safely reclaim a curiosity about sex.

Somatic sex education can be an effective way to address sexual trauma. For survivors of sexual abuse and violence, navigating desire and communicating choice in highly-charged sexual exchanges can feel impossible. Somatic sex education provides an arena in which people receiving touch can stay safe and focused. They are encouraged to breathe into body sensation and decide, moment to moment, what their body wants. Body-based exercises and experiences help people unwind trauma from their cells. Assessment practices allow practitioners to evaluate what clients are ready for, and to work in each person’s particular learning zone. ‘Emotional First Aid’ practices help clients get grounded and reoriented in the face of trauma triggers. The clear boundaries and ethics of professional practice create a container for healing.

Pleasure itself is healing. Learning to choose pleasure is key to erotic empowerment. When we are forced to endure trauma, oppression and neglect, our inner guidance system is damaged. Our culture further skews our self-trust with messages that pleasure is bad, and sexual pleasure is especially wrong and depraved. We are trained to deny and denigrate sexual pleasures, or to pursue empty pleasures that don’t serve us well in the long run.

Another client, Paul, described himself as being addicted to pornography. His sexual relationships felt flat and dull. His primary form of erotic expression came through masturbating in a habitual way to a specific type of porn he found on the internet. Paul had been circumcised as an infant. Although he had no conscious memory of the event, he described his genitals as scarred and numb. Scar tissue honoring, plus fascial work to restore genital feeling, helped Paul release the physical and emotional consequences of early-

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<sup>2</sup> as I learned to do from Betty Martin, a mentor and foundational teacher in this field. See the wonderful resources on her website: [bettymartin.org](http://bettymartin.org)

life trauma, and become more sensitive to subtle sensation. We worked together through a series of sessions that included breath coaching, masturbation coaching, and full-body massage with extended genital touch. As Paul's body became more capable of feeling expanded arousal and extended pleasure, he felt more relaxed and excited about sex. He became more aware of soft-penis pleasures and his internal arousal anatomy. He gained practice with the subtle joys accessible in a relaxed state – pleasures he had felt inhibited from exploring by cultural scripts that prescribe what a “man” is and how a man has sex. With this, he became more accessible emotionally, and more interested in deepening relationships with potential partners.

Reclaiming erotic pleasure from personal and cultural constraints means learning to trust our personal pleasure-seeking impulse. In small ways, over and over, we can create conditions in which we cultivate awareness of our own true yearnings. Each time we choose pleasure, we learn to follow the inner Yes. In deepening our experience of joy and wellbeing, we are also learning to trust the inner No - to avoid harm, including self-harm, and to deflect what and who will inhibit us. By expanding nervous system capacity for excited arousal and relaxed enjoyment, somatic exercises help people build competencies in self-regulation, connection and joy.

Tina and Terry had fallen in love as young people. Their early relationship was exciting and sexual, but over twelve years of marriage and the birth of two children, the fire had been extinguished. Terry yearned to reignite the passion, but Tina was reluctant. Her desire for sex had fizzled after the birth of their first child, and she experienced sex as a painful duty until she finally stopped. When they arrived at my studio, their relationship seemed joyless. It was devoid of all touch, not just sexual touch, because Tina perceived every touch as a demand for intercourse.

Tina and Terry needed practice identifying their inner yearnings, and choosing authentic pleasure in their lives. Coaching in communication and boundary-setting helped them create a safe container in which to get more curious about touch and erotic pleasure, so they could explore both directing and permitting enjoyable touch in an expanded container of consent. Information about genital anatomy, neurochemistry and hormones, erotic massage, and specific suggestions for how to make sex pleasurable in a long-term relationship helped them to find more pleasure in their

bodies and their connection than they thought was possible. At the same time, becoming part of a community of erotic explorers took the pressure off their marriage. Tina and Terry enjoyed surprising themselves and each other as they learned to investigate their own unique erotic identities more deeply, while remaining loyal to their relationship.

To really welcome erotic pleasure into our lives, we need more than a set of instructions for how to have better sex. We need practice being more calm, excited, attentive and alive; we need to make changes in our unconscious patterns and habitual reactions. We need a world that can welcome all of who we are. Our heads can be filled with knowledge and analysis about sex and relationship, and yet we still feel paralyzed when it comes to experiencing joyful sex, asking for what we want sexually, and living our particular and ever-shifting sexual identities with confidence and peace. Changing sexual habits and erotic relationships involves building awareness of personal and cultural constraints, opening to the more that is possible, and actual, ongoing practice of the future we want to live in.

The principles of somatic sex education are accessible. My book *Science for Sexual Happiness* describes basic tenets and offers over 100 exercises people can do at home. I am also on a team that teaches somatic sex education as a profession, mentoring and qualifying Certified Somatic Sex Educators and Certified Sexological Bodyworkers for the Somatic Sex Educators Association in Canada. Graduates are professional practitioners with a specialized education, standards of practice, a code of ethics and professional associations. The concept of client-centered care can be seen as a guiding principle for somatic sex educators. All attitudes, decisions and activities are meant to foster our clients' health and well-being. Anatomical knowledge, commitment to supporting diverse expressions of gender and sexual orientation, practice with empowering vulnerable clients, intake and assessment procedures and hygiene standards are among the characteristics of somatic sex education as a professional practice, along with ongoing peer and mentor supervision, and education for continuing competency.

Many ancient and indigenous cultures honor sexual energy as sacred. In Western culture, for many centuries, sex and spirit have been characterized as opposite forces by institutions that aim to control and ration spiritual experiences. Many of us unconsciously

internalize this idea, and imagine that sex is something lower and spirit something higher, or that sex is physical while spirit is ethereal. In reclaiming erotic pleasure from this separation, and exploring the science and poetry of our own bodies, our physical and emotional experiences of erotic pleasure can offer an unparalleled experience of joy and integration. Erotic pleasure can be a way to access altered states and other worlds. Beyond ordinary reality and everyday consciousness, we can connect with a deep, trans-personal wisdom that can guide our lives. Sexual energy can be experienced as transformative spirit, an aspect of the sacred, a way to dance in union with all that is.

Somatic sex education can help people go deeply into the beauty and mystery of sex, and learn how to access profound ecstatic states. Interacting with love and mindfulness while making deep connection from this core part of the self, we can experience sacred presence in others and in ourselves. Happiness, reverence and ecstatic bliss can be consciously chosen and practiced over time.

In the genital matrix of body, mind, spirit and emotion, we can learn to expand our capacity for joy, experiencing more and more deeply what it is to be fully alive.





## DEVELOPING GREATER CAPACITY FOR PLEASURE

by Meredith Reynolds

I have noticed over time in my role as a somatic sex educator that there is one common thread that runs through many of the stories and experiences my clients bring. This thread is pleasure limitation. Whether it's a person who experiences their vagina as numb, or a person who ejaculates earlier than they would like to, or a person who struggles to stay present during sex, the subject of pleasure limitation – and in some cases, pleasure aversion – feels frankly epidemic. This piece speaks to that phenomenon and what can be done somatically to support people to develop greater capacity for pleasure.

### **What is pleasure?**

Let's first get clear on what pleasure is. It isn't just about sex – and pleasure limitation in sex often signals pleasure limitation in other areas of life, so we need to look at it widely. While it's experienced in many different ways, pleasure can be defined by its broadly agreed characteristics:

- Pleasure is often associated with the satisfying of basic biological drives, like hunger, sexual desire, and social belonging.
- Pleasure can be found in appreciation of the arts, in music and dancing, and in religious and/or spiritual fervour.
- Pleasure's heights are often fleeting, and we can distinguish them



because they surpass ‘ordinary’ experience.

From a somatic perspective, I would add that:

- Pleasure fundamentally involves the body. Even the pleasure of an intellectually stimulating conversation can be felt in the body as well as the mind.
- Pleasure is about connection – with others, with ourselves, or with a sense of something greater than us. Though the experience of pleasure is highly individual, it is rarely in isolation.
- Though pleasure’s heights may be fleeting, we can learn to expand our frequency and experience of pleasure so that it becomes an easily accessed presence in our lives.
- Deeply embodied pleasure is synonymous with wellbeing.

### **Sounds wonderful! So, what’s the problem with pleasure?**

Those whose cultures are Western may recognize the poles of denial and indulgence. We have a guilty relationship with pleasure. Even dictionary definitions use terms like “recreation or amusement”, “diversion” and “worldly or frivolous enjoyment”. The impression given is one of an experience that is irresponsible or selfish, one that we should grow out of or learn to control if we are to be productive members of society. Yet, we see excesses and dishonesty where pleasure is held back, compartmentalized, or denied. We also see meanness, self-loathing and depression as people battle against their desires for pleasure and connection.

Adding to the confusion, there are mixed messages. Some pleasures are marketed or wryly tolerated in our cultures, such as the experience of being a consumer with a ‘lifestyle’, indulging excessively in food or alcohol or drugs, and engaging in sexual activity that breaks relationship agreements, i.e. doing things we’re ‘not supposed to’. These stories are luridly reported in the media, and fed back to us as a vicarious sort of pleasure. In many countries, sex education is inadequate at best and scare-mongering at worst, and the content may differ depending on what sex you are. Shame underpins most of the messages we receive about pleasure, and conscious choosing and embodiment are rarely modelled. Is it any wonder so many people are conflicted when it comes to sex and pleasure?

Pleasure limitation presents in the session room in many different

ways – as numbness, oversensitivity, compulsion, and avoidance. The internalized messages vary. A person may feel that they can't ask for what they really want for fear of being judged; there may be strong socialization that others' needs are more important or that pleasure isn't deserved; a lack of information may mean that the body's pleasure capability is not well-understood; there may be disabilities or issues with identity that can complicate experiences of pleasure; or there may be a trauma history, which has caused the body to be experienced as an unsafe place.

Plenty of people struggle to digest pleasure, to generate it reliably, and to feel good about feeling it. Many do not know how to cultivate it within themselves, instead looking almost exclusively to external sources for arousal.

It is this disconnect that I work with as a somatic sex educator and Certified Sexological Bodyworker – supporting people to really notice their bodies, to be able to inhabit them more consciously in incremental steps, to begin to feel more, to work with feelings of shame and unworthiness when they emerge, to experience pleasure and 'stay with it', and to learn to prolong pleasure states.

### **Towards the welcoming of pleasure**

Learning to be in pleasure is a process, a skill to be practiced. This takes time, and the shape of the work will depend on the barriers that people face. It does seem to me, though, that the body is persistent, and it will find its way, as a plant grows towards the sun. I believe our bodies long to be heartily lived in, to be witnessed, to be gloried in, to heal. In my work, I have the privilege of working in flow with these natural tendencies.

*Learning to be in pleasure is a process,  
a skill to be practiced.*

What is useful is often what is simple. The breath is a wonderfully simple tool of embodiment. Though complicated breath sequences can be enjoyable, they are not necessary to experience more awareness of the body in the present moment. Just by choosing to place attention on the breath, we can experience greater embodied awareness. In addition, we can learn to calm our nervous system down by making our out-breath longer than the in-breath. If we also learn to upregulate our nervous system by making the in-breath longer than the out-breath or by speeding up the breath, that's a great

basic toolset to explore different kinds of feeling states and arousal in the body.

In the steps towards the welcoming of pleasure, I have also found that a more psychological aspect requires attention. Without the element of permission, a joyous, erotically-integrated life can only be partially allowed. Permission for pleasure comes up in session, comes up in the orgasmic yoga (mindful self-pleasure) homework, and comes up in clients' wider lives. Self-consciousness and fear of greediness can emerge, which to me indicates not just discomfort with moving beyond the shallow or quick pleasures many of us are accustomed to, but also reveals the extent to which many of us fear imposing ourselves on others or fear being judged as indulgent. As an example, I recall my own experience of struggling with giving myself permission as I developed greater sensory awareness. I remember initially feeling self-conscious if I suddenly realised that I had been stroking a coffee cup or turning my face to the sun, just for the pleasure of the embodied experience. Over time, I learned how to relax in it, and have found that if people do notice that joyfulness and make a comment, they're more curious than judgemental. Developing greater capacity for pleasure involves giving ourselves permission to feel.

### **How we can build our capacity for pleasure**

“What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure”.

– Michel Foucault, from an interview published in the French magazine *Gai Pied*, April 1981

Developing an understanding of our genital structures and their functions can be normalizing in an age where sexual aesthetic and performance ‘ideals’ of porn have perhaps never been narrower. Whether supported by a somatic sex educator or through independent learning, finding out about the basic anatomy and physiology of arousal brings appreciation of the way our bodies work and why. Exploring those functions through mindful self-pleasure that focuses on noticing the physical changes in our genitals (and indeed the whole body) at different stages of arousal can be fascinating and very empowering.

The body holds an extraordinary amount of information about

what is happening for us. In addition to breath work, my sessions include simple exercises to support the person to notice the inner processes of their embodied experiences and describe what is happening (e.g. “my heart is beating a little faster than usual”, “there’s a tightness in my hip”, “there’s a tingling in my fingers”). Noticing these experiences in the body will inevitably involve noticing how things change in even a few minutes when sensations are ‘stayed with’ mindfully. These skills are supported and cultivated through a range of clothes-on somatic practices and through bodywork that raises erotic sensation.

In addition to becoming comfortable and proactive with our bodies, pleasure capability is grown by becoming comfortable and proactive with our boundaries. One of my teachers, Dr. Betty Martin, describes a process of learning to notice what you want (and what you don’t), to trust that, to honour it, and to learn to communicate it. Without boundaries, the wishes of others can become a burden that causes us to disconnect. With clear boundaries, honesty and communication, we can seek shared experiences of pleasure and bliss without becoming overwhelmed or derailed.

Understanding more about how our bodies work, deepening our experience of body awareness, and becoming more skilled at noticing and expressing our desires and boundaries make us “infinitely more susceptible to pleasure”, as Foucault so beautifully articulated.

### **Somatic awareness for holistic wellbeing**

‘Integrate your erotic’ is my strapline, because supporting people to enable their erotic capacity to infuse and bring joy to every aspect of their lives is my mission. In Western societies, many of us have learned to value the mind and distrust the body. But a groundswell of body/mind integration is evident. More and more people are unwilling to accept the disconnect. It is becoming increasingly well-understood that embodiment can make it easier to achieve things we long for and strive for – better sex (whatever that means for you), greater contentment, reduction in anxiety, and more considered and confident decision-making. It is my observation and experience that the befriending of our bodies and our pleasures doesn’t just make for greater sexual fulfillment, it makes for improved wellbeing in the fullness of our lives.



# LOVING TOUCH: MY JOURNEY WITH SOMATIC SEX EDUCATION

by Jen C.

I used to believe I was untouchable. That there was something intrinsically wrong with me that kept people from wanting to touch me, unless it was to hurt me. I carried that belief with me for much of my life, long after the abuse I endured growing up was over.

The sexual abuse left me feeling disconnected and alone. It wasn't until much later that I began talking about the abuse in therapy and started to heal. However, years of therapy only took me so far. I was still scared. I was scared of having an intimate relationship, of my sexuality and female-ness, of my body and my desires. And as much as I wanted to be touchable, I was scared of being touched.

It took over two years from when I first heard about somatic sex education until I felt ready to try it. Through a series of synchronicities, I heard Pamela Madsen (a Sexuality, Pleasure and Relationship Consultant) speak about her experience with this work as part of a women's health and wellness telesummit. Although I initially recoiled at the idea of being touched that intimately by anyone, never mind a stranger, I kept thinking about Pamela's talk. In hindsight, I think I knew this kind of work could help me heal.

Just showing up for my first somatic sex education session took heroic levels of courage. I'd be vulnerable with a stranger in ways I'd never been with anyone outside of the abuse. Although I'd resonated with the practitioner's website and liked her emailed responses to my

questions, I'd never met in her person. This session was so far outside my comfort zone and prior experience that it felt surreal as I walked up the road to her studio space. What kept me going was a deep knowing that I needed to see this through. When I got there and saw her partially opened door waiting for me, it was all I could do to knock and step inside.

We started slowly. She let me get familiar with her and the room, grounding me in the present and a sense of safety. We did some movement and boundary exercises, and she helped me begin to develop a vocabulary for different kinds of touch, so I could identify and ask for what I wanted. I felt torn because I was anxious about being touched, yet I wanted to explore as much erotic touch as I could while I had this chance. Hearing this, she helped me see I was wise to trust myself and not rush in; she shared her personal experience with somatic sex education and assured me there would be other chances to explore as I was ready. This permission to honour my intuition and boundaries was exactly what I'd needed.

Near the end of the session I asked for a massage. I knew I'd regret it if I left without having one. She said it would be a regular (non-erotic) massage unless I wanted more and invited her in. Because she set that boundary, it was easier for me to respect my limits, be in the moment, and enjoy her touch. That first massage I didn't venture far into erotic touch; it was enough for me to lie under a sheet with my underwear off instead of on. Her touch was confident, very present, gentle and loving; I felt safe. She had me guide her touch, telling her where to touch me and how (pressure, stroke, etc.). At first I felt self-conscious and afraid to say what I wanted and liked. It was challenging to tune into my body, never mind communicate what I felt. However, by the end of the massage it became easier and guiding her touch felt empowering, even fun. I ended up having what was by far the best massage I'd ever experienced.

The night after the session, I had a dream where I was being pursued by hundreds upon hundreds of horrific creatures and I took refuge in a house. When I realized the creatures were really my fears, I became calm and in my power. I simply opened the door and stepped out to face them. They disappeared.

Showing up for that first session was a rite of passage, moving from a life shut down by the abuse into a commitment to deeply

honour myself. On the ferry ride home, I felt the ocean's energy coming in through my root chakra and going all the way up to my heart. It felt incredible, and I later discovered the massage stroke I loved best opened up that energetic channel in my body. In the days after the session, I felt increasingly in my power, more at home in my body, and no longer scared of my feminine energy or ashamed of my sexuality. I felt more connected to myself, other people, and the Universe/God. For weeks afterward, the memory of the practitioner's touch and the feeling of the ocean brought a smile to my face.

Amidst those good feelings, I hadn't anticipated the hardest part of this experience would be returning to my daily life. Now I'd experienced such present, caring touch and connection, I more acutely felt its absence. I craved more sessions to the point it felt painful, and didn't know when or if they would happen. When I'd looked online there were no practitioners in my area. Living in a rural town where travel's more difficult, I'd felt lucky to find someone who resonated with me and was only a day and half's drive away. However, in addition to the extra travel time required, I had to cover some fairly large transportation costs given I had no car, the cost of the session itself (by the hour – and I chose a longer session to feel more comfortable), and accommodation. The biggest, ongoing challenges to doing this work weren't the emotional barriers I'd erected in response to the abuse, but both my finances and simply getting to her studio space.

Since that first session, I've gone back for a short, three-day retreat most years. These retreats have deepened the connection and awareness I found during that first session and gifted me with other breakthroughs and understandings. Going back to my daily life after being in such an intensely loving, connected environment remains the hardest part. I've cried after sessions, not knowing when or if I'd be able to return due to time and, especially, finances. And integrating my experiences with my daily life has been challenging. Although I've done my best to add more support into my life, this work's been lonely for me. I've few people I can talk to about it on a deep level, given it's so intimate in its nature, and no one other than my practitioner with whom I can truly share this path. Maintaining the feelings of beauty, love and connection I get from the sessions can be hard.



What helps me maintain my progress is also what I believe makes the sessions so profound for me. I actively use my creative outlets (from visual art through dance) to process and integrate my feelings and experiences, along with tools from years of therapy when I was younger, my spiritual faith and connection to nature, and the resilience I've developed through surviving abuse. I've created my own erotic practice: I cultivate pleasure by being present to things like the sensation of gentle rain on my face; my self-pleasuring has evolved beyond seeking release (orgasm) to finding pleasure; I actively use my therapeutic tools to work through feelings and flashbacks. And while a year between sessions can be hard, it's a time of integrating and growing so when I do go back for more sessions, I am ready for the profound experiences I often have there.

The somatic sex education sessions combined with my own erotic practice have healed things that (literally and figuratively) couldn't be touched by talk therapy alone. Despite the challenges, I've become deeply dedicated to this work. As I move through my fears and emotional pain, and experience new levels of erotic pleasure, I increase my capacity to cultivate joy and pleasure in my daily life. I am in awe as I peel away the layers of abuse and discover the beautiful power of my spirit.

It took my most recent session, five years after the first, to finally experience sacredness in sex. My whole life, I'd believed sex was something shameful and dirty; I wanted to believe in its goodness. The deep work we did that day triggered strong feelings and flashbacks of the abuse. After the session my practitioner made sure I would be okay and knew how to reach her if needed. Since she had no other clients that day, I was able to stay in her studio after she left. Trusting my intuition, I sat on a mat on the floor. My hands immediately started moving all over my body. First rapidly over my clothes and then, as they slowed to take off my clothes, over my skin. I realized it was an imitation of the abuse I went through and wasn't sure whether I should stop or keep going. I started saying "No!" over and over as my hands kept moving, seemingly of their own volition, and emotions spilled out of me. I was aware I could be walking a thin line between helping and further traumatizing myself and I sent out a strong prayer over and over for the Universe to show me in a tangible way the Divine in my sexuality, in all of this. It felt never ending. Desperately I kept pleading to the Universe, crying,

breathing, and staying with my feelings...

My “no”s gradually turned into “yes”es that became increasingly stronger. Instead of feeling my body was betraying me by responding to the “pleasure,” as it had seemed with the abuse, I was now fully moving toward pleasure and feeling my desire. As I touched myself, I increasingly felt surrounded by a warm aura of love and safety, my body undulating with deep enjoyment. It felt like a huge energy wave of love and other qualities I couldn’t describe was moving through and with me, as if we were one. Like dancing with the Divine. And when I came with a loud “Yes!” the energy flowed through me, intense and beautiful as it crested.

I feel blessed to have somatic sex education and my practitioner as part of my healing journey. My intention in sharing this story is to offer a personal glimpse into a healing modality that’s still relatively unknown and misunderstood, in the hope this may be of help to others. Given everyone’s different, I fully recognize this kind of work isn’t right for everyone and the degree people benefit from it varies greatly. The client-practitioner relationship also matters; finding the right practitioner was critical for me. And abuse survivors, in particular, may need support outside the sessions as somatic sex education isn’t a substitute for therapy. I was at a point where I was called to and ready for this work. Since then it’s become an integral part of my life.

My healing journey continues to be filled with intense highs and lows, and everything in between. In allowing myself to be vulnerable and touched intimately by a safe person, and in claiming my right to feel pleasure, I feel more connected to Life. Some of the most healing touch for me still includes the massage stroke I loved during my very first session, and being lovingly held in my practitioner’s arms. After a session, I often feel deeply grounded in my body, beautiful and powerful, my energy pulsing in harmony with the vibrant energy of the natural world around me.

I used to believe I was untouchable. Now I know differently. I am touched and loved by Life itself.



## SOMATIC SEX EDUCATION AS A PIONEERING RECLAMATION MODALITY

by Christiane Pelmas

The intention of this anthology is to introduce the newer modality of somatic sex education to mainstream culture. The primary intention of this chapter is to introduce somatic sex education as one of only a very few powerfully subversive healing modalities I call ‘reclamation modalities’. In order to do that I bring your attention to the war being waged by the dominant culture *against life* as it relentlessly converts ecosystems and human systems (and all the abundant inherent resources within) into profit, or extermination. I make clear that the dominant culture’s war against life includes the necessary assault on our human sovereignty/autonomy that begins with an assault on our wildness, our erotic intelligence and unique expression. I introduce two terms, ‘reclamation modalities’ and ‘dominant culture modalities’. I position somatic sex education at the exciting forefront of the ‘reclamation modalities’ which also positions it powerfully at the frontlines of the dominant culture’s war against life. There, it is positioned to assist us in reclaiming our voices and power, by guiding us back into the fullness of our – momentarily domesticated – erotic embodiment and intelligent wild wholeness.

It is Spring of 2017 as I write this essay. Here I sit, in Boulder Colorado, in the tranquil beauty of my home office, at my desk looking out over the (momentarily) green fields – coyote and raptor country – which run for a few miles, straight into the base of the

Flatirons of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Many days I say aloud, to myself, “*I’m lucky*”. It’s relatively peaceful here, easy to imagine the world is okay. But even here in this serenity and beauty, at this point, I’m disturbed, frightened, at times enraged. There are 216 fracking bids for the land that circles this neighborhood, awaiting their imminent green lights, like Hades horses frothing at the gates, eyes wild, hooves ready to plunder. These days, as patriarchy’s unquenchable hunger for power-over and profit-from earth’s remaining biodiversity (aka “convertible resources”) continues to grow, there is steady news of homeless refugees. Images come streaming into my office and heart; beleaguered and traumatized, babies strapped to their backs, meager belongings clutched in trembling hands, their homelands destroyed, lands that have been farmed for generations, sometimes millennia, only to be wasted in a mere few decades by unspeakable greed. The dirt under their nails is the last contact they may ever have with the lands within which their ancestor’s stories were born, woven and passed down. Languages are being lost at a rate of 1 every 2 weeks, and with them die the particular wisdom, medicine and traditions which root a people to the earth in a way that supports human stewardship. Scientists believe that 150-200 species of plant, animal, bird and mammal go extinct every 24 hours. With their extinction comes a further hobbling of the earth’s complex system of abundance and co-function; a thing we now have packaged into a term we call *permaculture*. Most of us cannot truly fathom what all this means, nor identify with it as the crisis that it is. Yet make no mistake, our bodies and souls are no less ravaged in this war. We are in the midst of our own intimate diaspora and extinction at the hands of the dominant culture. One that makes it possible to watch the news, see the forests being wasted, the men in power shaking hands with each other relentlessly, and turn back to our own lives only slightly disturbed, or worse, feeling even less relevant and responsible than we did a moment ago.

People, there is a war being waged by the dominant culture, which is colonizing and plundering the natural world for the profit of a very few individuals. This is a war, essentially, against life itself, in which *all* earth’s resources – its wilderness and wildness, its waters, its complex natural ecosystems and complex cultural human systems, its animals, plants, rocks, water and air – are all seen as entitlements for the taking or for extermination. And just under this clear assault is an

insidious one. The war waged against life is, necessarily, being waged against our human wilderness, our wildness and the souls which reside in them. This war necessarily targets that part of each of us which is sovereign, free-thinking and feeling, which is *of-the-earth*; that part of us which innately, intelligently stands against injustice and global biocide – the inevitable suicidal outcome of this war. This intimate, sinister assault against our wildness is a necessary strategy of the dominant culture's power and preservation. It must prevent individuals from the autonomous thinking and acting that would prohibit, among so many egregious actions, the wasting of the earth upon which we rely for our survival. *If we are okay with or blind to the forced exodus from, and vilification of, our own intimate homeland – the flesh, bones and blood of our physical bodies – we will be powerless against every other crime the dominant culture commits.*

This war – a global biocidal profiteering – must maintain a consistent assault on humans and our capacity to engage in soulful, enraged, sustained actions of opposition. The capacity to engage in this way, authentically protecting all life, is only possible in initiated adults who are in touch with, protective of, and deeply valuing, their intimate wildness and generativity and the lands within which these energies dwell – our physical bodies. This intimate war is the linchpin of the dominant culture's larger vision and it relies on three cornerstones in order to assure its continued success. It relies on a majority of us experiencing a relentless waterfall of individual shame. It relies on a majority of us experiencing an impenetrable, only momentarily assuaged sense of unworthiness. And, it requires that we have an omnipresent ever-growing experience of our own powerlessness and irrelevance. The keystone of these three toxic human experiences – the strategically positioned intimate reality we must not only experience but dutifully maintain, the one that allows each of the above cornerstone pathologies of human nature to take root – is our deep abiding exile from the unique and wild wisdom of our sex, our eros and generativity. We must become afraid and disdainful of our human wildness and the intimate wilderness of our bodies within which it dwells.

Because it is one of the requirements of the dominant culture's war that we are not only silenced and blinded but also complicit and participatory, it violently requires conquest and conformity, ensuring that all expressions, but particularly those of our human sexuality, sex

and eros, be either co-opted and colonized or violently shamed and driven underground if not exterminated. It requires that sexuality be co-opted for commercial gain, so that intimate encounters with our erotic generative nature are no longer organically, endogenously available to us. We must turn to a packaged version of them and access a domesticated experience of mono-cropped eros.

Within the dominant culture's war on our sovereignty and intimate terrain, healing modalities have necessarily been co-opted and colonized. Many, like the traditional western medically-minded fields of psychiatry and psychology, have made their allegiance clear and have become disguised foot soldiers of the dominant culture's goals. These modalities are generally not interested in human sovereignty and true unique expression and embodiment. Their primary focus is on helping individuals to function more smoothly within the current dominant culture's expectations. Their metrics pay attention to our peaceful human participation in the dominant culture, according to the rules established by the dominant culture. Their primary goal is to restore the human to a sense of *okayness and functioning*, and above all, not to disturb the waters of soul or feed our sleeping hunger to truly see the roots of our belonging and importance. Whether overt or covert, these modalities have a manifesto of '*Get with the current program, because it's not going to change. Why don't we just focus on making the best of it?*' The tools used by these dominant culture modalities are specifically the by-products of the dominant culture (and they egregiously line the pockets of the dominant culture). In fact, most often these modalities serve to alienate us from old-world traditional, earth-based practices, medicines and remedies by telling us that science has found a quicker and more predictable way to treat our discomforts and disease. '*It's more efficient*' we are told, '*to take this pill*'. In the case of psychiatry and psychology, the primary tool in their arsenal is psychopharmacology and the use of synthetic chemistry to merely ameliorate our superficial symptoms; symptoms that are a healthy expression of the war being waged against the earth and the alienation we feel from our own intimate terrain. More insidiously, dominant culture modalities alienate human beings from their social, communal, earth context. A person who cannot sleep is simply '*an insomniac*'. Rarely is there an invitation to listen to and deeply honor, let alone prioritize, the larger, likely far more accurate, social, communal and earth-contextual story

of the person who cannot sleep.

Conversely, ‘reclamation modalities’ are ones that specifically aim to restore us to the contextual-rich soils of our soul-embedded homelands, homelands that are more-than-human and larger than our domesticated life. These modalities do not have *okayness* or *undisturbed participation* as their goal. They have as their metric for success the extent to which we are alive and curious (even if uncomfortable and disturbed); the extent to which we are embedded within a larger context of meaning and value; the extent to which we have unfettered access to our authentic essence. Importantly, reclamation modalities understand that this is work that often disturbs a person’s sense of wellness as they strip away old identities and re-connect with their authentic wild nature and embodied experience. Likely, relationships, jobs, living situations, ways of being might all fall away as a person uproots themselves from their former behaviors and expectations. And whether it is a direct aim of a reclamation modality, or the by-product of the work done, the work helps to reconnect us to our innate awareness of the primary importance of earth’s healthy environmental, eco- and human systems, without which we will not survive.

Currently, the modality of somatic sex education is one of very few reclamation modalities. As such it is uniquely and strategically positioned at the frontlines against the dominant culture’s war against life. Somatic sex education’s focus and philosophy, and the deeply intimate, radical nature of the hands-on work its practitioners do, helps guide humans back to the intimate homeland of their erotic wildness. We might imagine this work is the antithesis of political, and yet our intimate terrain of wholeness and embodiment has been so strategically undermined, commercialized and incarcerated that any modality whose aim is to restore us to our authentic embodied experience is among the most subversive. Somatic sex education focuses on our erotic and sexual wellness but not merely for the sake of pleasure. We focus on these aspects of our human experience because, alienated from them, we can accomplish nothing else of authentic value. ‘Subversive’ is a particularly good word for the modality of somatic sex education because while we might be speaking to the task of increasing pleasure and embodiment, it turns out in fairly short order, these capacities tend to, whether directly or indirectly, inspire us to become *agents of misbehavior*, standing against



the dominant culture's biocidal profiteering. Somatic sex education assists in uprooting us from the domesticated, disembodied, shamed experiences we have been *taught* to have of our sexuality and wildness, to carefully replant us in the fertile soil of the intimate experiences we are *endowed* to have. It is a delicious by-product of these experiences that we become aware of the fact that we are inextricably *part of* the wildness of the world, without which we cannot survive, souls intact. Practically and gracefully, somatic sex education does this by assisting individuals to cultivate intimate, embodied, pleasure-filled encounters with soul and self, cultivating and prioritizing the wildness of our generative, erotic natures.

Like other reclamation practitioners, somatic sex educators are wilderness guides and spelunkers – comfortable in the terrain of the unknown, the mystery, the dark where experiences of intensity (grief, rage and ecstasy to name a few) are the norm. They are intimate archeologists; deeply valuing the gentle excavation of that which has become collateral damage to a thing the dominant culture erroneously calls 'progress'. Whether or not they consciously identify themselves as such, somatic sex educators are pioneering activists, persevering in the exploration and refinement of a vocation that can be considered sex work, and therefore illegal, in all 50 United States of America and most of the other countries in which we are practicing. We are radical practitioners because despite the dominant culture's insistence that it is of no consequence, we doggedly teach and believe that our greatest sense of wellness lies deep in the vast terrain of the oft-sequestered, exiled wildness of the most essential aspects of us – those of our sexuality, generativity and pleasure.

Unlike practitioners of the dominant culture, reclamation practitioners are not *fixers* or *healers*. We are not listening for problems and pathologies. We see this language and orientation to be one of the powerful numbing stories in the war against our autonomy and sovereignty – that we are fundamentally flawed, requiring repair and modification, amputation of unnecessary or inconvenient parts of us. Somatic sex educators *see* and *celebrate* wholeness and possibility. We develop, teach and guide practices that bring our people back to what is alive and well in the body and soul (if atrophied, scared or understandably traumatized). We understand the energy of our arousal and pleasure to be one of our greatest human endowments for its nourishing and healing capacity; which among its many

benefits, can efficiently carry stuck, unsequenced trauma, powerlessness and unworthiness out of hiding, through resolution and into integration.

To bring these bold claims into context and meaning, and while I have volumes of examples as a practitioner of somatic sex education, I'd like to tell you a story from my experience *receiving* somatic sex education. Years ago, while attending the residential portion of my certification in somatic sex education, our large cohort was invited to break into small groups of 3 or 4 to create individual self-pleasure witnessing, erotic embodiment rituals for each member. Self-pleasure witnessing and coaching is a core practice in the modality of somatic sex education. While it's often the one that causes the most reaction, and sometimes even trigger ("someone is going to *watch me* masturbate?!?"), it is routinely the very practice that ends up being the most beloved for the way it efficiently inspires powerful healing, increased erotic intelligence and radical embodiment. Somatic sex education places great importance on the practice of our self pleasure, and on the important role of being witnessed. Self pleasure, or masturbation, is often our first and most tender place of sexual and erotic exploration. It's also a place that is routinely shamed, awkwardly ignored, or co-opted by predatory (usually older) individuals. It is important developmental terrain in which early patterns are neurologically hard-wired to create ever-decreasing erotic attunement and a dwindling erotic map, curiosity and exploration or the very opposite. Very few of us come out of adolescence and this critical initial experience of our generative power and sexual selfhood unscathed, our curiosity and innocence intact.

Coming back to my experience in the certification program: while the direction to our small groups was quite open, most students took the opportunity to use their self pleasure witnessing ritual to focus on something that felt stuck in their sexual energy or emotional body, like an acute (traumatic) event that never had the opportunity to be worked through or revisited in a safe way. One student created a self pleasure ritual around a date rape experience she wanted help re-narrating with an empowered voice of sovereignty she could not exert at the time of the assault. Another student chose to claim his love and appreciation of his life-long relationship with his joyful, exuberant erotic nature. The room was alive with people sharing some of the most intimate stories of our humanness imaginable – the

stories of our first experiences with our sexuality, curiosity and wild erotic natures.

Our groups were selected randomly and it just so happened that I landed in a group with the two oldest students; a 63 year old vibrant devoted grandmother, tantra teacher and sacred intimate who invited care and sweetness into all her interactions and a 70 year old well-loved, wise and joyful man who also happened to be a very successful veterinarian. He was getting his certification because he had been so served in his own work as a client of somatic sex education. I happened to be the third oldest participant in the course, at 44! Though I didn't know the full extent of my fortuity in being placed with these two, I could already feel excitement and a sense of being well-held and loved by them.

When it came my turn to begin designing my ritual, I had no idea what would come to me. Unlike many of my colleagues, I came to this modality believing I had never experienced any overt assaults or traumas to my sex or my physical body. As a child, and still as an adult, my erotic nature was my main access to soul; both my soul and the soul of the world. By the time I was 6, I was regularly engaging in self-designed rituals of erotic wildness and exploration in which I would bring myself to the oak-inhabited New England woods behind my house, lie on my belly, left ear pressed to the earth, listening to the buzz and hum of the earth. There, I would feel my body and spirit come alive with the very energy of life coursing through the earth, the trees, the birds and mammals of the woods. Since humans had not interfered nor proven inhospitable to my wild nature, I was free to develop this love affair and sense of belonging, unfettered and innocent.

However, sitting with my two elders on that afternoon, I realized I had suffered a very painful severance as a girl, the consequences of which I had not yet fully acknowledged, until that moment. I realized I'd suffered a crisis of faith as a young girl that had stayed with me, its tentacles wrapped around the freedom and permission I felt to use my voice, to stand for what I believed in, to know my power and sovereignty in all situations, not just some situations. The assault to my freedom of expression happened one beautiful summer afternoon in my 9th year, when I brought a blanket, a pillow and my favorite violet stuffed hippopotamus out to a shady spot behind our house, nestled behind a thick pine tree. There, I laid out my nest and began

my ritual so well-worn it was like breathing; left ear pressed to the earth, belly to soft ground, hearing the buzz and hum, rocking my body back and forth, almost entirely transported to that non-ordinary state I'd been visiting for years, where I could feel my own belonging in the wild order of things. When out of the heavens boomed a deep masculine voice, angry and unrelenting, "Go ... To ... Your ... Room!" It didn't occur to me in the moment to do anything other than freeze. 'Who has the right to tell me what to do in my own backyard?!' I thought. And then, a more primal voice in me said, 'We are under attack! We have to move to safety!' and so without a second thought I grabbed my blanket, my pillow and Greta the hippo and I raced to my room, slammed the door and threw myself down in my chair.

Out of breath and seething with anger, I remember saying to myself, "If that is what god the father has to say, forget him! I am going to find god the mother!!" But as sovereign and endowed a response as that may seem, what happened in that moment was devastating, though I would not fully grasp this until 34 years later. At the age of 9, I lost the tender just-building experience of my rightful place and voice among humans. I grew up in a protestant house. Not overtly religious, nevertheless, religious enough to have grown up with, and bought, the ubiquitous notion that there was a singular deity called 'God', and that he was male. More important to my particular crisis of faith was that *everyone I knew, all the adults, teachers and people upon whom I relied*, believed in this male God. And now, I was confronted with the cruelty and abusiveness of this entity, an entity everyone believed in and worshipped, wrote books and songs about, went to school to study. (It didn't occur to me until years later that the voice coming from the heavens was actually my father's, coming from his bedroom window.) If God the Father, whom everyone worshipped and followed without question, would treat me so cruelly, how could I imagine I had any relevance to, or value for, others?

Sitting there that afternoon in my certification training, across from the loving and welcoming eyes of these two elders, I knew immediately what my ritual needed to be, and it wasn't even necessary that it be particularly fancy or thought-out. The next moment had me laying out my nest of blanket and pillow (and imaginary Greta the hippo), imagining I was lying in the benevolent

shade of the beautiful silver pine, grandmother at my right hip and grandfather at my left, ready to protect me from anyone who might encroach with shame or judgment toward my form of devotion. There I brought myself to and through waves and waves of pleasure, innocent and alive with joy, even as the rage of the old crisis of faith and the feeling of betrayal moved through me. I kept going as deeper clarity around the subsequent years of my own silencing came to me. I became aware that this silence was particularly fierce and impenetrable in relation to things that were of most importance to me. I was brought back to all the moments in school, in my careers, where I had felt as though I would be annihilated were I to speak up. At one moment I was standing up to a boss, the next I was protecting my children from bullies in the neighborhood. With a sense of belonging and sovereignty I kept going, all the while my two benevolent elders kept their eyes on me, smiling and loving me, telling me I was beautiful and safe, that my pleasure was healthy and necessary, that the earth welcomed my pleasure, that I was a daughter of this earth and therefore important to the humans who inhabit it.

I felt the ropes of fear and *otherness* unwrap from my throat, my vocal cords and my mind, ropes that had kept me from claiming that I had something to offer to the people of my world. Ropes that kept me tied to a story that I was ‘*not that*’, if ‘*that*’ meant I was wanted in the world of humans; a story that kept me from speaking out passionately, fiercely and relentlessly against the small-mindedness of the dominant culture and its shame and terror of authentic intelligent free expression. On that afternoon, with the help of these two elder-witnesses, I left those old stories and limitations behind.

After the certification was over, I returned home and within two weeks I had launched a new website, one that included my experience as a girl. I made the decision to shift from licensed psychotherapist in private practice to a practitioner who would now be creating a hybrid modality weaving the most evidence-based practices of psychotherapy and psychology with the new – and wildly promising – kid on the block, somatic sex education. In addition, and perhaps most terrifying, I became a regular writer and essayist, speaking to the importance of re-inhabiting our wild erotic landscapes if we are to become initiated adults capable of fully offering our gifts to the world.

Before the pivotal initiatory experience that afternoon in the spring of 2010, I only had access to a partial voice and power. I had fear and uncertainty in my capacity to be a voice for erotic intelligence and embodiment. I was struggling to feel a full sense of the rightness of my place and purpose in this world. I had come so far, by all standards, yet I had hit a roadblock. The reclamation I experienced, with the somatic sex education practice of self-pleasure witnessing, offered me the permission and healing integration I was missing.

A deep, abiding, integrated connection with our generative, sexual and erotic wildness is the necessary foundation of our authentic expression and participation with the world. This foundation of an integrated connection to our erotic wildness and generativity provides a constant stream of encounters with our essential soulful self; the self that is poised to risk everything in service of what it loves. A person who is in consistent contact with their unique and powerful essence is a person who is resilient, self-guided, differentiated from the dominant culture's overt and covert attempts to have us conform and behave. As one of the most promising reclamation modalities, somatic sex education and its pioneering practitioners are uniquely positioned to guide us into the terrain of our healing and wholeness. Here, we are endowed with abundance as we discover and delight in our innate erotic intelligence and joy. Here, we are capable of independent and fiercely dedicated participation in our own lives. We support the unfolding healing of human bodies, human cultures and the earth.



## SOUL SONGS

by Quynh Phuong Nguyen

In the dark  
I grasp  
to hear the soul song  
That makes my heart yearn

For the love that  
For so long  
Eluded me  
Excluded me  
As someone deserving  
or capable of  
Preserving  
A tune of the Heart

So I spiraled  
Through the world  
of sensations  
and worshiped  
ideas and forms  
of how-tos  
and should haves



While saddening  
as my songs grew quieter  
Although I searched  
For perfect pitch  
In Another  
I only found  
Imperfect yet  
Compelling notes  
of others like me

Crying to be met  
To be heard  
To know that  
Resonance of Deep Soul  
That can hear  
Song of other souls

So I sank to the Earth  
And Laid my body down  
And I could hear  
Faint songs  
Emanating from there

Songs of other souls  
With their ears on the Earth  
And through hearing their songs  
I could suddenly hear my song

It came from my heart





## CHRONIC PELVIC PAIN: A SOMATIC SEX EDUCATOR'S APPROACH

by Kristin Lang

Chronic pelvic and genital pain is one of the most misdiagnosed and mistreated conditions in the medical field today. Chronic pelvic pain is a complex and often misunderstood set of conditions or symptoms that affect a growing number of people of all genders. This pain can and often does lead to sexual dysfunction. Somatic sex educators can fill an important gap in the care of people with chronic pelvic pain. As somatic sex educators, we have a unique skill set in that we are trauma-informed practitioners who can provide genital touch and also talk about arousal, something very few other professionals can do. As professionals in an emerging field, we have begun to define our profession and we give ourselves permission to exercise our rights to offer a healing and therapeutic modality in the field.

Addressing pelvic pain has in large part been left to medical doctors, surgeons and physical therapists. Somatic sex educators deserve a place among other health care professionals to provide an alternative and complimentary therapeutic approach that can have a tremendously positive impact on those who present with chronic pelvic pain. Part of the missing link is in addressing the emotional component of a person's experience, bringing awareness to the somatically held trauma, emotions and patterning that may be unknowingly keeping them disconnected from their body or in pain. The effects of trauma on the body, in the form of dissociation from physiological sensations or as chronic pain and tension, have been

well researched and documented in the field of neuroscience. These people need to be heard, their stories and experiences validated, and they need to have the direct experience of somatic, embodied learning if they are to reconnect and understand what may possibly be the cause of their pain or dysfunction. In working cooperatively with other health professionals we realize the potential therapeutic value of somatic sex education.

In my practice, I have worked with women who present with pudendal pain, vulvodynia, vaginismus, lichen sclerosis, scar tissue adhesions and medical trauma with good results. I have had women who were able to feel pleasure again, and to resume penetrative sex without pain. Other women who felt hopeless have begun to feel in control and hopeful again, with a sustained decrease in severity of symptoms. Pelvic pain can be acute or chronic, somatic or visceral. People who present with these types of pain often have multiple layers of issues. A diagnosis like “vulvodynia” can be a catchall term used when medical caregivers do not have a clear understanding of what is truly happening.

Pelvic pain can be broken down into areas such as skin, vaginal, clitoral, pain at the vaginal opening, nerve pain, pelvic floor pain, pelvic organ pain (bladder, bowel, uterus, fibroids, cysts, endometriosis, pelvic congestion), and orthopaedic pain (bones, joints, postural alignment). Pelvic pain can also stem from many different layers of the body such as skin, mucous membranes and openings, nerves, musculoskeletal, organs and the systemic layer. Some of the words you may hear describing pelvic pain include vaginismus, vulvodynia, vulvovestibulitis, clitoraldynia, vestibule-odynia, lichen sclerosis, pudendal neuralgia, PGAD (persistent genital arousal disorder), pudendal pain, endometriosis, interstitial cystitis and cyclist pelvic pain – to name a few.

Acute genital pain can be due to a variety of factors such as unresolved trauma, prolapsed or misaligned organs, pelvic floor imbalance, auto immune conditions, hormonal changes, gut disorders and lumbar injuries. Scar tissue adhesions from caesareans, episiotomies, prostatectomies, hysterectomies and gender reassignment surgery can also be factors. Quite often there are other complicating factors such as depression and relationship challenges. There can be a re-traumatization of the tissues and emotions with every sexual encounter, as many people endure touch or sex that is

painful due to shame, fear, lack of understanding or poor advice. Many clients shut down and avoid physical intimacy with their partners. Partners may not know or understand the true severity of the issues and have little information on how to help. There is often a sense of hopelessness. It is not uncommon for many clients to have feelings of wanting to die or to become suicidal.

### **Case Examples**

A recent client who came in had pain around the vestibule apparently due to an overgrowth of tissue after the birth of her first child one year prior. Her pain made sex or genital touch impossible. She had a subsequent surgery to remove this “extra tissue” at the advice of her doctor. However, the pain continued. When she came in she was totally disconnected from her genitals. She had a lack of understanding about what was really happening in her body and whether it was healing or not. Even more, her relationship had totally broken down as a result of not being able to have sex or to manage emotionally her partner’s demands for sex. As she put it, “The 15 minutes every few months I get with my doctor is not working for me”. We started with simple body awareness, postural exercises, tools for bringing breath deeper into the body, teaching her self-care with castor oil and massage. By the end of our first session she was feeling more hopeful, as well as feeling seen and honoured in a way she had never been before. A relationship between the effectiveness of treatment and a feeling of being heard and seen by a trustworthy practitioner has been shown in the medical literature.

In her second session, I focused on helping her stay present in her body and communicate what was currently arising within her while we did scar tissue remediation and genital mapping. She was able to make a connection to the past two years of enduring unwanted and painful sex by her partner who continually pressured her despite the pain she was experiencing. Recognizing the pattern of tension and holding she had and how and where her body had already been shutting down long before her pregnancy was an important realization and connection for her. She was able to let herself feel the feelings that had been long held in her body. During the treatment, she felt safe and accepted. She began to learn how to take more responsibility around her boundaries and to use her voice to ask for what she wanted. That is not to say other factors concerning her

labor may not have also contributed to part of the pain she was experiencing, but it seemed we had unearthed an important piece of the puzzle. After her second session she felt softer, more connected, relaxed and in touch with her genital area — and she began wondering if a second surgery to remove this “extra tissue” was even necessary. We left this for her to discuss with her doctor.

Another recent client was a young woman in her 20s who came to see me because of debilitating pain in and around her uterus that left her often unable to move, work or function for days. Her ongoing and seemingly random acute pain had been going on for two years. After seeing a series of health care professionals, and undergoing ultrasounds and other tests, plus trying different medications and treatments to no avail, she was left undiagnosed, untreated and with nowhere to turn. Hers is not an uncommon experience for those with chronic pelvic pain. During our first session, a thorough intake and questions led to her disclosure of being abused, and enduring sex by her abusive partner for over a year. Through our discussion she suddenly made the connection to feeling this particular pain for the first time when she was having intercourse and experienced orgasm with her abusive partner. She began to think that this was possibly the main cause and start of her pain.

Before our session, she had never once considered that this relationship or the abuse/sex component could be a potential cause for her pain. Her doctors kept pointing to irritable bowel syndrome but despite many changes in diet no change in her symptoms occurred. She gained important insights when she began talking about her experiences. When we moved to the table to do some breathing, body awareness and touch, she was able to discover how much she was holding emotionally in her body in general and specifically in her belly, and how she would dissociate from her body as soon as touch around her pelvis began. This was what happened when she had sex, she told me. In short, where she couldn't say no, it seemed her body began to do it for her. It is not to say that the problem was magically solved and although there would be more work ahead for her, she felt grateful for the new-found information. Our work together led her back to herself, and her responsibility to take the steps needed for self care. She is determined to continue to seek the help she needs.

## **Guidelines for practice**

Although each client is unique and sessions are based on what will benefit each individual, I have developed the following guidelines I use when working with people who have pelvic pain:

I am clear about scope of practice. I do not make promises about what will happen or diagnose.

I am willing to work with other health care professionals. I empower clients to work with and talk more effectively with their doctors. Often people experience medical trauma from exams and lack of empathy from doctors who don't know how to handle their situation or who do not take them seriously. Empowering clients with language and information they can use to help educate their doctors, gives them a sense of control and involvement in their process, rather than feeling lost in a system that does not know how to help them.

I find tools to help deal with and manage chronic pain such as daily/weekly self care plans, short term goals and forming a support network.

I take a holistic approach in coaching and refer to other providers for suggestions on how to support their overall system.

I identify triggers for pain and find ways to work with them.

I teach the importance of down-regulation in pain management.

I make it known that there is no quick and easy fix, that it may take time, so they feel content with the short term goals and subtle changes they are making.

I reframe and redefine what sex and pleasure can be.

I teach clients about conscious touch, non goal-oriented experiences and options for non-penetrative sex.

I bring partners in for sessions if appropriate.



I work on the areas of connection between boundaries, communication, feeling states, symptoms, true needs, desires and real time possibilities for sexual engagement with their partners.

I teach how to receive touch and find other areas of pleasure in the body. Teaching that pleasure and pain can co-exist and are often felt simultaneously gives them a sense of control over pain.

I work with scar tissue and castor oil if indicated. This can be an easy proactive and nurturing self-care exercise to do at home.

I provide resources, including books, videos, and exercises.

Based on my client's feedback on their care, I provide a list of all the resources in my area and beyond, including good counsellors or therapists who deal specifically with trauma or sexuality in particular.

What keeps me going is the feedback from my clients that is often, "This work was more effective than...". Based on my experience in my private practice, I believe the field of somatic sex education has much to offer in the area of chronic pelvic pain.





## SOMATIC SEX EDUCATION: APPLICATIONS IN THE GENDER GALAXY

by dr. liam “captain” snowdon

A gender journey in anyone’s life is no small event. Much like other journeys, they involve risk, courage and (hopefully) supportive community and educated practitioners. Much of my work for the last fifteen years has been educating medical and other allied professionals, from social workers to police officers, in building competence in working with transgender and gender-variant folks. As practitioners, many of us try our best to come from an informed and respectful place when meeting our clients where they are in their lives.

Often the place to start is language. When we travel to a new country or want to interact in a new community, we try to learn the language. With transgender and gender-variant clients this is a respectful and logical way to start. In transgender communities, there is constant dialogue about terminology and its application for diverse members of the community. This can be both exciting– as it is a deeply creative place to be able to invent or reclaim language that fits us individually and communally – and frustrating, as it is not always easy to decipher the “right” language to use with our clients. Our humility can be the greatest gift, along with remembering we don’t always know what we don’t know.

For the purposes of this article, we will use the terms transgender, gender-variant and genderqueer. Transgender is used as an umbrella term referring to clients who are on a gender journey that includes exploring a gender expression different from the one assigned to

them by the medical system(s) at birth. Gender-variant is used to describe clients whose gender expressions do not fit the traditionally prescribed gender expressions of the society they live in. These clients may or may not be intentionally on a gender journey. Lastly, the term genderqueer is used to describe people of all gender expressions who do not subscribe to the belief that there are only two genders, male and female. Identifying as genderqueer can mean both a relaxing and/or a complete erasure of that gender binary. Choosing an identity can be one of the most liberating things in a person’s life. It is important as practitioners that we be mindful of, and listen to our clients for, the words *they* use for themselves and avoid choosing identities for them.

The modality of somatic sex education is finding myriad applications in the lives of transgender and gender-variant people. Online sessions, weekly groups, and one-on-one sessions are being employed as containers to deliver sex education to this population. The embodiment that is possible for folks struggling with how their internal gender experience matches with how the world perceives them seems unlimited in both scope and variation.

The choice to make a referral to a somatic sex educator can be appropriate for a number of challenges that face genderqueer, transgender and gender-variant people. For gender-variant people, the world is often an uncomfortable and violent place. Somatic sex educators actively create sessions and workshops for those facing gender concerns that offer safe(r) places for gender expression and gender acceptance. We can offer sanctuary from the many forms of gender-based violence experienced by people on the gender margins, a place to relax into gender exploration. Furthermore, gender transitions are a somatic experiment and experience, and somatic sex education interacts directly with the body and the body’s knowledge and wisdom. Clients in deep body dialogue already are often primed and ready to engage in educational practices that involve somatic research, boundary work and touch.

Somatic sex educators can help gender-variant folks who are beginning their gender journeys, people who have elected to take hormones and have one or more sexual reassignment surgeries (SRS), and folks who are looking to find home in their bodies and the world without any medical intervention. Somatic sex education, while not a medical profession, offers people entering into gender transition

(whether using hormones or not) support and education in exploring questions such as:

- How can I bring my inner gender out in the world?
- What medical interventions, if any, are the right ones for me?
- Does changing my gender affect my sexual orientation?
- Where do I end up sexually?
- How do I want my new experiences of my body to interact with being a whole sexual being in the world?

Referring clients for somatic sex education early in their questioning is valuable and proactive, and can mitigate the need to work through damage created when interacting and engaging with generally well-intentioned but almost universally uninformed, trans-incompetent medical and other systems. Somatic sex education assists people in achieving a solid foundation while they still have the momentum and confidence necessary to interact with all of those systems. Gender-variant people's experiences often range between denying their own existence and body, to embracing it and living with pride; working with clients when gender variance initially comes into their awareness is ideal. Building a solid foundation of embodied pride in one's journey helps clients to find themselves less affected by the ups and downs of gender exploration and transition.

Somatic sex education also helps clients with pre- and post-surgical support. Work is done to prepare clients with realistic expectations of visual and functional outcomes of the common SRS procedures. The following common questions are explored:

- What will my genitals be capable of?
- How do I reintroduce (or, often, introduce) pleasure into my new body?
- How do I talk to potential partners about my body and how it

functions?

A growing area in the field of somatic sex education is scar tissue remediation (STR). Practitioners are now trained to work with old and new scars in ways that can help people move from trauma to healing, and to increase sexual sensitivity after surgery. STR for breast and chest surgeries and genital sexual reassignment surgeries is valuable. Somatic sex educators have a growing understanding of what scar tissue is and how fascia works. Best practices have us involved shortly after surgery so we can assist in optimizing sexual function and teaching people techniques to use their own hands to touch themselves in healing ways.

Post-surgery clients also benefit from sessions involving both Body Mapping and Pleasure Mapping exercises. These sessions orient clients back into the new incarnations of their bodies and help locate areas of sensation and pleasure. There is often grief work for what might have been lost and a newfound body pride that can be achieved with both kinds of mapping. As somatic sex educators specifically trained to work with both vaginal and anal touch, we can assist clients in somatically orienting themselves to their new bodies.

Not all people who choose to examine the roles of gender and gender expression in their lives elect to change their gender. Somatic sex education is a modality that supports people in learning about their options and accepting themselves where they are, as well as striving to find a home in the spectrum between genders and beyond gender. In a world in which we put people into boxes in order to make sense of our experience of them, somatic sex education can be a foundation-building experience of somatic empowerment for individuals challenging the mainstream understanding of gender.

To date there are a number of best practices emerging in this area of the somatic sex education with transgender and gender-variant folks:

**Meeting folks where they are in the gender journey.** Much like any client-centered practice, somatic sex education meets clients where they are, going deeper into the body wisdom and somatic understanding of one’s gender without an agenda to move someone from point A to point B.

**Attention to Consent.** 75 percent of transgender and gender-variant people have experienced gender-based violence in their lives. A common experience of gender-variant people is much like pregnant women – when people find out they are transgender their body becomes a topic of very public questioning and non-consensual touch. This necessitates a deep focus on boundary and consent work with transfolks as a foundation for future trust-building in relationships and sexual pleasure. Group settings are highly effective places for building these skills.

**Communal Applications.** Working with the tools of somatic sex education with gender-variant people in group settings is highly successful. Being in spaces of consciousness-raising, where people have a cognitive, emotional and somatic understanding that they are not the only one confronting discomfort with deviance from gender norms (both from self and society) is reassuring and empowering. Sitting together and sharing daily struggles and hopes also builds communities of support for participants. A phenomenal experience is reported by people who have participated in somatic sex education groups. A kind of erotic attunement happens, in which individuals notice that they are not so different sexually as they might think, or that their differences are wonderful and suggest intriguing variations for further exploration. Buy-in to their process by more than two people creates powerful reinforcement to an individual's process. Group participation can also be more affordable than individual sessions, which is important in the lives of folks who often lose their jobs and other means of support because of transphobia and transantagonism.

Many transgender people who have engaged in somatic education report feeling more grounded and confident in their chosen gender expression(s) and their whole lives in general. Clients assert that they have a new and positive relationship to their gender and sexuality. Gender-variant clients also report a new relationship to their bodies and their desires. Clients receiving scar tissue remediation work after surgery report better postural alignment, and an ability to take deeper breaths. They often speak of a feeling of open-heartedness related to



the dissolution of pectoral scar tissue and adhesion. Students and clients of somatic sex education practice skills in sessions that they report being transferable to other areas of their lives (work, creative endeavors and relationships). The impact is like a ripple in a pond in their lives.

### **A Few Gender Journey Stories**

Three case examples follow indicating how somatic sex education has benefitted transgender, genderqueer and gender-variant clients. They are fictionalized individuals based on several actual journeys so as to indicate the processes used and outcomes reported without violating confidentiality. These journey stories demonstrate different uses for one-on-one and communal somatic sex education modalities as well as a small sampling of experiences among the multitude of gender identities.

“Kit” found an advertisement for a workshop series called “Emergence: Erotic Embodiment for Folks on the Trans-Masculine Spectrum” on a website and called to get more information. Kit made it very clear on the call that they (“they” is their chosen pronoun) were looking to explore their gender further, but were not interested in “buying into the gender binary, in which the only choices are female or male”. After an in-depth conversation and assurance that they did not have to fit into any gender boxes to attend the workshops, they concluded that it was a fit for them. In this workshop, participants covered topics including body stories, attraction, sexual exploration and function, dating, and relationships. Somatic sex education exercises encouraged participants to delve deeper into the stories put upon their bodies by family, society, and media. Stories were peeled away like layers of an onion, dropping to the floor years of society’s pressures to fit into gender norms and roles. The participants became allies in each other’s healing, and found themselves experiencing “erotic attunement,” both supporting and urging each other on in their journeys. During this process, Kit was becoming more themselves, and found a home in the galaxy of gender. Kit reports this work and group of people “allowed me to delve into a vulnerability with my body and sexuality that I have never known before. I was able to sit with discomfort and move through it”. Upon completion of the Emergence workshop, they excitedly reported having “an embodied knowing that my gender is

my own and belongs to me, no one else!”

“Mo” is a 33-year-old female-to-male transgender person who had heard about somatic sex education, and specifically scar tissue remediation, through his doctor and friends. Mo had been out as transgender for four years, had chest surgery two years ago and started testosterone three years ago, with no intention of having genital surgery. He had undergone three pelvic surgeries, including a C-section and ovary removal. Mo had scar tissue ranging in age from 2 to 17 years old. He presented as “wound really tight” both physically in the belly as well as metaphorically. He was interested in alleviating tightness and a feeling of internal pulling toward the center of his pelvis. Mo was open and excited about working both externally and internally on his C-section scar which overlays his older scars. In a series of five sessions plus homework, Mo reported an “unwinding, shifting and opening up” in his belly and heart. Many old emotions surfaced in the sessions, which he reported had previously been worked though on the talk level and now “felt released from the cells” of his body. After the series of sessions, he spoke of his body “trusting him more and he trusting his body on his gender journey”. After sessions of internal and external scar tissue remediation and supplemental self-care for scar tissue as homework, Mo reported changes in his posture, more pleasure and deeper arousal during sex.

“Li” had been the victim of much transphobic violence. She was introduced to the work through a public speaking engagement on transgender issues. Li is a male-to-female person who has had all possible sexual reassignment surgeries and is on “feminizing” hormones. She reported being very happy now as Li, but was struggling with sex and sexuality. After taking an in-depth sex history and touching lightly on some of her sexual trauma history, she was interested in beginning some hands-on work in the second session. Sessions included sharing about her life and relationships and exploring touch and boundaries. She was guided to do an activity in which she would touch each part of her body affirming out loud, “This is my body”. Sessions included a number of different boundary exercises in which she gradually went from saying “No” to all forms of touch to feeling into and discovering what kinds of touch she did want. In addition, we experimented with several different tools to practice Li knowing her desires in the moment and asking for what she wants. Li also reports benefiting from attending workshops based

on somatic sex education principles on topics including sex, desire and communication, and erotic embodiment. The integrated approach of both one-to-one and group modalities gave Li the opportunity to practice what she learned and feel the support of community. She reported a “new and pleasurable relationship to my own touch,” “a growing trust in my desires,” and “more excitement than fear in my new intimate and sexual relationships”.

Somatic sex education is not a fix-all for the immense impact of both subtle and overt violence and gender policing that folks deal with everyday. But as somatic sex educators we can be part of a team of care supporting folks in finding voice, choice and pleasure in the gender galaxy.



## THE BEST AND SAFEST GIFT

by Vulnerability Warrior

Wanting to heal from past traumas was the main reason why I wanted to work with a somatic sex educator. I had a few Skype sessions and homework before meeting her in person for a five-day retreat. On my first day working with her in person, she asked me to decide where I wanted to sit in her studio. She also asked me where I wanted her to be in the room. At first, I just picked the first chair and told her to sit in the chair next to me. I had not understood yet the purpose of her request. With her encouragement, I explored different chairs and moved them around the room. I also asked her to move around the room, come closer and go further from me. I started to realise that I had wants and needs, and that I could share what I want or need. It was so foreign to me and it felt very uncomfortable. Someone was asking me what I wanted AND welcomed my answers. This simple activity helped me develop more awareness of what I wanted and trust I could share it with her.

When we started to explore touch, she was careful to ask what I wanted and check in constantly. She was able to offer the exact touch I requested. Because it was new to me, sometimes what I thought I needed was not actually welcomed by my body. I was able to ask for the touch to change or stop. Every time I asked it to stop or change, my request was honoured and welcomed. A feeling of safety grew and with it, I was able to relax and connect with my body and ask it what it wanted.

During that first retreat, I also learned about being in full heart when asking and answering questions. The somatic sex educator and

I took turn asking questions and checking with ourselves before answering yes or no, and saying thank you after the answer. Until you have the chance to practice asking and answering in full heart, you do not know how important it can be, and how difficult it is. You might think saying No or receiving a No as an answer is difficult, but many times, I found saying Yes or receiving a Yes from a request was as difficult if not more difficult than a No. A Yes meant I was worthy. I struggle to see and accept my worthiness. After some practice, I was able to learn what being in full heart meant. At first we practiced without touch, then we started to include touch. Knowing that I am in full heart and that the other person is also can take some anxiety away and stop the second-guessing in the relationship.

I have high anxiety around talking with people, and especially with asking for help or asking for what I want and need. As I continued to work with the somatic sex educator over Skype and email, I started to call this anxiety a panicky question or a panicky share. The “panicky” feels like a tightening in my body and my breathing becomes very tense or shallow. The question I want to ask keeps repeating itself in my head like a broken record. My hands get tight and I often feel shame. I sometimes say to her. “I have a panicky question,” so she is aware of how vulnerable and anxious I am feeling. I think by saying I have a panicky feeling, she is better able to answer my question or request in a way I can continue to grow. For example, she reminds me that all my questions are beautiful and important. She says that my questions are welcome and that she will see them as an expression of curiosity and not a demand. Another way she is helping me is by reminding me that any change of mind will be welcome and celebrated. In that way, I can really connect to what I want in the moment and feel safe enough to ask for it, knowing that I can also ask for it to stop or change. One year ago, I did not know I had needs and wants, let alone that I was allowed to ask and share them. I am still learning to notice and share what needs to be heard and seen.

You might wonder how this important learning can be applied in my personal life with someone else other than a somatic sex educator. It hasn't been easy and so far I am able to apply it with only one other person in my life. I have a friend of 20 years who is a “touchy-feely” person. She would regularly give me hugs, touch my arms or back, and put her hand on my thigh or knee while talking with me. She never once asked if I wanted to be touched. She was

aware at some point in our friendship that I was a survivor, but it didn't change her behaviour, and I didn't know any different. I hated to be touched, but I thought I was wrong and broken, that somehow I should enjoy it or at least tolerate it. I didn't know I could honor my body. She was sharing affection with a friend, thinking it was helpful and welcomed. She did it without knowing it hurt me. She did it out of love. Last Fall, she came to visit me for the first time since my retreat with the somatic sex educator. I didn't even think about the touch and what was coming until it happened. My friend hugged me... She did not ask... I didn't want it... I didn't say anything... My friend left after the visit thinking I was doing great; she was happy that I seemed more "relaxed" since my retreat. The feeling of panic after she left was so great in my body that I had to spend a few days in hospital to recover from a hug by a good friend who had great intentions. Her hug sent me in a complete fight-or-flight response. My body couldn't accept an unwanted hug. Having learned with the somatic sex educator about connecting with my body to ask for what I wanted, this unsolicited hug from my friend was too much for my body. It felt assaulted instead of numb, now that it knew it could say No. My body viewed the unwanted touch as trauma. I cannot now stay numb to touch, and I must stay aware of this and advocate for my body.

With the somatic sex educator's help, I was able to explain the concept of asking for the touch I want to my friend, and I asked her to check in with me before touching or hugging. This transition wasn't easy for her or for me. But I knew I deserved healthy touch that I requested, and her love for me made her want to help me with touch that was safe. Our relationship grew stronger and on our next visit over the holidays, I was able to request touch I wanted and she was able to honour my request. We still need some practice – for me to practice connecting with my body and asking for what I want, and for her to learn to ask before touching. But also we want to practice being in full heart with each other as we answer Yes or No, knowing that we will welcome each others' No as much as our Yes.

Somatic sex educators can help others with touch and connecting with their bodies. Some people, like me, will need lots of time to understand they have needs and wants. They will need lots of practice to know that their body can and will tell them which touch is needed. If I had not learned about this with the somatic sex educator I

worked with, I might have requested touch that I thought I SHOULD have and not touch I wanted or needed. For example, with seeing a somatic sex educator, I could have thought I SHOULD have erotic touch that brings sexual pleasure and orgasm. I might even have requested it. But no, she was careful and took the time that was needed to help me connect with touch I WANTED and NEEDED. She kept me safe. The touches my body actually wanted - holding hands and feet, feeling her hand on my cheek - might seem superficial or unimportant from the outside, but it was what my body needed. Maybe one day, my body will request more sexual touch, maybe not, but I know the somatic sex educator will be there to welcome my request and any change of mind. I can also be sure that she will stay in full heart when listening to any request I make, and she can in return be sure I will stay in full heart myself and welcome her answer. This practice being in full heart is the best and safest gift.







PERFECT TOUCH:  
USING TOUCH TO HEAL TRAUMA AND  
NEGLECT

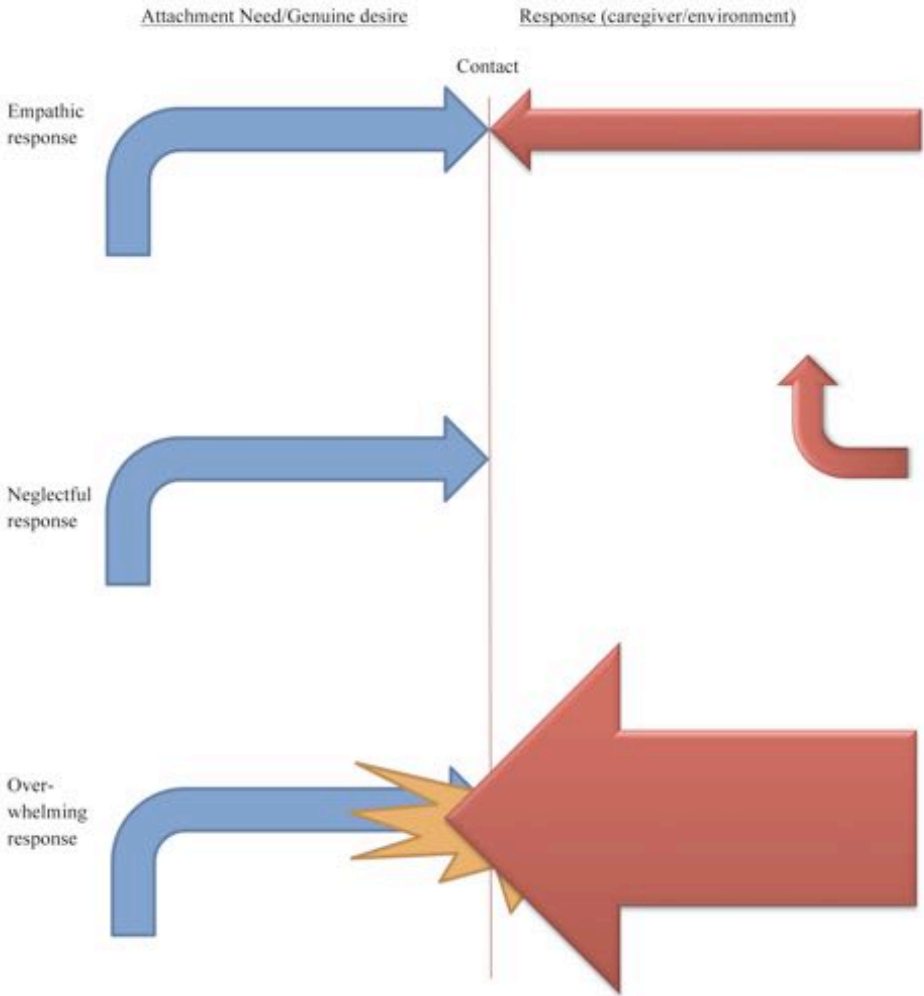
by Mehdi Darvish Yahya

**Personal and Political Rationales for Touch**

We are born with an innate desire to live. But we are born dependent on those implicitly charged with our care so that we can realize our potential and grow into complete human beings. Once in relationship with our caregivers, the desire to live translates into the need to be seen, heard, held, the need to feel special, important, the need to belong and to matter to someone in this world.

But these desires and needs are not always met perfectly. As a matter of fact we are more often than not faced with incomplete responses at best and other times with negatively overwhelming responses. These latter responses are those violating, abusive, traumatizing experiences that many of us are familiar with. But there is an even worse response that often does not get noticed purely by the very fact that it is an absence of response; when the caregiver does not see, hold, or acknowledge the desire in the child; in other words, when the child is neglected. Although neglect can have many forms and layers, here I primarily refer to emotional neglect; a form of parenting that creates a sense of abandonment, extreme loneliness, in the person.

The following diagram illustrates these three forms of response by the caregivers to the child.



Despite the recently renewed interest in the effects of overwhelming experiences causing trauma (e.g. war, disasters, rape, abuse, etc.) psychological research shows that neglect has in fact an even worse outcome than traumatic events. Often it is impossible for the victims of emotional neglect to see how they were damaged by their caregivers because there was no specific incident that one can point to as the cause the source of current and chronic challenges.

It is only in recent decades that trauma research has evolved to expand the definition of trauma from the single incident that can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to the yet-to-be-accepted-by-the-psychiatric-elite (i.e. those who design and define labels for all *abnormal behaviours*), Complex or Developmental Trauma. And the impact of such prolonged and hideously negative experiences is being shown to include severe challenges in interpersonal relationships, in self-regulation of emotions, and in self-concepts. In fact it has taken over a century of intermittent research, on-again off-again interest in effects of trauma, and frequent admissions by the mental health practitioners of ineffectiveness in treating chronic mental health challenges to finally come to terms with what might be at the root of many emotional, mental, somatic, and social issues: chronic forms of maltreatment by caregivers in early life.

The fictional, wishful, and misguided thinking of the mainstream medical establishment (psychiatry and psychology), with added support and pressure from the profit-seeking pharmaceutical industry, has suppressed the true knowledge of the nature of mental and emotional challenges and has reduced them to a simple mechanical concept of *chemical imbalance*. In this model, people have been reduced to simple machines that can be fixed by putting certain chemicals into their bodies. The fact that this approach can reduce the symptoms of only a minority of *patients* has been shaking the belief in the efficacy of such a reductivist and inhumane approach.

The new movement in psychotherapy has taken up millennia-old practices of mindfulness and attention to the sensations, and the body, and has re-interpreted and explained it in terms of the recent discoveries of neuroscience. We are slowly moving towards an understanding of ourselves that goes beyond the simple interaction of chemicals in our veins. The brave proponents of the new paradigm are champions of the adventurous and compassionate approach to the long-dismissed sufferers of inadequate caregiving.

These brave souls aim to bring the practice of psychology out of the elite ivory towers back into the hands of common people by bringing attention to the neglected parts of us, our bodies. They are bringing us back to our senses.

### **Perfect Touch and Re-creation of Safety**

The practice of *Perfect Touch* that I am developing in my work with clients aligns itself with this new paradigm. It uses the fundamental sense of touch, the first sense activated in the newborn who feels for the mother's breast moments after birth. Touch is a portal to access the unmet or overwhelmed desires of the person. The purpose of using touch to heal trauma is to correct the violating or abandoning experiences that occurred so early in life that the person cannot find words for, experiences that have been stored in the body, in every organ and joint and muscle, and in every inch of the skin.

An empathic response in touch occurs when the need in the other is seen and understood and responded to with exactly as much pressure and intensity, as is desired by the body. The energy invested in the response must be equal to the energy rising from the body to the surface of the skin. The practitioner of *Perfect Touch* (i.e. a trauma therapist trained in client-directed bodywork) fully considers the location, pace, pressure, texture, direction, intention, and temperature of the touch. The pleasure arising from the feeling of the desire met by the world moves the body forward toward the next step, the next desire to be met.

This is not an endless hedonistic trip. The authentic desires of the body are not a *bottomless pit* as Freud wrote to his rebellious protégé Ferenczi to discourage him from using touch with his clients. This process of call and response between the person's body and the giver of touch is the natural process of the Self developing into completion. Trauma, neglect, abandonment, and fear stand in the way of that completion.

Chronic trauma and neglect (Developmental or Complex trauma) shrink the container of safety in the person's life and the body. Only smaller and smaller places are left where the person can feel safe, let go, and enjoy pleasure. And sometimes there is no place left. The practice of *Perfect Touch* softens, stretches, and expands that container so the person and the body can move towards pleasure again and stay open, more and more, to receiving pleasure. The goal is to trust the

response of the environment, trusting that the response would match the desire, that the boundaries will be seen, attuned to, and responded to without conditions. This response takes the form of touch (contact), or gaze (witnessing), or words (verbal reflection or affirmations).

### **Shame and Trust**

The Self requires a safe body to develop. To the extent that one's natural desires are not met, the body fills with shame and becomes an unsafe place to house the self. The process of *Perfect Touch* is to make the body a safe place again so that the natural development of the Self can get back on track and for the person as a whole to move towards self-realization. This process is one in which the effect of unwanted and uninvited touch is undone, and is replaced with the invited, self-guided and desired touch. In this way, the body learns to not only trust the world to respond according to the body's desires, but also to trust its own voice and expression to ask for what exactly is desired and to put a stop to what is not. Since the process of direct touch occurs at the fundamental level of sensory experience, it bypasses the mental and cognitive processes. This is a much more direct, effective, and efficient way to access and treat trauma than most other common therapeutic practices.

Early trauma (e.g. incest) occurs at a foundational sense level (e.g. touch of the rejecting parent, smell of the offender, etc.) and it is registered on a sensory level. So it only appeals to reason to address the healing response primarily to the sensory level in order to facilitate access to the body memory and then to responsibly integrate the unresolved fragments of the experience into a coherent whole that can then be understood, managed, and mastered by the conscious self-aware ego. Once the touch occurs, the ensuing sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, and memories, are brought to the conscious level and gradually integrated.

All this takes place in the clearly defined container of one-way touch. This is not a sexual *exchange*. This is not a mutual relationship. The therapist gives touch to the client according to the client's directions for the purpose of serving the client in exploration of desires, memories, emotions, and beliefs.

In order to counter the shame brought on by trauma and neglect, we must not only acknowledge the shame but explore and dissect it

in its every manifestation within the relationship in order to undo the shame habit in its physiological structure and the way in which it manifests in the therapeutic relationship. It is only through mindful observation of the shame in the body that we can gradually rid ourselves of shame. This shame is the destructive energy caused by trauma which creates a deficient state in the body and undermines efforts to move forward, to move with purpose, and to express one's truth. This shame is the foundation of oppression: personal, cultural, and political. This shame is what holds us back from feeling and acting complete.

Giving clear information about the body is one way to undo the shame habit. Shame silences the voice. Clear voice breaks the cycle of shame. So encouraging the voice to speak about the body and its true desires is a direct and effective path to undoing shame. The client is continuously encouraged to give voice to the desires and processes of the body moment-by-moment. In other words, the client is a translator of the body's processes for the therapist and the therapist speaks to and interacts with the body through the client.

### **Client-Centered Practice**

The client is guided to turn inward and let attention descend into the body while keeping a *conscious observer* aspect of themselves fully active so it can report on what is seen and felt. This use of "conscious trance" is the core process in *Perfect Touch*. It requires a complete attunement on the part of the therapist to the client and on the part of the client to the body. The therapist invites the client to tune into the body and to report on whatever is observed and then asks if the observed event or sensation requires a touch, or if it needs to be witnessed, or if the person needs to hear an affirmation that will counter the negativity arising from the sensation. This is very important since not all body desires require actual skin-to-skin touch. The therapist's loving presence and exquisite attention is sometimes all that is required and in fact it is a form of contact. We can touch with our gaze.

It is important to invite the client to explore what the specifically observed internal event desires: direct touch, witnessing, sounds or words. This brings attention to the minutiae of the subtle body sensations which went unnoticed long ago and were eventually lost due to overwhelm or neglect. So we are going back to the beginning,

to the very small voices in the body that ask for an empathic response and rebuild the new structure from there, one sensation at a time.

### **Pleasure and Healing**

Once the body receives what it asks for, no more and no less, it begins to feel safe. The sensory experience can enter a flow of call and response cycles between the body and the therapist. It is essential to note that this way of touch practice, as intimate as it can be, is far from a so-called ‘happy ending’ erotic massage. We need to be clear that there are many obstacles in the way to truly authentic joy. In order to reach our true happy ending, that blissful full body experience of peace and oneness, we sometimes must charge through painful, frightening, shameful, or rageful passages. In the erotic temples of Khajuraho in central India, there are ancient temples covered with exquisitely carved statues of common and noble people in all kinds of sexual positions and interactions. But every now and then there are also carved images of individuals wrestling with dragons. I interpret these as the hard struggles in the process of reaching ultimate bliss, that sweet union with the *Beloved*.

A common ‘happy ending’, a sexual climax, is a physical release that momentarily interrupts the constant process of quest for bliss, for *Oneness* with all. There is a sweet feeling in that. But most people can get stuck in that and let go of the bigger journey. And even with that, for those of us who have been heaped upon with shame and fear, approaching an orgasm or even any simple sensory pleasure, can seem as impossible as wrestling dragons.

So this process is about noticing the subtle urges in the body and accepting all sensations for what they are: sensations. When the body’s desire is met with attunement and as perfectly as possible, the body’s sense of safety begins to be restored. The fundamental sense of safety, that implicit promise made at conception – that the world can and will meet our needs – is broken as a result of overwhelm or abandonment. Once the impact of those early experiences are undone on a foundational sensory level, the trust in the safety of the world can be rebuilt which in turn engenders hope and optimism and a motivation to move on.

Information in the research literature on tactile memory, to the extent that we explore in our trauma healing process, is still emerging.



But there is plenty of practice-based evidence to show that touch can access memory, very specific traumatic memories, quite effectively. The practice of *Perfect Touch* is about a very slow exploration of traumatic memories through touch while balancing the hardship of this journey with pleasure, which is accessed through the caring and loving nature of the touch. So we build safety and capacity in the body as we move along the journey of integration of the fragments of the self: those floating bits of identity in the dark psyche that are too frightening and too shameful to bring to light. The *Perfect Touch* process allows for the integration of fragments and healing of trauma with pleasure.

In using *Perfect Touch*, disjointed fragments of trauma memories which are stored in the body become activated through touch. Whereas normally this activation of trauma memory would trigger a helpless freeze response (because in the original traumatic event the person's fight or flight response was made ineffective) in the safe container of *Perfect Touch*, the person can stay present (i.e. unfrozen) to the intense energy of the body memory and gradually modulate the internal response. This is made possible by slow and careful movement between two poles of suffering and pleasure. The therapist's exquisite attunement to the client's internal states facilitates the release of long held feelings of fear, sorrow, anger, and finally shame. Tears, angry sounds and words, and energetic movements are expected at this stage. At the end of the process, the client is able to simply accept the traumatic memories as stories of the past which have now lost their sharp and painful edges.

The traumatized person suffers among other things from a symptom that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* calls anhedonia: absence of pleasure, or the inability to feel pleasure. The pursuit of pleasure is not something that conventional psychotherapy emphasises, at least hardly beyond encouraging the client to take part in support groups for social connection, or to go to the gym or for walks in the park.

The capacity for pleasure is something that we hold and practice from the moment we are born into this world. When the newborn baby is held firmly, touched softly, wrapped in warm and soft fabrics and fed the sweetest nourishing milk, when the baby is gazed at with adoration and rocked and sung to lovingly, and is welcomed in every encounter with wide eyes and excited voices, a capacity is built in the

baby for pleasures of the senses, and a deepened desire for connection with others and therefore with the self. When this process of call and response, i.e. the baby's excitement to be in the world and to move towards connection with others, and the caregiver's almost perfect response, is disrupted by trauma or abandonment and neglect, then the natural journey towards pleasure is broken. It is possible nevertheless, through the healing process, to tune into that historic brokenness and to put back the pieces together through the process of pleasure, a process as natural to us as breathing. With every breath we can experience pleasure in every cell; the breath satisfies the cell's desire, and that is how we go on breathing.

There is much to be explored in the world of healing. We discover more as we shed the heavy veil of oppression, of secrecy, and of shame around our own bodies. For millennia we have had our bodies stand in for our shame, all the unwanted parts of ourselves, and we have buried our bodies under symbols and costumes, under sins and silence, in order to cover up that shame. I am proposing an unveiling and rediscovering of the body in a compassionate and ethical manner that would open the way to reconnecting with those parts of us which have been separated by trauma and kept away by oppression. This is a natural path towards the realization of our true potential for becoming complete.



## NAYSHA, THE WOUNDED WARRIOR

by Mehdi Darvish Yahya

Naysha<sup>1</sup> walks into my studio with a look of determination keenly noticing my every movement. She is fifty years old, tall but somewhat slouching forward. She has come to see me on the recommendation of a mutual friend, a mentor of hers and a colleague of mine.

I invite her to sit down and begin talking with her about her history which has brought her here. She speaks of men, many men, who have hurt her: her father, brother, relatives, her father's friends, and partner after partner. For as long as she remembers, she has had pain in her joints and digestive system. She has had vaginal pain, tightness, and yeast infection since age eleven.

I ask her how she feels about doing this work with me, a man. She says she needs to do this to prove to herself that not all men are evil. It has taken her a very long time to take the step to come to see me. The thought of being touched by yet another man has been daunting (feeling a pain in her neck she mentions a spontaneous recall of memories of being forced into oral sex), and yet she feels it is necessary for her body to find peace and relief from all those wounds.

I'm aware of the immense responsibility I carry by standing in for all the men who have betrayed her. I feel I am asked to share a part of myself with her that is very different from those men. To heal the wounds inflicted and deepened by all those men, and the loss of

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' note: Although name and identifying details have been changed to protect this client's anonymity, this detailed case study was written with her permission, and she has approved the manuscript.

trust, safety instilled in her by a rejecting and unprotective mother, she needs to experience a deeply empathic and loving feminine, and an ethically boundaried, strong masculine. An attuned and ethical practitioner can offer both, regardless of practitioner's gender.

I acknowledge her courage and the enormity of the journey. I begin to explain how important it is to me to know when and how she feels her 'NO'. Can she say NO with conviction or would she be concerned about my feelings or my reaction. The experience of trauma eschews the awareness of one's *NO* and the ability to voice it too.

I also explain to her how any touch offered in our sessions is asked for and guided by her. And that I would consistently bring her attention to her body in the present moment and would be curious about her genuine and true desire. I would then respond, to the best of my ability, if I can with a full heart, and not out of obligation or any expectation of reciprocity. I would respond either with touch or by observing, witnessing, and reflecting, or by saying words and affirmations that she would give me. The touch would be one-way, and I would wear gloves if I am asked to touch her genitals.

What follows is a brief description of changes and challenges over an 18-month process of working together with Naysha, her heroic journey towards a better life, complete with my stumblings and learning moments along the way. Our sessions had a consistent structure which was a 5-10 minute check-in during which she told me about things that had happened since our last meeting and talking about her intention for the current session. Then we would begin bodywork, if that was her wish, with a short debriefing afterwards. The bodywork took up the bulk of the one and a half hour.

We began with a movement exercise in which she would signal me to approach her, or to stop, or to move away from her. To do this I invited her to be fully present and attentive to her internal signals of safety and danger, a quality of awareness that is also mangled by the early and chronic trauma.

Soon into the exercise she began to cry while telling me she suddenly *got it* how her mother never helped her feel safe. Her mother's neglect and abandonment had been stored in her body all her life and just now, with permission and an invitation to attend to the senses, she gained awareness of her chronic sense of danger and stress. When I asked her what she needed in this moment, she asked

to be held like a baby and be told positive affirmations as if by an ideal mother and grandmother while she expressed rage at her father and grief over her mother's incompetence.

In our third session, she asked to be touched, fully clothed lying on the massage table, with some pressure along her sides, while she imagined being put back together. As I did that she felt she could do what she had always wanted to do, screaming "Please Stop! You're hurting me. Get your hands off me!"

Two months after our first session, she reported that a longstanding depression had lifted. She was now choosing more colourful clothes and felt she could express herself through mixing and matching various pieces. She seemed more attentive to her own sense of choice and less concerned with what others thought.

During a touch session she felt an old rage but was afraid of staying with it for too long. Father's rage was painful and frightening and she was afraid of becoming like him. I coached her to soothe and ground herself through down-regulating breath until she felt safe enough to feel her anger. She understood "nothing bad is going to happen to me". She held my hand imagining I was her kind "grandpa". She asked me to put my other hand on her "mound of Venus" and spoke of a scene she saw in her mind: a horse in a meadow, strong, fast, and safe. I invited her to let the qualities of the horse settle into her body. She began to move in a playful manner and kick her feet.

Over the course of the next few sessions she seemed to be gradually 'thawing out' the freeze response brought on by the chronic trauma. In Naysha, this freeze state manifested in her loss of awareness of her body and its genuine needs and in her inability to say NO to violating, boundary-crossing behaviours by others. Now by being able to allow and feel the playful and strong qualities of horse along with a deep sense of safety, she was moving towards reconnecting with her innate ability to stop unwanted touch and to protect herself.

A few months later, Naysha reported many meaningful insights. She felt an old anger that seemed to belong to her five-year old self. The anger made her feel out of control and she ate junk food to calm the feeling. She also reported an improvement in her hearing. In the body work part of her eighth session, she asked me to hold the back of her neck while touching her solar plexus, and described it as "like

holding a baby”. This resulted in a tremendous release of sorrow. She said “I am completely new” and praised herself for giving her children “what I didn’t get”. She stated the connection between the tenderness in her nipples and the chronic yeast infection under her breasts with the unwanted touch by her father; it was her body’s way of fighting against his aggression and violence.

In the next session, fully clothed, she asked for touch everywhere on her body. She wanted different parts to be held and rocked. She also guided me to move the toxic energy out of her body and to throw it away with flicking motions. She suddenly sat up and burst into tears, stating she felt ashamed for feeling aroused. She wanted to be hugged and expressed her fresh realization that she didn’t have to “endure touch”. She reported she felt naturally lubricated - something that she said “had not happened in years!”

Throughout her process, Naysha was imaginative and open to speaking about her mental imagery, no matter how painful and ugly it was. On the one hand she was able to find strength in her imaginations of the horse, the safe meadow, and a familiar wolf pack. These images connected her with a deep but long-lost sense of safety, intuition, and purpose. On the other hand, she was active in letting go of the “toxic waste” that she had carried in her body and her mind for so long.

About nine months after we began our work together, Naysha’s father died. In the next few sessions, she felt light, spacious, and more open to experiencing joy and pleasure. She wanted to move and dance, and wished to be touched more in pleasurable ways. In a session, she asked to be touched all over her body with some focused touch on her sacrum, and pelvis, and gentle touch on the genitals, she said “It is like I’ve been waiting for this all my life”. She wanted to absorb the joy and pleasure of this experience while she also felt her habitual armouring against pleasure.

It was at this point in the process that she reported she felt healthier, more energetic, and her thinking was clearer. She had no pain and felt more sexually aroused. She felt more excited more often and was masturbating twice as much as before. She felt less hungry, especially for junk food. She spoke of a felt sense of being in a “plaster mould” that stopped her from being alive. This seemed to be an apt description of what trauma had done to her sense of self in the world; there was always a degree of separation that blocked her ability

to experience the reality of her life. She guided me to gently touch different parts of her body as if I were massaging a baby while she told those parts they were safe.

Later she reported she felt more confident facing “all men ever lying” to her; “I feel like me for the first time”.

When we met up for our fifteenth session she announced “I got it that I can give up the belief that that any man coming close to me is going to have sex with me. When I gave that up, I felt safe with you”. Later she asked for touch in the mid and lower body. The touch triggered anxiety related to “dad”. There had been a flare-up in the yeast infection and hives on her inner thighs. As Naysha guided me to touch her legs I noticed a drop in temperature in the area between her hips and thighs, and I asked her to tune in to the area and see what she noticed.

This method of bodywork is more of a *client-centred* practice than a *client-guided* one. There are times when clients might ask for certain touch because they believe the touch to be necessary or expected. This is the indoctrination and disempowerment caused by generations of ‘experts’ imposing their will on ‘patients’ and telling them what they should want and how they should accept what they are given. A practitioner’s finely attuned attention to the client’s body can help the process. We can keep bringing client’s attention to their bodies and to the work of staying present to their bodies’ true needs in the moment, regardless of what they *expect* to experience in a session.

In the next session, Naysha expressed lots of anger towards her mother and “all the selfish things she did”. In the bodywork, she guided me in a touch that helped her feel an opening up in the upper chest. She then asked me to slide my hands down her sides and lift her hips. She recalled her father lifting her as a baby to change her diapers. She allowed herself to feel a lot of tremors and tears. I coached her in making sounds that vibrated her belly from the inside. She felt the urge to move and I encouraged her to run in place, and kick and hit the massage table with her legs. She asked me to lift her hips again in the exact way her father used to do. She was able to stay present and differentiate the present moment from the old experience.

This was a critical shift in her in that she was able to prevent herself from being ‘hijacked’ by the old trauma memory, something



that makes a traumatized person get lost in the frightening feelings and experience the memory as if it is happening in the present moment. This is how trauma damages the sense of time in its victims. To heal from trauma, it is necessary to arrive at the point where we can see clearly ‘that was then, this is now’.

In the next little while she reported her urge to declutter her home while in the bodywork she worked on “clearing energy blocks”.

Lying face down on the table one day she remembered being sodomized by her father. She noticed how by habit she tightened her body and held her breath. I asked her if she wanted to tune into those feelings now. She asked me to hold and open her hips at the same time, which prevented her from tightening her genitals. She then released many tears with anger. As she shook and sobbed intensely she said “This is my body, I am not bad, I did what I could to stop it”. Indeed she had done all that she could, despite the great cost to her body and her physical health.

In debriefing the session, she said: “This was new! I feel a burst of love and a heart opening. This is beyond the earthly reality. This is the deepest work I have ever done!”

During this period she was involved in clearing her father’s place to prepare it for sale. This was a constantly triggering experience due to the fact that she often came across things he collected for his sexual obsession, or objects with which he had violated her. She became highly agitated in a session during this period. After helping her to get grounded through breath-work, movement, and sounds we ended the session early.

In the next session about a week later, she stated she had come back despite the bad experience last time and fear of that happening again. She seemed like a severely wounded but proud warrior who could not and would not accept defeat.

In this session, she spoke about feeling her father on the left side of her body, even smelling a putrid odour on the left side of her forehead. She sensed a viscous fluid in her lower back between her hip bones. I focused her on the flow and how it was emptying out from one side of the body. A new joyful light energy began emerging in her uterus, filling her pelvis, and the right side of her body. She was able to focus on the pleasure of this experience, which felt like another shift in the habitual tendency to focus on the pain and fear. When she felt the fear she also felt very angry and called out “Fuck

off! Enough is enough!” She seemed to feel her power to stop the intrusion.

In an email she stated: “It has been a powerful week. I am more aware of the change/awareness that I have with my power to see things differently... I am happy and celebrate every small thing I accomplish”.

In the following sessions she was gradually able to focus on pleasure. While she noticed sensations that in the past would have made her “freak out”, she was able to *stay with them*. In the world outside she reported she felt more confident, and less guilty or ashamed.

At some point in a bodywork session, she began to respond more positively to touch, feeling excited and engorged, and asked for touch on her G-spot and clitoris. Quickly though she became overwhelmed with pain. On reflection it seemed to me that we were both excited about her progress, and we might have rushed forward too fast.

In the same way that a child’s development can be disrupted as a result of untimely, unwanted and uninvited sexual touch, the healing process can be disrupted by rushing towards ecstasy if the client is not equipped to manage and regulate the experience. Such an experience can be triggering and traumatic in itself. So while dealing with effects of sexual trauma, we must keep in mind all aspects of the client’s experience which would empower them to invite and receive that state of bliss in complete safety and with full mastery. We cannot impose sexual happiness on anyone.

Naysha reported that despite (and maybe because of) the previous session, she felt better about herself and “loving every part” of herself. “It’s a strange way of viewing myself” she said. In the body work that day she moved in and out of anxious and reactive states, and she managed to connect with her inner safety. She guided my touch to experience pleasure around her groin and vulva while staying present to the sensations.

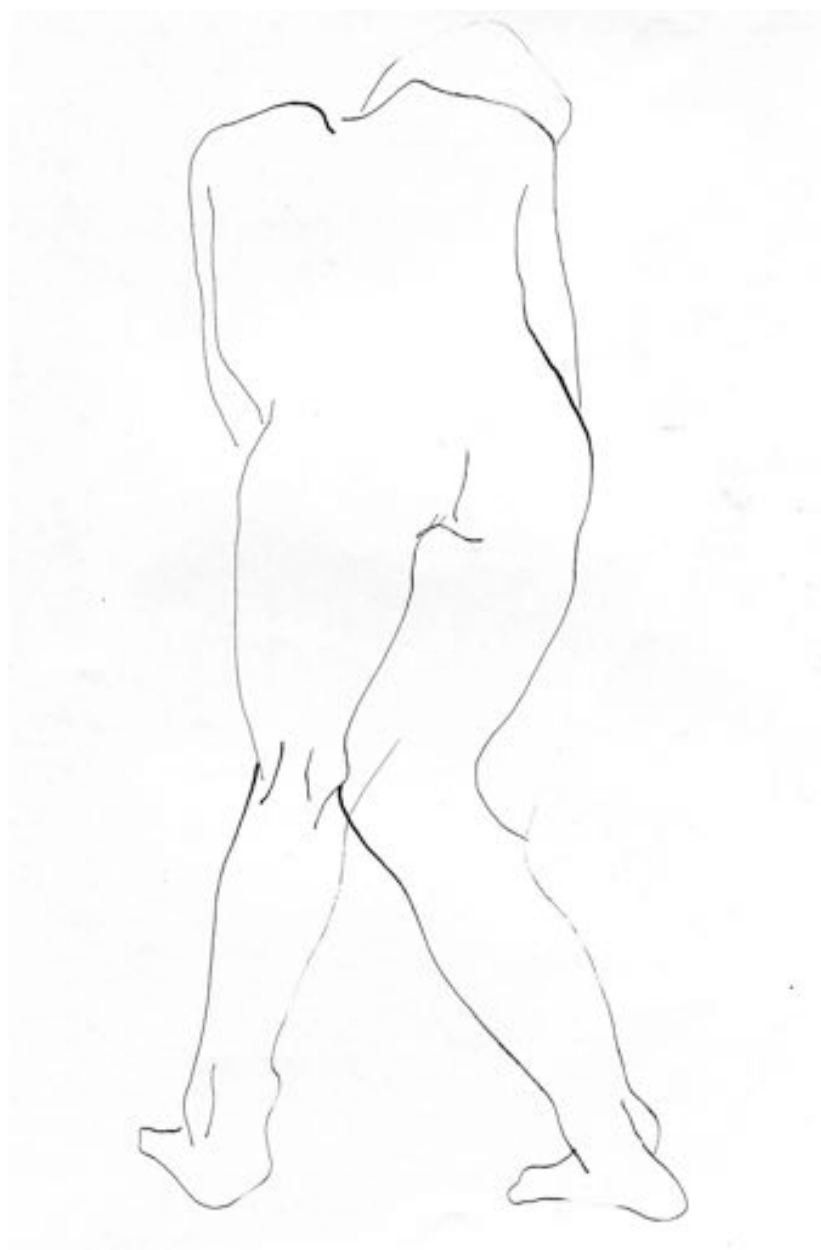
In our final session, she set her intention to feel love for her Self. While receiving touch, she felt overcome with feelings of self-love and her constant longing for it. Feeling her grief she sat up and cried, laid down again, and this time noticed the divide in her Self: the older, motherly and mature part, which she named “the wise one”, and the “little one”, who at my invitation was able to stand in the corner of her bubble, observing and learning from the wise one.

In this final session, Naysha was able to recognize and to differentiate two important parts of her psyche, parts that had been sent *into exile*, her “inner child” carried the early life wounds. Another part had matured through hardships and had discovered her truth through raising her own children. She wrote to me later that the newfound awareness of these two aspects helped her achieve better mastery of her day-to-day challenges. “The realization that I have a choice on how I respond to experiences has made such a difference on how I live my life. I am always surprised at how my life continues to change every day. I am comfortably growing into my own power with ease and excitement”.

And a few months after finishing our sessions, Naysha wrote: “I realize that even though I have never felt loved from a child’s perspective, it is an old pattern that doesn’t apply and that I have always been surrounded by people who love me. I also came to the realization that it is safe for me to be well... There is power in knowing that I don’t need to be sick to be safe”.

Reading this I imagined her taking her constant armour of pain, infection, and numbness off and walking away from the battle which had been imposed on her by her traumatic life. Now she could rightfully focus on her own desires and voice them to the world with confidence, and best of all, without shame.





## UNWINDING SEXUAL TRAUMA

by Roi TurPin

Sexual trauma can have a devastating impact on the identity of an individual. We can utilize a variety of methods to directly address how a sexual abuse survivor inhibits their pleasure, and help them learn to experience their capacity for erotic joy. We can offer support for a student's desire for being erotically embodied, while effectively helping with unwinding the traumatic events of the past.

What is essential in any helping relationship is the building of safety and trust. In a sexual healing context with a history of trauma present, orienting the student towards the felt sense of trust is vital. Besides directly addressing any trauma from sexual abuse, it is important to identify how body image and sexual shame may be effectively uncovered without creating retraumatization. To support a healthy understanding of the ways people can be more erotically embodied, we uncover the shame of the sexual trauma while gently helping them learn to pendulate between the trauma and their inner experience of joy. Basically, we are exploring ways to help someone "grow up" their erotic capacity into adulthood through the sharing of information and potentially a direct, hands-on experience. We help reorient the student to a relaxed experience of themselves in the present moment.

When sexual trauma gets unwound, erotic expression can become a celebration of health, trust and loving relationship. The initial journey in this process is the building of a sense of safety and basic trust through a practice of mindfulness. Initially, I support students'

basic need for safety by enquiring whether our proximity to each other helps them feel more or less safe. Based on their own assessment, I move myself around the room, or even go out of the room, so they can experience this sense of control and mastery over their environment as they gain an internal sense of what feels better. Encouraging the development of an internal awareness of bodily responses, sensations and feelings, helps open the student to the possibility of rich, joyful and safe erotic experiences. This inquiry demands that we fully explore, experience, and identify old messages, patterns, and barriers to fullness. Many trauma survivors do not know their bodies, what their bodies look like, how they function, and where specific body parts are located. If that is the case then we begin working with the most basic boundary of all, the skin. What is it like to have them touch their own hand, what is it like to have a suggestion that I touch their hand, what is it like to actually be touched, and how is it for them to be witnessed in this process? What are the sensations that arise during this process and how do I find ways to help them better track these sensations? What is imperative throughout this process is developing a dialog with them, getting their invitation every step of the way, and slowly guiding them so that there are no surprises. As I observe and support them in directly applying their body wisdom and its innate resources and responses, they feel more inner safety. This also builds relationship together.

I find it an important guideline to help each student identify where they are on a continuum, from sexually traumatized to erotically embodied. Depending on where they are on this continuum, I then explore through the use of little experiments (always getting their full permission first) either boundary setting (using a towel in a mock tug of war), basic touch (exercises mentioned above) and/or breathing exercises. I track how easy or difficult it is for them to build and sustain a charge without flooding their nervous system with too much sensation. Titrating or moving very slowly in manageable ways towards the sensation helps them learn to slow down their nervous system. Becoming comfortable with more nervous system activation leads them to a greater trusting of what is arising inside.

### **Breathwork**

Through the use of various breathing methods, people who have experienced trauma can learn to modulate their own internal state.





the unexplored sexual shame of religions about something so natural and simple as our bodies. A mass psychogenic illness arises from a culture of shame and body negativity precipitated by religious beliefs which describe our natural erotic impulse as negative and encourage a body/mind split. How does our worthiness as sexual beings deserving of erotic joy become embodied so that we can listen to our own internal voice rather than the voice of an imposed external authority? This is the nature of understanding and transcending sexual shame. It's an ongoing inquiry with all of our students, ourselves and all the human inhabitants of this planet. When done with compassion, clarity and integrity, mirror work provides an opportunity for a dynamic sexual attitude restructuring.

### **Undoing Overcoupling**

The term overcoupling comes from fluid dynamics where a fluid with one viscosity is mixed with a different fluid of another viscosity. The way these two fluids meet and interact suggests a dynamic relationship between both of them. The same can be said of two or more emotions experienced together. Overcouplings are instances where several emotions or physical sensations appear at the same time, and flood the nervous system with too much information. When we can identify overcoupling we gain more choice. For example, someone who experiences excitement may simultaneously feel anxiety. The anxiety may act as an inhibition to the excitement and lead to frustration. By encouraging a student to place their attention between the two sensations and gently oscillate between them, they not only develop a greater capacity to distinguish between them but also increase their capacity for tolerating them without dissociation. To deconstruct and understand how a given emotional experience is organized allows us greater clarity and freedom.

### **Conclusion**

Here are a set of goals I have developed over time for working with sexual trauma:

- Deepen the capacity for trust.
- Uncover the depth of internal resources.
- Practice the innate ability to slow down.
- Develop a sense of presence in the here and now.

- Reclaim a sense of curiosity about the body.
- Unwind and release previous traumatic experiences.
- Learn to set clear boundaries and safely move beyond them.
- Explore how anxiety and excitement may be over-coupled.
- Track the experience of flow in the body.
- Support increasing feelings of personal power.
- Give up trying - discover that any process we explore together is about ease and flow.
- Experience inherent surrender to innate body wisdom.
- Experience and increase a capacity for more sensation in the body - feel how sensational you are!
- Connect more passionately with the Self.
- Explore freedom, relief, empowerment, courage and primary change motivations.
- Identify the capacity for appreciation, compassion and gratitude.
- Identify and directly experience erotic appetite and desire.
- Identify core beliefs and help to integrate new learning strategies.
- Create a gratitude list.
- Identify future goals.
- Identify internal and external resources.
- Orient towards finding successful erotic experiences in life.

Whatever the particular course of action or combinations of body-based exercises and experiences we enlist in dealing with the aftermath of trauma, recovery requires courage and a deep commitment to heal. It also requires a high level of expertise and experience on the part of the practitioner. The continuing evolution of awareness of the issues involved, and increasingly more effective healing modalities, offer help and hope for those previously trapped by their past experiences.



# YOUR HOME

by Cosmo Meens

Your Home  
sits empty  
waiting for you  
to fill it  
this body  
is a vehicle  
embodied  
I can feel it  
Pure is my heart  
So full  
with love  
I could spill it  
Healing myself  
if needed  
Through a dialogue  
God is my spirit  
found in this body  
no church or synagogue  
Lifting the fog  
of this game  
and helping others  
do the same  
Revolution  
from the bondage  
of guilt, fear and shame  
Left from the  
battle wounds  
of this world  
like a stain  
connecting  
with ourselves  
then others  
Through feeling  
touch  
and movement  
Sexual healing!



## PORN ADDICTION IS REAL

by Corinne Diachuk

In my practice I work with a wide range of people in various stages of life, love, sexuality, ability, and relationship. A common theme I notice is the correlation between the habitual use of pornography and inability to experience sexual fulfillment. Habitual use of pornography can result in loss of physical sensation, desire and arousal, inhibited ejaculation, dissatisfaction, and often shame, deceit, and retreat from interpersonal connections.

The American Association of Sexuality Counsellors, Educators and Therapists (AASECT) has recently released a statement saying that there is not sufficient empirical evidence to support the classification of sex or porn addiction as a mental health disorder. While I agree that many people are inappropriately labeled as sex addicts or porn addicts, I would argue that porn addiction is real. Here I use the term ‘addiction’ to mean an obsessive habit rather than a mental health disorder, while noting the tremendous suffering that surrounds pornography use – a suffering that somatic sex education can help relieve.

### **Sex Addiction or Sex Ethos?**

When clients first come to work with me as a somatic sex educator, it is important to help them focus on their own experience and desired outcome. In many cases my work has included

debunking a misdiagnosis of “sex addiction”. Many individuals have been diagnosed based on a counsellor’s values and worldview rather than their own. When an individual’s desires are contrary to the values of a partner or counsellor, responses can be shaming and harmful. Misinterpreting sex ethos as “sex addiction” means people are missing out on the complexities of their erotic design.

In the AASECT view of healthy sexuality, there are only two rules of sexual engagement: 1. Consenting 2. Adults. It doesn’t matter what your sexual preferences are, or how much of your life you want to dedicate to erotic play, as long as it’s between consenting adults. Healthy sexuality can therefore be determined by process rather than content, and is principle-based rather than act-based.

Here are the 6 principles of the Sexual Health Model as described by AASECT:

1. Consensual
2. Non exploiting
3. Protected from HIV, STI, and unwanted pregnancy
4. Honesty
5. Shared values about sexual activity
6. Sexual rights and pursuit of pleasure

Addiction, however, is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (online) as “compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance characterized by tolerance and by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal; broadly: persistent compulsive use of a substance known by the user to be harmful”. In my experience, habitual use of pornography can come to fit within this definition.

### **And porn addiction is different from sex addiction.**

Many people are able to view pornography as a healthy form of erotic inspiration, to infuse new ideas into partnerships, to reignite creativity, or to access arousal that may be otherwise unattainable. However, watching porn can easily develop into unfulfilling habitual patterns.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the burden of depression and other mental health conditions is on the rise globally. Instant gratification, a powerful hit of dopamine, unlimited

access to every sexual scene one could ever imagine at one's fingertips and lifestyles that are focused around technology, can compound the isolation porn users often feel from their intimate human relationships. High rates of depression and low self-esteem also play a role. All these factors taken together can brew a powerful formula for addiction.

The content of porn is not as important in people self-determining whether they have a "porn addiction". However, many people have told me they find that just as a heroin addict needs to take a little more every time, they have found themselves looking for content that continually becomes more extreme. What was once thrilling can become boring. Images need to become more wild, aggressive and explicit. Such porn use can imprint violent, abusive, and non-realistic ideals of what sex is about. As a colleague of mine, Pamela Madsen pointed out to me once, "It's only kinky the first time".

My clients tell me that their pattern of habitual porn use is often:

- stress/boredom/depression
- + easy access to technology
- = release & repeat

This pattern creates isolation, shame and disinterest in the world outside. Whether it's alone in bed, on the couch, or on the office chair, the porn addict's world becomes increasingly small.

Individuals come in with a variety of different stories, needs, desires and goals. The learning offered by a somatic sex educator must be customized for each person, based on their desired outcome. Most will not be seeking "treatment", but rather a safe space to learn more about themselves. We are not in the position to diagnose or judge. We simply create space for habits and patterns to be explored as a path to finding more sexual fulfillment.

Here is a loose 6-step learning plan that I often use. This is subject to change at any moment based on the needs of the client.

## **1. Intake**

A thorough intake process is essential to maintaining professional standards, and to supporting the long-term goals of the client. Though an initial intake conversation is generally held over the phone, in-person consultation is essential for creating a personalized



learning plan. During the intake process, I use acute presence and observation skills to notice what brings joy and what brings pain or fear to the client. It's important to stay curious and in a place of humility; we can never know what it's like to be the client. As soon as we think we have become the expert we need to look at the lens we are seeing our clients through.

## **2. Intention setting**

After an intake consultation, I will often offer a body scan, which is a guided visualization of the bodily sensations. In this process, we notice the breath, the senses, and invite awareness into each individual part of the body, encouraging a softening. I invite clients to breathe into all parts of the body, including the genitals, welcoming sexual/creative energy as a healthy and important part of a whole being. I give permission to clients to feel what they feel and notice what they notice without telling them about their experience. Once in a state of mind/body connection, I ask a few soul questions to help them form clear intentions. I guide them to create a powerful statement, in the present tense as if it's already happening: I deserve pleasure; I am worthy of my own love; I have joy and ease in my body.

Intention is different from a goal. I will often discourage clients from having a particular "goal" in mind, especially when the goal is to achieve orgasm in session. However, it's important to honour a goal if the client perceives this as being of value.

## **3. Mapping Self Pleasure**

I encourage the client to share with me as much as they feel comfortable with about their self-pleasuring practices. When I ask bold questions to encourage a detailed description, we can work together to map what is working and what isn't, and in what ways the client can start to integrate new practices.

## **4. Witnessing**

Sometimes a client wants to receive touch. Sometimes they just want to be witnessed. Both can be very powerful. A full body erotic massage can help to create new pathways for pleasure, connecting the brain to expanded possibilities. For some people whose sexuality has been relegated to isolation and the glow of a computer screen, just

simply knowing that they are accepted and seen, that they are okay, and that it is safe to be themselves, can be a huge part of a healing process.

## **5. Encouragement or ART**

I ask my client if there are any encouraging words they would like to hear from me while they are experiencing touch or being witnessed. The acronym ART stands for “Affirmative Ritual Therapy” – a process of my own design in which the client is invited to speak out loud the self-doubt or self-criticizing thoughts that come up while receiving touch or self-pleasuring. Once the negative self-talk is shared, I offer a reframe or opposite affirmation. I always ask for consent before embarking on this ritual.

Some words I find can be powerful:

“Your pleasure is beautiful”.

“Your desires are welcome”.

“All of your (sounds, movements, words, fears, emotions, fluids, desires) are welcome here”.

## **6. Coaching / Support**

I never assume that I know what’s best for my clients, and I always offer suggestions using language of invitation and inquiry. This is a short list of some of the techniques I use:

- Guided erotic embodiment meditation for developing interoception (perceiving the body’s sensations from the inside).
- Coaching in breath and movement for accessing arousal in a relaxed state and to generate orgasmic energy.
- Using the “Wheel of Consent” by Betty Martin, practicing the language of negotiating desire.
- Pendulation - Using porn as a tool for inspiration, and then bringing the awareness back to the body. Pendulating between attention to the screen, and awareness in the body. (this is a technique developed by Joseph Kramer, who offers extensive resources for porn watchers on his website [pornyoga.com](http://pornyoga.com).)
- Whole-body touch for pleasure and self-knowing. Learning new ways of experiencing sensations to create new neural pathways for pleasure.

The following stories are based on real client scenarios of people I have worked with as a somatic sex educator. The stories have been amalgamated and adapted to preserve my clients' privacy and anonymity.

*Client:* A 60 year old man who describes himself as a “lover”. In the past he has had unlimited energy for pleasuring his partners. But partner sex has become increasingly disappointing. He complains he is unable to “perform” and “cum”. After having five to seven orgasms while watching porn every day for several years, he is now unable to orgasm with anyone else present in the room.

*Our Process:* Listening, witnessing, encouraging self-love and acceptance for this new stage of sexual expression, letting go of the expectation of orgasm and bringing attention to all the other ways of experiencing pleasure.

*Client:* A 36 year-old single dad, whose loneliness led him to the nightly ritual of masturbating to porn. He holds so much tension in his body from the stress in his life. He needs to furiously beat himself harder and faster with more and more tension. Moving only his right hand and holding his breath, he is still not able to find the release he seeks.

*Our Process:* Guided relaxation meditation, nurturing touch, massage, coaching in breath and movement. Supporting a deepening of his somatic awareness to become aware and let go of unconscious tension. By encouraging a softness, he became more open to finding pleasure in small ways throughout the day.

*Clients:* A couple in their late twenties who received their sex education through watching porn together. They have just had their third child. When they engage in penetrative sex, he wants more and more speed and pressure to find his orgasm. She feels dissatisfied, used and abused in their sexual life, even though she claims to be happy and healthy in every other aspect of their relationship.

*Our Process:* Simply listening, slowing down, and practicing the Wheel of Consent, developing awareness and the ability to ask for what she wants. When she had the opportunity to be held in tenderness, I witnessed a deepening of the authentic intimacy

between them.

*Client:* A 22 year-old university student who can't leave his house on the weekend, let alone approach a real woman. He self-identifies as “addicted to the worst kind of humiliation porn”. In the videos he watches, the Female Domme looks him straight in the eyes and tells him how pathetic he is, how worthless he is, and how he'll never actually have sex with a real woman. He describes for me in great detail how compulsive it is for him to “binge” on up to 8 or 10 hours a day consuming porn, when he should be sleeping or studying.

*Our Process:* Listening, empathizing, creating intentions, affirming positive beliefs, guided breath and movement.

*His own ideas:* Creating an accountability plan, he self-selected to sign up for No-Fap, an online community for an abstinence-based porn addiction recovery program. He created a men's group amongst his peers for support.

*Client:* The recovering alcoholic who uses internet porn and masturbation as a substitute addiction. His wife doesn't recognize him as a sexual being, and their relationship has been “sexless” for many years.

*Our Process:* Coaching in breathwork and movement, sensation play and whole body touch. Creating a daily practice for integrating pleasure and arousal without the intention of release. Communication coaching with the Wheel of Consent for building bridges within partnerships. He discovered of a whole new world of pleasurable possibilities, inspiring connection, motivation to spend quality time practicing self-care, and a desire to support other men in recovery to create new healthy relationships with masturbation.

There is no one “porn addict” profile, so there cannot be one “prescribed” method of working with someone for whom porn is problematic. Somatic sex educators have the opportunity to be informed with honest, authentic, accurate sexuality information as it relates to our clients through their current embodiment of cultural and societal conditioning. This information cannot be learned from textbooks alone; there are as many individual erotic designs as there are unique people in this world. We support profound healing for our clients when we create a space of non-judgment, listen with

compassion, celebrate pleasure and help them to create strong and powerful intentions. We can support people in making tiny steps towards expanding pleasure by offering one small new thing at a time.



## UNWINDING THE BONDAGE OF PATRIARCHY IN THE BODY

by Katie Spataro

It seems as if we are now experiencing a cultural climax of the work done to expose patriarchy and shed light on how it has impacted personal and collective trauma over the past several hundred—if not thousands—of years. Patriarchy, as used here, refers to the systematic, oppressive relationship structure of power over another, and how historically the dominant roles of power have been both imposed on and taken by men within the family, religion, the workplace, government, and communities.

As we all hold within us a reflection of the world around us, the damaging effects of patriarchy inevitably show up in our bodies, highlighted through negative body image and shame, gender role oppression, control of fertility and birth, reproductive injustices, and restrictions in our sexuality and sexual expression. We all feel these negative effects in different ways and throughout different parts of our lives, and while each person will have unique experiences of patriarchy in the body, it is nearly impossible for anyone to escape them entirely.

In my practice as a somatic sex educator, I have witnessed and observed how patriarchy shows up as bondage in the body. I intentionally use the word bondage, borrowed from the practice of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism), to describe the somatic experience of patriarchy. From

this perspective, bondage means to be tied up, restricted, restrained, lacking full mobility, containment, restriction of breath and circulation, literally to be held hostage. Of course, within a BDSM context, bondage involves mutual consent, whereas the bondage of patriarchy is nonconsensual and often unrecognized consciously.

The field of somatic sex education is one of the important modalities for supporting the unwinding of the bondage of patriarchy in the body. Somatic sex education offers unique opportunities because it involves somatic inquiry in a trauma-informed context while working within the realm of the erotic, using the exploration of pleasure and arousal to support presence in the body. In this way, practitioners of somatic sex education provide radical support in the embodied release of patriarchy's effects in the body.

The ideas presented here were sparked by my own observations in my practice as a doula, somatic sex educator, and Holistic Pelvic Care practitioner. I refined them in conversations with my colleagues at Seattle Sexological Bodyworkers as well as experts in the BDSM field, and filtered through my experiences as a woman and mother. I acknowledge the context in which I practice somatic sex education is shaped by my experiences as a white, western cisgender woman, and that these identities provide a lens which both informs and limits my point of view.

### **How patriarchy shows up in the body**

In my practice, I work mostly with ciswomen and non-binary people assigned female at birth. Oftentimes my clients grew up in fundamentalist Christian families. The intention and goals for our work together follow themes around finding presence in the body, experiencing more pleasure (from sex specifically), feeling comfortable expressing desires, managing/relieving pelvic pain, and healing from sexual trauma.

A common theme amongst many of these clients is that even though they may have left the church long ago or separated from family or partners still within that faith, the bondage of patriarchy is still experienced in their bodies. Patriarchal religions have shamed the body for millennia, the act of becoming embodied at birth even called out as "original sin". Even though we all came from the (female) body and from sex, these religions continue today to shame sex and eroticism, and by association of its sexual nature, seek to

control fertility and birth.

Intellectually, many of my clients have acknowledged these systems of oppression, and some have accessed the privilege of stepping away from them, leaving their churches and religions behind. However, the long history of patriarchal power in our ancestry can be wound in the body in such a way that even when the mind shifts, the body still holds the imprinting.

There are many ways in which I've noticed how the bondage of patriarchy can show up in the body. Some people experience various levels of disconnection, from vague physical numbness up to a complete lack of knowledge or deep misunderstandings of their sexual anatomies and reproductive cycles, and how they relate to their ability to experience pleasure in their bodies. This ignorance, which is fostered by patriarchal systems bent on controlling our sexuality, has created what sexologists describe as the "genital hole". This concept, which originated with A. H. Almaas, is a form of self-castration. It refers to such a complete numbing-out of the genitals and surrounding areas that a person is actually cut off from their proprioception, or physical awareness, of these parts of their body.

The bondage of patriarchy also restrains and restricts our vital life force energy (libido), which can show up for some as a lack of desire. Cut off from our root connection, the bondage restricts blood flow to the genitals. This makes engorgement and arousal responses difficult at best or impossible at worst, causing discomfort and "dysfunction". The human nervous system physically and energetically connects the pelvis to the jaw. Because of this connection, restriction or numbness in the pelvis can restrict the voice and one's ability to speak out. It's no wonder so many victims of sexual violence remain silent.

An overwhelming number of women experience symptoms of pelvic pain at different times of their lives, which is often overlooked or under-treated by medical professionals. Birth is physically traumatic, and yet almost no care is given to the pelvic floor muscles afterward. This almost utter lack of attention results in common outcomes like organ prolapse, painful sex and incontinence, all of which are largely preventable with proper care. This is a symptom of a culture that disregards women's health, and has successfully abolished the ancient traditions of postpartum body care.



For many people, their experiences of sex are violent, even when self-pleasuring. Straining to reach orgasm, their muscles clench down in habituated responses causing restriction in physical mobility and breath and sometimes resulting in pain or discomfort after orgasm. Sex education in schools fails to cover how to experience healthy pleasure in our bodies and as a result, patriarchal conditioning has cut off our understanding of the full range of orgasmic states and limits access to fuller sexual expression.

The top-down, power-over model of patriarchy is also internalized with our mind-over-body mentality, which values the mental and intellectual while subordinating or even rejecting the body's innate wisdom. The internalized bondage of patriarchy is a learned response, likely stemming from very early experiences as infants and even on into adolescence of having our bodies shamed and our boundaries violated. These micro- and macro-level invasions and assaults impact our ability to fully honor our own desires and arousal. Even worse are the physical and psychic impacts of knowing that we do not own our fertility as the patriarchy continues to control access to birth control.

Bringing the unconscious restriction of this bondage in the body and its resulting wounds into conscious awareness offers us more access to our own choices. While the bondage of patriarchy limits our experience in our bodies, knowing this provides opportunities to feel into our habitual responses and invites in other possibilities.

### **Somatic sex education**

Somatic sex education offers various ways to support building awareness of the body's constraining and limiting patterns, and bringing in more choices that invite the unwinding of patriarchal bondage. Working with clients on simple boundary exercises, sensing into what "yes" and "no" responses feel like in their body, practicing how to ask for what they want, learning about anatomy and arousal patterns, and uncovering deep-rooted beliefs about giving and receiving are a few of the tools used in somatic sex education.

While a variety of tools and exercises can be introduced by the practitioner, the real value of somatic sex education lies in following a client-centered and trauma-informed approach without a prescription or agenda applied by the practitioner. Many clients initially come in expecting something to be done *to* them, rather than asking

specifically for what they want. This in and of itself disrupts the learned habit of passive receiving or more accurately, conditioned enduring of something they don't want. Empowering clients to tune in and practice allowing their own desires to arise from their bodies rather than their minds, opens up their experience of receiving in a whole new way.

Somatic sex education practices that explore the embodied experience of “yes” and “no”, and having those choices welcomed and celebrated, often bring into awareness previous experiences when those choices were ignored and violated, either by another person or within themselves. Simple exercises in somatic sex education, when carried out slowly and with intention within a session, can reveal places where our clients overextend their yeses, give beyond their consent, or are closed off to receiving. Bringing awareness to the disconnect between the mind's responses and the body's responses helps teach clients how to feel safer in their bodies.

Most people have experienced being touched or penetrated without their explicit consent at some point in their lives. Somatic sex education works with the body, including the genitals, in a way that requires explicit consent on more than just the surface level. Somatic sex educators do not enter or even touch without the client's full and embodied consent. This means that we first teach our clients to deeply feel into what their body is saying and honor that, even if their mind is saying something different. Having the client's internal responses be honored externally by the practitioner begins the unwinding and allows the client even more space for movement and choice.

In my practice, I include the techniques of Holistic Pelvic Care, a gentle pelvic floor release developed by women's health physical therapist Tami Kent. This genital touch, which is not intended for arousal, involves slow and gentle pressure on internal fascia combined with acute presence, intention, and breath awareness. This experience can be incredibly grounding for some clients, bring up strong emotions or stories for others, and provides inquiry into this part of the body in a non-threatening way. What I've noticed with many clients, even those who have tried other more clinical versions of pelvic floor releasing, is that it allows them the space to open up without being worried about being penetrated or entered without their consent.

## **The practice of receiving**

The pioneering work of intimacy coach and erotic practitioner Dr. Betty Martin provides a valuable model for understanding the prevalent and often unconscious patterns in patriarchy. Betty refers to her model as “a radical inquiry into the nature of giving and receiving”. Her “Wheel of Consent” provides somatic sex educators with a framework for supporting clients in better understanding their habitual responses to patriarchal bondage. Using the Wheel, practitioners help clients by illuminating places where we break the boundary of consent by over-giving or enduring unwanted touch, or where we are taking without consent, or failing to check our entitlement.

For many of my clients, these habitual responses involve putting up protective barriers that limit and restrict their ability to fully receive. We acknowledge together that this armoring has served a purpose of self protection and can be very necessary at times – that the walling off, closing down, or seizing up is the body saying no, or pause, or go slower. Respecting this response and not pushing past it is an important part of their healing, particularly for my clients with pelvic pain symptoms.

But learning to truly receive touch and pleasure, in an embodied way, is directly connected to the unwinding of patriarchy’s grip on the body. In order to open up to receiving in an active way, it requires us to ask the questions “Want do I truly want?”, “Am I worthy to have what I want?”, and “How do I ask for what I want?” These questions directly contradict the cultural beliefs that sex and pleasure are shameful, that we are wrong for seeking pleasure, and that we don’t have the right to control our own bodies.

The one-way-touch nature of somatic sex education means that the client is always in the role of receiving. Practitioners empower clients to ask for what they want, within the context and agreements of a session, as a way of practicing this state of active receiving. For these clients who have endured painful experiences in this part of their body over time, the journey towards a more active receiving state involves patience. While some clients may learn valuable skills and tools in one or two sessions, others choose to engage in more ongoing sessions for deeper exploration.

One of the outcomes of unwinding the restraints around receiving is having greater access to the arousal states that arise when the nervous system is in its more relaxed, down-regulated condition. When the root is open to receive, the experience of arousal arises without effort or clenching. Practitioners offer breath coaching to up- or down-regulate the nervous system, so that clients can find their “learning zones”. These “learning zones” are described by somatic sex educator Caffyn Jesse as the critical places where our clients feel just enough stress to be challenged to learn, without feeling unsafe or checked out.

### **The unwinding**

As the bondage of patriarchy is unwound in the body, clients may discover increased somatic awareness and a sense of relief or freedom that comes with creating more space for breath, movement and pleasure. They may experience a sense of loss and grief as well. The unwinding can invoke a sense of coming undone, a loss of containment that may have provided a sense of comfort and safety, even though it may have been causing harm. There may be a period of numbness after the bondage comes off, when there is not yet full mobility, or there may be fear of unwinding as it involves the unknown, unsure if safety nets are in place to catch us when we let go.

The process of unwinding may not be a linear one, as healing happens backwards and forwards, across generations, and as we realize we carry the bondage of ancestral trauma. We bump up against places of discouragement when we realize that despite our best efforts, we’re operating in systems that are designed to keep us bound up. Race, class, and gender privileges provide access to more resources and safety nets, while those who are more vulnerable within these systems have less access to those same resources and safety nets.

The unwinding can illuminate areas in our lives, even outside of intimate relationships, where we are holding on to narratives that aren’t ours or that no longer serve us, which can feel disorienting. It may impact current relationships, families, and communities, and clients may fear losing or changing those relationships even if they are unhealthy. Within intimate relationships, it may require redefining what sex is and what sexual relationships look like.

Somatic sex educators provide radical support not only in the process of unraveling, but also in the types of aftercare needed during the process. Along with therapists and health practitioners who understand the value of somatic sex education, somatic sex educators play a strong role in offering support and a safe container for the unwinding of the bondage of patriarchy in the body. And ultimately, it is only within a safe-enough container that the wounds can become the womb.



## A JOURNEY TO MYSEXUAL

by Erin

I sat at home in front of my journal, pondering questions that had been coming up over and over lately. Was sex, intimacy, sensuality, and partnership just not for me? Was it better to just give up altogether on the idea of ever getting to feel my own sexual wants and desires, especially with another person? I wondered these things because I had spent the last six years single, celibate, and in a state completely void of any sexual feeling or desire. I had never really enjoyed sex all that much before, but I had also never been quite this shut down. For a while, it made sense. My last relationship had not been great and I figured I was just enjoying myself being single. But as years passed, I could tell that some other mechanism was at play. I ruled out anything physiological with my naturopath and had worked in therapy through much of the trauma from past physical and sexual abuse, and yet, desire and arousal were still completely nonexistent.

“Asexual.... Hmm, maybe that was it,” I thought. The word describes a person who has no sexual feelings or desires. The word seemed to fit my symptoms, and I really didn’t remember having all that much feeling or desire even when I had been sexually active. It seemed to fit everything I knew about myself, but as I sat in front of my journal and contemplated the label, my heart protested. Deep down, I knew something was missing, had always been missing, and my heart begged me not to give up. I made a commitment to myself then and there that I would make one more concerted effort to try and figure myself out in this space before I resigned to a life devoid

of sexuality.

I didn't know where to start. I knew that straight up dating did not work so well for me yet. After my marriage had ended years prior, I had done a lot of personal work and was much more emotionally mature and personally aware. However, as I moved out into the dating world, I would sadly watch old, practiced habits take over. The moment I was with another person, their wants and needs became priority. In fact, that happened so completely in me, that I became entirely unaware of my own wants, desires, and preferences until the date was over. I would go home and realize that I never actually wanted to make out with the person and had just been following anything they wanted. My history of physical and sexual abuse, and a father who treated me completely like property, had left me with only the skills to abandon my own wants and desires in service to the other. It had been a survival mechanism in the past, but now, as an adult no longer in actual danger, it was just personal and repeated torture. Watching this happen over and over, it made sense that I never felt anything and in fact, when any kind of touch or sensual exchange was happening, I often just wanted it to end.

I had done so much work with my therapist to find my way to voice and preference in normal things, like food and bodily comfort, but the second any sexual energy was in the room, everything in me shut down and wanted to get the hell out. Ok, so maybe I wasn't asexual, but instead just not interested in sexual experiences where I was not connected with myself, my choices, and my preferences. That made sense to me, but at the same time, I had no idea how to work with this edge. I couldn't work with sexual energy and touch with my therapist, but I had no capacity to navigate this space out in the dating world. My own sense of self disappeared too quickly on dates and I would always sadly follow what the other wanted. I turned to fantasy and began to see if I could dream up what might work for me. I kept finding myself fantasizing about scenarios where my sexual feelings and desires were the only ones that mattered; scenarios where the other person didn't (or couldn't) want or need anything from me. The fantasies themselves disturbed me a bit at first as they contained images of paying prostitutes or even ones where I was overpowering another and disregarding them completely. While the images were disturbing, something in them allowed a part of me to begin to wake up. When there was no sexual

need or desire from the other, I was finding my own beginning to subtly show up.

While it brought me a little hope to see that I was not completely ‘dead’ inside, I had no idea how to move forward to being able to engage safely and respectfully with another human being in the ‘real world’. I truly needed a space where I could begin to explore, without the other person needing or wanting anything from me. That much I knew and felt right, but I felt sad and devastated believing that that kind of space did not actually exist...and then I stumbled across the work of a Canadian Somatic Sex Educator and author. It must have been fate.

I purchased and began to read a book she had written, and in just the preface and introduction, I felt the words were written just for me. She described some of her own journey and an experience she had working with a woman who held sacred space and offered sacred, healing, genital touch. I wept deeply as I read. They were tears of grief and relief all at the same time. Grief came as I realized just how much possibility for pleasure and joy had been cut out of my life and relief as I found great hope in learning that there just might be a place for me to work this edge in a safe and supportive container. There were actually people, who she called ‘sacred intimates’, who held space in ways that I might actually be able to explore touch, sensuality, and my own sexuality in a safe and supportive way. Both hopeful and terrified, I reached out.

Over the next several months, I worked both remotely and in person with this somatic sex educator and sexological bodyworker. She was sweet, gentle, and inviting, and I found very quickly that I could trust our sessions to be a space that was truly focused on me. While we did foundational work in the beginning, to help me find my way to connecting with my own preferences in the moment and how to express ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘I change my mind’, it is the sessions on the table that changed everything for me. I can still remember in great detail our first session with full body touch. She guided me through a process to define and create a ritual that was designed perfectly for me and my body. Every touch and intention was detailed and discussed until we had come up with the exact experience that my body was wanting.

I still remember laying on the table as her hands gently swept my body from head to toe. Each touch was delivered with verbal



statements and affirmations. “Your body is yours,” came the words as her hands brought soft attention to my skin, stroking gently the length of my body. “Your body is yours; I am here to support you”. The words themselves seemed to penetrate, my body listening and drinking them in with each sweep of her hands. “You can trust your body and let your body move,” brought encouragement to the long frozen and terrified parts of me I had locked away deep inside. “It’s okay to let yourself feel good,” seemed to breathe life into me as I felt hands on my body offering and not taking. My ears heard, but my body listened, received, and drank in the words and touch in a way I could never fully explain.

On my back, I felt vulnerable and exposed, but the affirmations and gentle touch offerings continued. The repetition and slowness gave my body time to orient to and feel the healing intent of the offering and the safety of the container. I felt my preference for touch shift and asked for steady, unmoving hands on my yoni and heart. I felt a familiar tension as she placed her hand on my vulva...an internal bracing and expectation of pain and unwanted touch. “Your body is yours,” came again as I felt her hand respectfully holding my genitals and heart. “I am here to support you,” reminded me that the touch was an offering and not a taking, and I felt into the support. My yoni had never been touched in this way before and tears fell as I began to relax into it, breathe, and let myself feel....really feel. I felt connected to my own body as the touch and words steadily continued.

While the words and touch seemed simple enough, the experience was profound. My body was finally mine: all of it. This might seem like a given to most, but for me, this was truly a first. I was in contact with another person, and my body was still mine. It was in existence for me, not for the other. The details of how I was touched and handled were for me and not for the other. The choice of what happened with my body next was mine, not the other’s. “It’s okay to let yourself feel good; your sexual energy is welcome here”. Pleasure was available and welcomed for my body, too, and not something that happened just for the other while my body was in pain. “You can trust your body and let your body move”. Movement was mine again and I felt warmth and life wash over parts of me that had been long frozen in efforts to protect.

Something deep in me changed in profound ways in that session. My world was no longer the gauntlet of sexual threats and predators it had been when I was growing up, but somehow my body had never gotten the message that it was finally safe. Before that session, it only remembered all the ways the world took and abused, and while my mind was aware that things were different now, my body had not yet fully received that understanding. It remained locked in the past, braced, frozen, and unfeeling as it anticipated the same thing it had always experienced. And each time I engaged with a potential mate, my body enlisted the same strategies of shut down to keep me safe and unfeeling inside a protective shell. The experience on her table that day, however, changed everything. The steady touch and affirmations over the hour and a half gave my body a completely different experience and reference point. My body believed, for the first time ever, that it was possible to open to sexual and sensual touch and not lose everything.

As I moved forward with the work, so much continued to change and open up for me. I found my way to more ease in speaking each 'yes', 'no', and 'I change my mind'. I found hints of desire and arousal showing up and discovered ability to stay with my own preferences while in physical connection with another. I found a longing to find more experiences to allow the unfolding of my own sexuality and sensuality in pleasurable ways and especially with other trusted partners.

Since then, I have continued to explore and experience my own sexuality in new, wonderful and still sometimes challenging ways. As I finally felt confidence in moving back out into the dating world, I have found that others are often looking to label my sexuality. I am very clear now that asexual is not a label that fits, but as I tried on others, they did not seem to fit well either. Bisexual, queer, and pansexual, these were close, but again did not seem right. These last ones all seemed outwardly focused in a very subtle way. The truth is, I have no idea who I will be attracted to tomorrow and what gender or nonconforming gender they may be.

So I sat again, in front of my journal, pondering a whole new question. What is my sexuality? I cannot say that I will always be attracted to male, female, transgender, or no one. I cannot say, in all honesty, that what drives my desire is the particular gender expression of another. I cannot say that because I feel no sexual

desire or arousal today that I will still feel that way tomorrow. What I can say about my sexual preference that I never, ever want to change, is that now and forever it will be based on the experience I am having in my own body. The orientation I am committed to and will always follow is what brings me and my body pleasure. And then it hit me. The word wafted into awareness and it was perfect. Every cell in my body said yes to both the word and the meaning I placed behind it.

~Dear Diary, If you must call me something, call me “mysexual”.





## MAKING SOMATIC SEX EDUCATION SEXCESSIBLE FOR EVERY BODY

by Shauna Farabaugh

Who would have expected that in a professional training exploring such juicy topics as anal eroticism and erotic trance states, I'd be most excited about scar tissue? I'd never even thought about scar tissue. But when I learned at the Sexological Bodywork Certification Intensive in 2013 that scar tissue's impacts extend throughout the body, and that we as somatic sex educators can affect change on that tissue, thus creating more ease and liberation (and thereby increasing the potential for pleasure) in the body, I was fascinated. And curious.

Like scar tissue grows and weaves a web throughout the body, my curiosity grew and led me deeper into inquiry. What about surgery? Millions of people experience surgery every year, and I wondered how many of them experience impacts on their sexual expression or function during recovery or subsequently. Do they talk to their doctors about those issues? Are their doctors willing, comfortable, or informed enough to provide support, answers, and relief? From surgery, my thoughts went to chronic illness, such as fibromyalgia, lupus, or arthritis, and from chronic illness to physical disability, such as spinal cord injury (SCI), multiple sclerosis, or cerebral palsy. And from all these thoughts and questions, I realized that my experience in the practice of somatic sex education had not addressed these myriad bodies, that the ways I had been studying, discussing, and practicing somatic sex education had ignored or rendered invisible

the sexuality of anyone not defined—by self or culture—as “able-bodied”. I decided that unless I rethought how I approached and practiced this work, I had succumbed to the widespread cultural taboos and lies surrounding sexuality and disability or sex and sickness. So, as a person who is as passionate about justice as about sex, I started doing some research. What follows is a brief exposition of what I’ve discovered so far, through academic and practical research, as well as some recommendations for simple things somatic sex educators can do to move their practices in the direction of accessibility.

Creating a practice that moves beyond “able-bodied thinking” allows somatic sex educators to recognize and creatively show up to support the sexual expression of a wide-variety of communities who are often neglected in the world of sex education, including those with intellectual disabilities, cancer, and stroke survivors, in addition to the communities to which I previously referred. While much of the research I share here can be applied to many or all of these communities, in this article I will specifically focus on people with physical disabilities.

The basic premise from which I launched this research is that every body has a right to sexual expression. I was delighted to discover that the World Health Organization (WHO) agrees. In *The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)*, published in 2001, the WHO cites sexual expression as a right of people with disabilities. The Outsiders Trust, a UK organization dedicated to supporting the rights of people with disabilities to sexual expression, asserts that sexual expression benefits people with disabilities in multiple ways. “Disabled people gain confidence and experience increased well-being once their sexual needs are met. Those in pain need fewer painkillers once they are experiencing orgasms. The mental health of deaf-blind people improves if they have a sexual outlet. People with spinal cord injury and cerebral palsy can feel far more relaxed, with no spasms for a while, after orgasm”.

The impact of orgasms on spasticity is documented in “The Health Benefits of Sexual Expression,” a report published in 2003 by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in cooperation with the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. “Studies looking at the effects of rectal or penile stimulation on muscle spasticity have found that ejaculation and/or orgasm can decrease rigidity and

improve muscle relaxation in women and men with musculoskeletal injuries or diseases—e.g., paralysis or multiple sclerosis”. The report goes on to say that in men with spinal cord injuries this relief has been documented to last for eight to nine hours.

Sexual expression is a right of and provides benefit to people with disabilities. But lest we get caught in erroneously framing the benefits of sexual expression for people with disabilities as medical interventions, I remind able-bodied readers to ask themselves how their sexual expression benefits them in their life. That’s how sexual expression benefits people with disabilities. I set out to research specifically how somatic sex education can be of service to clients living with disabilities. What are the benefits and limitations of this modality in that context? How can somatic sex education strive toward accessibility for all bodies? To explore those questions, I now present a brief case study.

### **Client Background**

The client is a cis-gendered male in his forties who experienced spinal cord injury over 10 years ago. He is quadriplegic, lacking sensation below his chest with reduced sensation and mobility in his hands and arms. He has been actively exploring his sexuality since the time of his injury, both independently and with others, and has noticed changes in his body’s sexual response over time. For years after his injury, his penis did not engorge when stimulated by another person. However, in the past year, sensation in his genitals has increased, and his penis now engorges with manual stimulation during self-pleasuring sessions. The more engorged his penis is, the more sensation he experiences in the genital area. He has discovered that self-administered manual stimulation of the head and corona creates the most orgasmic sensation, and, when he is very erect, induces his highest levels of arousal.

When asked to more fully describe his erotic and orgasmic sensations, he largely describes them as an awareness of energy moving through the body, often in waves. He sometimes directs that energy with his breath, or by touching other parts of his body. He perceives the origin of this erotic energy to be the genitals. While orgasm for him does sometimes feel like a big release of energy, more often he feels the energy build, then release a bit, then build again. Sometimes he can ride these orgasmic waves for a sustained period



of time. Occasionally he will be flooded with endorphins and experience a sense of satiety, which inspires the cessation of a self-pleasure session. More often he stops because of time, fatigue or body pain. Since he does not experience the physiological relaxation that typically follows ejaculation and orgasm, muscle tension often lingers in his body after self-pleasuring sessions. While the mental relaxation and euphoria of post-orgasm often exists, it can be helpful or necessary for him to stretch (or have his body stretched) after self-pleasuring to release the unresolved physiological tension.

When asked to describe his typical self-pleasuring behaviors he reported that he typically self-pleasures three times per week. Physical concerns such as inflammation, chronic pain, and digestive upset can all impact his interest in or ability to self-pleasure, as do issues of privacy and scheduling. His energy levels are highest during the day, but that may not always be a convenient time. He takes an herbal supplement once per week that he has observed to increase blood flow to the genitals when self-pleasuring; he has also observed that a cannabis product increases his erotic sensation. He typically begins self-pleasure sessions laying down, focusing on breathing while manually stimulating his penis. It typically takes thirty minutes for him to really feel aroused. When feeling significantly aroused and erect, he will often change the position of his bed to an upright, sitting position and continue manual stimulation or use toys, such as a vibrating wand or a masturbation sleeve. His self-pleasure sessions typically last two hours.

### **Intentions**

When I asked this client about what he wanted to get out of his experience with somatic sex education, he wrote, “Feeling less pain in my body. What can I do to minimize creating more pain?...How do I feel strong, confident, sexy, and more assertive?...How can I be more powerful making requests?” Three great questions, all of which can be addressed to varying degrees with the tools of somatic sex education. Narrowing our focus, we decided to address the issue of the pain “backlash” that often follows self-pleasuring sessions by exploring how somatic sex education tools can help him build more arousal with less physical exertion. Because his spinal cord is damaged but not severed, he lives with chronic pain, which is primarily experienced on the right side of his body as a sense of

tension and pain from the neck all the way down to his hip. In his words, our priority was, “What’s the most gentle way to experience pleasure without [subsequently] causing myself more pain or discomfort?”

### **The Research**

The client and I worked together over the course of three sessions of approximately 90-120 minutes each. Two of those sessions took place in his home; one was via Skype. Our first session primarily consisted of my witnessing his masturbation. I also engaged in some supportive roles, applying lube as needed, adjusting the angle of his bed, etc. Witnessing allowed me to observe his self-pleasuring habits and to assess which somatic sex education tools might prove to be most relevant to our inquiry. I observed an above average awareness of erotic energy’s movement in the body and a willingness to engage breath, accompanied by his occasionally forgetting to breathe. I also witnessed a reluctance to rest or pause manual stimulation, even if there was a sense of fatigue in the upper body.

It is also significant to note that I realized in our first session together that I needed to clarify the somatic sex education “container”. This client has worked with a variety of different erotic service providers and friends to explore varying aspects of his sexuality, which made it more important to clarify the ethical guidelines and boundaries of somatic sex education and the ways we could engage, since those boundaries are different than other erotic containers in which the client had explored. (Somatic sex education sessions are client-focused sessions that do not involve interactive touch for mutual pleasure.)

Based on both my initial observations and our video intake, I created a plan for our third session. An initial grounding and body scan established a baseline picture of feeling, experience, and energy in the body. I included communication and consent exercises with the intention of building the client’s capacity around identifying desire in the body and asking for what he wants, as well as continuing to build and strengthen our ability to communicate and trust each other. The exercises were based on the 3 Minute Game developed by Dr. Betty Martin. This game is a powerful tool that supports clients in discerning and expressing their desires and cultivating an embodied understanding of consent. (See her website [bettymartin.org](http://bettymartin.org))

for phenomenal free resources.) I also taught and practiced with the client a breath and visualization technique known as the “Microcosmic Orbit” that helps to amplify the flow of energy in the body. Through the session we worked on establishing intention for how he would like to touch himself and what kind of touch he would like from me. I witnessed and assisted the client’s self-pleasuring session incorporating the breath technique and masturbation coaching. We concluded with a body scan and debrief.

The “Microcosmic Orbit” seemed to have the most impact on the client’s experience. I chose that technique based on the client’s demonstrated skill at perceiving and moving energy, believing that focusing on that skill could allow him to more consciously and effectively manipulate his erotic energy without using his physical body, thus reducing the effort expended and, hopefully, reducing the backlash of upper body pain the next day. Nine days after this session the client reported the following via text message: “Wanted to let you know that I had an extraordinary experience yesterday self pleasuring and I could feel the most pleasurable sensation in my cock that I’ve ever experienced post-injury. Even after my cock was soft it was still extremely pleasurable. It was truly one of the best orgasmic experiences! Was practicing [the breath and visualization exercise] and found that really helped”.

The primary function of coaching that day was to remind the client to take breaks from manual self-pleasuring during which he noticed breath, energy, and sensation in the body, as well as to use these “breaks” to consciously manipulate erotic energy, and savor his sexual arousal. Throughout the session I reminded him to breathe whenever he held his breath.

The client’s intention for self-touch was primarily to touch his penis while I vigorously stroked his head. He found that the simultaneous stimulation of his penis and his head helped to draw the energy from his genitals into his upper body.

We also explored ways to modify toy use for maximum physical ease. When using a cordless vibrator, we experimented with resting the vibrator against his body (the vibrator then being between his abdomen and penis), allowing his abdomen to support most of the vibrator’s weight rather than him having to grip the vibrator tightly with his hand and hold it away from his body against his penis. He reported that he did find that the stimulation to his genitals remained

the same with more ease in his arms and hands with that modification.

Another interesting experiment to note involved the inclusion of fantasy, with titration, in self-pleasure sessions. After initially teaching the client the breath technique and having him practice it for a while, I invited him to practice it again while simultaneously engaging in fantasy. He reported experiencing more arousal this second time. This opens an interesting inquiry for exploring or cultivating dual attention in somatic sex education clients: can they focus deeply on the experiences in the body and cultivate vivid fantasy to enhance arousal simultaneously? Can our clients learn to pendulate between the two, and will this accomplish the goal of enhanced erotic and orgasmic pleasure while reducing physical exertion? While the default of somatic sex education is often to get people out of their heads, including any dependence on fantasy, and into the experience of their bodies, I have discovered that when working with clients with disabilities we often have to drastically change the script. For example, while encouraging physical movement is a go-to recommendation for somatic sex education, this must be rethought or modified if a client has limited mobility. To reduce physical exertion or pain during or after any kind of sexual activity, relying on any and all skills that can enhance arousal that are not movement-based is a reasonable strategy.

## **Conclusions**

Somatic sex education as a modality provides a great number of tools that can be beneficial in supporting clients with disabilities to explore and express their sexuality. Somatic sex educators need to modify their expectations for these tools: movement is not the best recommendation for clients with fatigue, chronic pain, or mobility restrictions. Breath is not the best recommendation for clients with breathing problems or who use breathing apparatus (or perhaps again for those with fatigue—breath that stimulates the sympathetic nervous system can be exhausting, even for clients without fatigue concerns). Somatic sex educators need to be flexible and creative with the tools at their disposal and expand their thinking to include helping clients modify sex toys, strategize ways to manage a catheter during partner sex, or discover a more comfortable position when self-pleasuring. Practitioners need to think about the spaces in which

they work —are workshop venues accessible? Are they willing to do home visits if their office is not accessible, or if clients are more comfortable on their bed at home or unable to travel? And this necessary flexibility requires that practitioners be even more clear and articulate regarding the boundaries and container of the modality they offer. Perhaps this requires an additional intake consideration: “Through which other modalities have you explored your sexuality? Tantra? Surrogate partner therapy? Escorts? Are the differences between the intentions of and boundaries within those modalities compared to those of somatic sex education clear?” Or perhaps the client has had NO sexual experiences or interactions, including with themselves (if they have had no support for masturbation from family or caregivers), in which case explaining the boundaries of somatic sex education and how they differ from other experiences the client may choose in the future is even more vital.

Of course, somatic sex education cannot address all of the sexual needs of clients with disabilities. For many people with disabilities, their primary sexually related concern is about partnership: finding a partner, feeling desired by another person, falling in love. Somatic sex education can increase a client’s confidence, improve body image and the ability to communicate their desires and attractions, all of which may increase the likelihood of finding satisfying romantic and erotic connections with others. But it can’t provide partnership.

The true challenge in partner access for people with disabilities is cultural. Until we change a dominant culture which perceives people with disabilities as not sexual or not deserving of loving partnership, and make society more accessible so people with disabilities are not isolated and limited in where and how they can meet people and cultivate relationships, the sexual expression of people with disabilities will still be limited, despite a commitment to accessibility in our profession.

There are also challenges within the container of somatic sex education specific to people with disabilities. The Association of Certified Sexological Bodyworkers Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics requires the use of medical-grade examination gloves for all genital and anal touch. For clients with disabilities the use of gloves can feel clinical, reminiscent of the many ways they are regularly touched by healthcare providers and caregivers. At best, this may simply feel un-erotic; at worst, it can be triggering or traumatic.

Certainly somatic sex education alone cannot dismantle the cultural challenges to the sexual expression of people with disabilities. But somatic sex educators are already challenging the limitations of standard sex education and current social beliefs about sexuality. By committing to the challenge of thinking beyond able-bodied sexuality, to changing the way the field discusses, teaches, and practices somatic sex education, somatic sex education can play its part in creating a world that recognizes, champions, and celebrates the right of every body to sexual expression.



## A SPECTRUM OF EROTIC EMPOWERMENT: ASSESSMENT FOR PRACTITIONERS AND CLIENTS

by Caffyn Jesse

As somatic sex educators we work with clients on a spectrum that ranges from very vulnerable to very empowered. At one end is the client with an unstructured and inchoate self. They do not feel confident, secure and well-boundaried in the erotic realm. They may have suffered trauma or profound neglect. Asking for what they want - and even feeling what they want - is a challenge. They need support to become independent and self-regulating. Another kind of client is more empowered. They come into our practice with a relatively structured and coherent sense of self, and a history of “good-enough” experiences exploring erotic pleasures. They feel reasonably strong and resourced. Their goals and intentions in working with a somatic sex educator often involve shifting habits that are confining and expanding more fully into all they can be.

Our more-vulnerable clients need exercises and experiences that empower their choice and voice. Attuned, safe and well-boundaried relationships have often been missing from their lives - and without such relationships, a secure and independent self cannot take shape. As somatic sex educators we can provide a safe relational environment in which these clients can share, explore and develop as sexual beings. We can offer exercises that build their capacity to feel and speak their desires. We can meet their secrets, shame and pain with our caring positive regard.

When it comes to bodywork with more-vulnerable clients, we need to proceed with extreme caution. We are guided by clients’ considered response to our question, “How would you like to be



touched?” Within this inquiry, these clients will need time, support and practice feeling into what their bodies want, and expressing that without fear. They will need practice knowing they can stop and change their mind from moment-to-moment.

As somatic sex educators we also need to be guided by our ongoing somatic assessment of clients. Tracking breath, muscle tension, skin temperature, posture, facial expression and unconscious movement, we pay attention to their autonomic nervous system activation. Are they staying within their learning zone, and able to track and speak of what they need? Or are they pushing themselves to experience something that is beyond their capacity to integrate?

Our more-empowered clients often need a different approach. While taking care to ensure our clients can express their needs and guide their sessions, with more-empowered clients somatic sex educators might use their experience and resources to lead rather than follow – challenging people to shift habitual sexual practices and conventional thought patterns, providing new information, and offering unusual opportunities for people to explore expanded pleasures. Suggestions that would be overwhelming to one of our more-vulnerable clients can create opportunities for a more-empowered client to move beyond the sterile constraints of “good-enough” sex and flourish in an expanded erotic life. Explorations of ecstatic erotic practices like Erotic Massage Dancing, Taoist Erotic Massage and communal Orgasmic Yoga would likely be inappropriate for a more-vulnerable client, but could be exciting and enlivening to one who is less-vulnerable.

With a more-empowered client, we might lead with a suggestion that they do a session exploring anal pleasure, genital mapping, or erotic massage - practices that can magnify the erotic well-being of an already-empowered client. For a client who is feeling anxious, uncertain and voiceless in the erotic realm, such suggestions - and experiences - would be overwhelming.

Both more-vulnerable and more-empowered clients are likely to find benefit in learning nervous-system regulation through the somatic sex education tools of breath, sound, movement, touch and imagination. But great care must be taken when exploring up-regulating practices with a client who is more-vulnerable. I have worked with clients for whom simply breathing more deeply with awareness of the pelvic floor is overwhelming. They need support to

learn to access a sense of calm safety in their bodies before engaging in practices that welcome expanded excitement and aliveness. Less-vulnerable clients can learn to experience prolonged pleasure and ecstatic states through deep connected breath, movement, mindfulness and extended touch – so long as their expanded erotic self-regulation is built on a foundation of safety.

### **Shifting Positions on the Spectrum of Vulnerability**

It is important to be aware that clients move to different places on the spectrum of vulnerability. Less-vulnerable clients become more-vulnerable clients because of shifts in external or internal conditions, uncovered memories, or when exploring new experiences or body parts. I once worked with a client over twelve sessions in which he seemed calm, confident and empowered. But then something in a bodywork session touched on an unacknowledged history of anal rape, and he became confused, dysregulated and very fragile. Another client felt strong and adventurous until a session touching on infant circumcision evoked deeply buried feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

More often, we work with clients who become less vulnerable and more empowered over time, as they build capacity to become self-aware and self-regulating, and to feel and ask for what they want. Beginning with boundary exercises and practices that help to develop choice and voice can lay a foundation for later work that investigates expanding pleasure, developing a personal erotic mythology, trying new sexual practices and forging new forms of relationship.

### **Intake and assessment**

How do somatic sex educators know where each client is on the spectrum of erotic empowerment, and when it changes? Intake and assessment practices help us assess when a client is more or less vulnerable. We learn to recognize and build on client competencies in asking for what they want, setting boundaries, feeling and articulating their moods, knowing what their body wants, resisting what they don't want, and communicating during the altered states we access through sessions involving touch. We can be guided by clients' articulation of their intentions and goals for our work together, along with a moment-to-moment assessment of their embodied presence. Do they feel strong or fragile? Do they feel grounded or

ungrounded? We aim to work in each person's learning zone, where they are excited and alive, but not unsafe.

### **Guidelines for Potential Clients**

Assessment is not only our work as somatic sex educators - it is also the responsibility of clients to keep monitoring and evaluating whether they are ready for the work we do, the experiences they want to have, and the impact of what happens in sessions. The following guidelines, drawn from those written by the author and published by the Somatic Sex Educators Association on their website, can be useful for potential clients considering whether or not they are ready for this work, and who to choose as a practitioner.

Clients with the aim of healing trauma should work with a practitioner who has a trauma-informed practice. Some somatic sex educators do not have this specialized training and experience. These practitioners can be most helpful for clients on the more-empowered end of the spectrum, who aim to change habitual ways of experiencing sex and learn how to feel more pleasure. Clients can shift from one end of the spectrum to another, as traumas surface or competencies build. They need to keep track of whether the practitioner they are working with is the right one for them as they change.

The process of discovering, identifying, releasing and healing from sexual abuse or neglect is powerful. Profound emotions can be released, and have a big impact on people's lives. Somatic sex education clients should have a support system, including someone they can talk with about this work. A situation in which a person's visits to a somatic sex educator are secret, and the practitioner serves as a client's main support person over the long term, is not a healthy and sustainable learning environment.

A person's physical health, diet, exercise, and sleep routines should be reasonably stable in order to support them through the process of working with a somatic sex educator. When physical health issues are present, clients need to consult with their doctors to make sure they are not neglecting important medical treatments. Somatic sex education practitioners need to be apprised of any medical conditions or medications that might influence their clients' physical well-being, state of mind or emotions during sessions.

Somatic sex education is not a suitable introduction to self-care practices, although working on sexual wholeness is likely to help people build their capacities for better self-care. Having a repertoire of established self-care practices like meditation, journaling, prayer and personal nurturing will be important for clients on this journey.

Somatic sex education is not a simple process. Be wary of anyone promising simple solutions or techniques that will miraculously transform. Healing personal and cultural wounds around sex takes time and commitment. Completing a program of somatic sex education can take months or years. In addition to time for the actual sessions with a somatic sex educator, clients must also give themselves adequate time to process and integrate sessions. “Homework” or “home play” will likely form an important part of any journey to wholeness. Each client is unique; the time it takes and the number of sessions needed to complete a learning process are different for each person.

The majority of somatic sex educators are well-qualified, trustworthy and very competent. They are following a calling to help others the in ways they have been helped to heal and learn sexually. And all of us can make mistakes, or inadvertently trigger painful memories. Occasionally somatic sex educators can be misguided, or lack appropriate boundaries. To work effectively with a somatic sex educator, a client needs to track when things feel wrong, and to be ready to speak up, and ask the practitioner to immediately stop and change the activity or the plan for sessions. (Practitioners should also be coaching clients so that they feel empowered in their choice and voice.)

It is important that clients gradually work on building an erotic community, rather than becoming dependent on a single practitioner. Somatic sex educators should not cultivate client dependency, but instead guide their clients to work also with other practitioners, and to participate in workshops and groups that will help them to create a “sexual wholeness” community.

## **Conclusion**

The journey of expanding sexual wellness is not about making linear progress on a value scale where “more empowered” is desirable and “more vulnerable” needs remediation. People can become brave enough to be more vulnerable when they have relationships and

practices wherein their woundedness can be brought to light in its ongoing unfolding. At the same time, people build personal and cultural empowerment by undoing sexual oppressions, and creating environments and practices that encourage learning and growth. The new profession of somatic sex education supports people on their unique and courageous journeys within the entire spectrum of erotic empowerment.



## LET OUR HEALING BE SHAME-FREE

by Sara

Imagine yourself in your most exposed and vulnerable state. Every raw emotion, human flaw and orifice is hanging out there to be seen. Standing on the precipice of self-implosion from shame. Then your witness looks you in the eye, sees you, and speaks of your beauty and courage. Instead of being dashed to the rocks, you are soaring. To be seen, really seen at such a vulnerable level, and at that moment, instead of what you imagine (the person running out of the room screaming) they embrace you with love and validation. It is the greatest gift you can give yourself.

I recently attended and came back from an Erotic Massage/Intimacy Healing week long class. “Came back from,” is an apropos description. It felt as if I was on another planet. That I had travelled to a distant land and experienced things I didn’t know possible. Even within myself, I met parts of me from which I had shied away. We were encouraged to challenge ourselves to move from a place of conformity and safety to a new edge. Get out of our comfort zones and to open up to more of what we want, what we truly desire and are capable of. That would require me to leave my private and conservative self behind. Was I ready? It had taken me a couple of years to get here. It’s not for beginners.

Through the week, there were a series of exercises to build trust as a group and to get to know ourselves more. We established clear boundaries, practiced voicing our desires, visited our shadow, and played with our fantasies. We were asked questions like, “What would make this more pleasurable?” and “What have you not dared to ask for?” Ugh, How do I answer that when it is hard enough to admit I

enjoy touch? Slowly, as I listened to myself, the answers came. And came and came. Oh, my gosh, really, I could ask for that? No way, how embarrassing. Maybe? The group encouraged me to, “Go for it, anything”.

Holy shit, I went for it. Naively, I was focusing on my physical body – exploring new sensory edges and ways to be touched. I no longer wanted to hide behind the fig leaf. What I didn’t expect was the emotional healing that would take place. After a bit of erotic gymnastics, I was there on that precipice. I had bared it all physically and was on the edge of a shame attack. The urge was to close up or to put on the brakes, resisting the possibility to take it further. Could I also risk emotionally?

I could’ve left it at that. A lot of play, laughter and newfound pleasures. But nooooo . . . very slowly, there was another need that began to take hold. After a while I couldn’t shake it no matter how I tried. Just thinking about it my eyes welled up with tears and my gut twisted in knots. The urge to shut down and hide was still strong. Like a flower right before the final blossom, shrivels up. Over the years, I had learned to ask for emotional support from my closest life companions, so the feeling was familiar, I knew that freedom came from speaking rather than shutting down.

I don’t even recall how I worded it. Astounded that anyone could even hear my soft voice. “Desirable? Am I desirable?”

No answer. It seemed like it took forever. The practitioner repositioned himself to establish mindful eye contact. Clearly reassuring me that he understood the importance of this question.

“Yes”.

The tears streamed down my face. “Sara, you are desirable”. The attention and heart connection was extremely powerful! He spoke with such a tender and loving voice. It felt genuine and heartfelt. Being so seen and still desirable. What a gift!

In my psychotherapy practice I often hear from women that they want to feel desired. Or as a client of mine said, to know she is “fuckable”. That doesn’t mean they want to fuck a lot of people. Only to be desired that much.

Sadness washed over me. Why is this so rare? Why does it take 25 or 50 years before one can receive loving touch that strips away our armoring, our oppressive cultural messages about our bodies and the restraints of erotic touch? Why isn’t this an integral part of standard

therapy? Why do we have to go underground and feel like we are part of the black market to experience sexual healing? We have lived long enough behind the veil of secrecy and shame. Let our healing be shame-free.

I am thankful for having risked taking this class. For having the support to listen to my inner voice about how I want to be touched which enabled me to climb to new heights of pleasure. Then in my vulnerable state of exposure, to risk even further, be held with loving and supportive words – such tenderness and validation.

The more vulnerable one becomes, the greater the reward of intimacy.





*Ink on paper by River Frey Drosera*



## EXPRESSIVE EROTIC PLAY: CREATIVE RITUALS FOR EROTIC EMBODIMENT

by River Frey Drosera

An intentional daily practice is the foundation for transformation and learning in the body. We may understand parts of ourselves intellectually but when we involve the body, we gain new perceptions and information as to how we move through the world as erotic beings. When we feel it in our bodies we can access information to help us with setting boundaries, developing body autonomy, and increasing our capacity for pleasure and joy.

Expressive Erotic Play is a practice that comes from the lineage of Orgasmic Yoga, developed by Dr. Joseph Kramer. Orgasmic Yoga is an intentional daily erotic embodiment practice that incorporates breathwork, body movement, making sound, and full body touch that may or may not include our genitals. It is a way to reconnect to pleasure, develop a sensation language about our own bodies, facilitate emotional discharge, and cultivate joy and a deep sense of self-love. This practice helps us to inform ourselves about our needs, desires, arousal, pleasure, and how to unravel shame and stigmas that keep our bodies collapsed and small. Laughter, joy, tears, grief, pain, and pleasure are welcome and valued.

I have practiced Orgasmic Yoga in various forms for four years and in 2016 decided to weave in the act of creative expression as a part of my Somatic Sex Educator Level 2 research project. I wanted to explore and investigate the intersection of eroticism and creativity. I was curious about how a daily practice of creative making and erotic

expression could inform each other. I wanted to know what happened when we make art and create while feeling into our bodies and arousal. This also feels like an important time to define “erotic”. Erotic, to me, is not always genitally focused. Erotic means a deep sense of connection to my body and an outward expression of my authentic self in the world. I find this quote from Audre Lorde’s essay, *Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power* powerful and on point:

“The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves”.

During this research and the development of the practice, my resistances were present – my shame, grief, erotic guilt and the peeling back of identities. I was also grateful to find joy, liberation, and a deep-rooted connection to my creative self. To come back to the body and to our creativity is a brave and rebellious act! One of the biggest changes and learnings for me was that I began to fight for creative space in my life. I *wanted* to create, I *wanted* to carve out time for my pleasure and creative life, and I deeply missed the ritual when the practice discontinued. I wrote this quote from Clarissa Pinkola Estés on the back of my sketchbook:

“Protect your creative life. Practice your work every day. Then, let no thought, no man, no woman, no mate, no friend, no religion, no job, and no crabbed voice force you into famine. If necessary, show your incisors”.

My intention in the set of “instructions” that follow is to help inspire readers to start a practice that acknowledges their bodies AND their creativity. I hope they will feel free to add whatever they want and make it up as they go along.



*marker and nail polish on paper by River Frey Drosera*

### **What is Expressive Erotic Play (EEP) and how do I do it?**

“Creativity is a shapechanger. One moment it takes this form, the next that.

It is like a dazzling spirit who appears to us all, yet is hard to describe for no one agrees on what they saw in that brilliant flash”

-Clarissa Pinkola Estés

EEP is a “daily” solo erotic practice that incorporates intentional breathing, sound exploration, movement, touch, and creative expression. There is no one right way to do this practice and it can be as creative and in the moment as you want it to be. When I first started, I would move, breath, and self-pleasure for 10 minutes, go to my sketchbook for 5-10 minutes to draw or collage, then go back to movement, breath, and self-pleasure. Some days I would do the embodiment piece for 30-40 minutes and then spend 15 minutes creating at the end. It’s all up to you and what you decide to do!

I put “daily” in quotes because I like to loosely define daily as 5 days a week. This is to let ourselves have a couple days off or miss

some days. These days off will hopefully be helpful with the shame spirals or “not enough” stories many of us fall into when we don’t complete something to its “fullest”. These shame spirals are a sure way to derail your intention for reconnection to your self. However, I recommend noticing if you begin to miss a lot of days in between practice and if missing days has now become the habit. You may also engage with EEP only from time to time and incorporate it into your other embodiment practices.

### **Notes about creative paths:**

\*If you are choosing a more visual creative path, I recommend starting with a sketchbook. Sketchbooks are brilliant because they are small, portable, and do not require a large time commitment. It allows for an “in the moment” laying down of images, ideas, words, and other materials without the pressure of having to create a big perfect masterpiece. The sketchbook is made to be messy and for practice.

\*If you are collaging, choose the images that speak to you and that catch your attention. I often spend time cutting out images and text I like from magazines, and keep all of these cut-outs in one folder for future EEP days.

\*If you are choosing a more performance-based creative path you can play music, sing, and create performance art or expressive movement. You may wish to record your performance for yourself or share them.

\*Feel free to make up whatever creative path you desire!



*graphite and ink on paper by River Frey Drosera*

### **Before you get started:**

\*Before each session of EEP, get all your art materials out and ready. It's the first and most important step. You don't want to be searching for your art supplies mid-session as that is a sure way to dissolve the mood and take you out of your experience. Keep these art supplies in a box or space that is ready to go so you don't have to organize and find them before every practice. Ease is what keeps the practice going from day to day.

\*Set a time container. Try to do this exercise for 30 min or more. An hour is even better! End with at least 5 min of stillness and integration. The integration period is for savoring, breathing, and to soak up the experience. Be aware if this is a step you skip. At the beginning of my research I found I was getting up immediately after each session and doing something around the house. I was resisting sitting still and letting the sensations and experience sink into my body

\*Set an intention at the start of each practice. Some examples of intentions are:

- My intention is to explore my genitals with slow touch.

- My intention is to cultivate my creativity and explore my eroticism.
- My intention is to focus on my breath and receive pleasure.
- My intention is to just show up.
- My intention is to release anger and explore grief.
- My intention is to explore joy and love myself.

\*Do a body scan. This you can do at the beginning and at the end of your session. It's a way to notice if there have been any changes that you felt in your body throughout the session. To do a body scan close your eyes, take a deep breath, notice the top of your head, slowly work your way down your face seeing if there are any sensations there, work down the front of your body to your genitals, to your feet and then move up the back of your body, not forgetting your asshole! Notice any sensations in the body and try not to judge or get involved with any stories. You can do this for a couple of minutes or as long as you would like.

All of your feelings are welcome! Grief, anger, joy, pleasure, pain, love, liberation, irritation, resistance, hope, etc! This practice will look different every day depending on where you are at mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Do your best to keep it in the moment with your body and the creative process. Notice if you are starting to shift into thinking too much about if you have the right colors, how it might be seen by others, whether or not it's the right composition, etc. Notice if decision making starts to pull you out of your body and back into thinking about what you should, would, or could do. If you notice yourself leaving your body and going back into your thoughts then bring it back to breath, movement, sound, and touch. Play with it.

You may wish to keep a written portion in your sketchbook to keep track of your process and any changes in your body. You may wish to track your resistances and roadblocks to see if there are repeating patterns.

Keep the practice simple. The more complex the practice the

more likely you will not do it over a period of time. You will probably be able to keep the practice up if you are working in a sketchbook versus doing a big painting each day. Don't worry about not doing it "right" and follow the pleasure.

### **A note about shame backlash**

You might feel you are unable to share what you are doing with friends and family. If you have a trusted friend, let them know that you are doing this super cool practice as a way to cultivate your eroticism and deepen your relationship to your creativity and self. I believe being seen and heard in our process can help to unravel shame. Shame may show up to inhibit you in making sound, accessing your eroticism, or feeling more in your body. This is all normal and a part of the process. Remember that you are not alone! Shame permeates our culture(s), especially around the body, eroticism, and creativity. Many of us have been told we are not creative and that our bodies are not important. It's everybody's birthright to be able to explore our desires with curiosity, attention, and love.

### **Notes about breath, sound, movement, and touch**

There are many ways that we can learn about breathwork. You may already know of different breathing patterns that you can bring into your practice. If not, there are plenty of resources on the internet. Check out youtube.com and The New School of Erotic Touch website. Any kind of breathing pattern works. This will help to engage with your body and stay out of your mind and it's running to-do lists.

Making sound is often one of the hardest practices for many people who try these exercises. Many of us have been taught to self-pleasure making as little sound as possible. When we engage with sound, we step further into our body awareness and can release pent up emotions. While this may be difficult if you live in a house with many people, I suggest starting by making sounds on your exhale to connect with your breath.



Movement is another piece of the practice to access your body and pleasure. Like sound, many of us have been taught to self-pleasure while being very still and tense. Dancing, shaking, and writhing around can help to integrate breath and sound, and to open up new pleasure pathways. While movement is important, some of us have limited mobility. Movement doesn't have to be big or involve your whole body if that causes pain or is not possible. Do what you can and remember that breathing also moves the body and chest.

Many of us self-pleasure by touching only our genitals. With this practice I invite you to touch the rest of your body. See what feels good and follow the pleasure. Again, do what you can do. It's all perfect!

If all of this feels like a lot to remember, start with one aspect and integrate the rest over time.

Expressive Erotic Play can be a fun and transformative way to connect with your erotic and creative self. It can help to open up new pleasure potentials and move what feels erotically and creatively stuck. This daily practice can help to unravel shame and old wounds by honoring our imagination and our authentic sexuality.

Creativity and connection to our bodies is vital to self-love in a world that tells us otherwise. It is our birthright for every body to take up space and time with creativity and pleasure.

I am so grateful to be able to share this with you all. For more inspiration of erotic art and art about bodies check out The Erotic Arts Project on Instagram and Tumblr. I hope you will send pictures of your artwork to [theeroticartsproject@gmail.com](mailto:theeroticartsproject@gmail.com).

drawing overleaf: *ink on paper* by River Frey Drosera

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**GENDER** does not  
exist in the *Wild*.



SOMATIC SEX EDUCATOR  
CONTRIBUTORS

## SOMATIC SEX EDUCATORS

### CORINNE DIACHUK



Corinne Diachuk is an advanced teacher of Therapeutic Yoga and a Certified Somatic Sex Educator. She has been offering “Yoga Therapy for Sexual Wellness” from her private studio in Victoria BC for several years. She is excited to be supporting the new field of Somatic Sex Education by working together with the Somatic Sex Educators Association as the association President and co-facilitator of the professional Somatic Sex Educator Training. Corinne is passionate about courageous communication and radical self responsibility as tools for intimacy and sacred sexuality. You can find her teaching a yoga class, hosting a sexuality workshop or by scheduling a private session with her in person or via video conference. For more information see [www.sacredcenteryoga.com](http://www.sacredcenteryoga.com).

## RIVER FREY DROSER



River Frey Drosera is a Certified Somatic Sex Educator and Sexological Bodyworker, and founder of The Erotic Arts Project (TEAP), living and working in the San Francisco Bay area on the territory of the Ohlone people. TEAP supports queers, trans, femmes, and women identified people in practicing erotic and artistic rituals to cultivate a personal definition of pleasure, liberate desires, and honor the body and our authentic creative selfs. River is one of the co-facilitators of the Certified Sexological Bodywork training in the United States and is the current President of the Association for Certified Sexological Bodyworkers. They are committed to joy, playfulness, and erotic liberation for all bodies. For more information see [www.theeroticartsproject.com](http://www.theeroticartsproject.com).

SHAUNA FARABAUGH



Shauna Farabaugh is a Certified Somatic Sex Educator based in San Francisco, who fiercely believes in the right to sexual expression for every body and is committed to making sex education more “sexcessible”. She is particularly passionate about exploring the intersection between sexuality and life transitions of all kinds—both how life change impacts our sexual identity and expression and how we can connect with our sexuality in times of transition as a source of strength, resilience and wisdom to guide us through change. Shauna has been a professional sex educator since 2007, with certifications from San Francisco Sex Information, The Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, and the Somatic Sex Educators Association. Reverently irreverent, she brings a profound sense of play to both her group classes and one on one work with students of all genders, sexualities, and sexual lifestyles...because sex really is supposed to be fun!



CAFFYN JESSE



Caffyn Jesse is a leading somatic sex educator who lives and works on Salt Spring Island in Canada. People from around the world attend her workshops and private classes, online and at her waterfront studio. She is the author of *Science for Sexual Happiness*, *Erotic Massage for Healing and Pleasure* and *Orientation: Mapping Queer Meanings*. She teaches an Intimacy Educator training plus co-teaches the Certified Somatic Sex Educator and Certified Sexological Bodyworker trainings for the Somatic Sex Educators Association. See her website at [www.erospirit.ca](http://www.erospirit.ca).

## KRISTIN LANG



Kristin Lang has over 20 years of experience offering massage and health education to adults, (CMT Calif. 1994-2001). She became interested in women's health and went on to become a Certified Doula (CD) and a Certified Yoga instructor (CYI) and began working with women through pregnancy, birth and postpartum, supporting them during this time of great change and transformation.

On her journey of exploring and reclaiming her own sexuality, healing sexual wounds and the traumas of childbirth, she has been able to regain awareness, sensation, and a better understanding of her own body and capacity for pleasure. Through these experiences, it became clear to her the great importance that a woman's connection to her pelvis has on her physical, emotional and sexual health. Her continued education and passion led her to receive certification as a Somatic Sex Educator and to become a practitioner of the Arvigo Techniques of Mayan Abdominal Therapy™. With this work she deepens possibilities for women to heal and connect to their bodies. For more information see [www.kristinlang.ca](http://www.kristinlang.ca).



## COSMO MEENS



Cosmo Meens was born and raised in Victoria B.C. For as long as he can remember he has been charged with erotic energy. Until just recently he had no mentorship on this journey to understand himself and his relationship to sexual energy and the healing powers possible through guiding it towards positive forms of expression. He feels lucky to now be surrounded by a sex-positive community that he is learning from and exploring with. Poetry is one clear form of expression he has used to penetrate through a complicated world and speak his truth from his heart. He is passionately interested in the connection between pleasure and vibrant health. He studies this as a chef...a dancer...a father...a lover...a writer and hopefully soon as a Certified Somatic Sex Educator.

CASSIE MOORE



Cassie Moore is a counselor and intimacy educator who shed an enormous amount of shame with the help of somatic sex education. She is passionate about helping others do the same. She is proud of her previous work as an erotic touch provider and is committed to working toward de-stigmatizing, and increasing cultural valuing of, healing erotic work. She currently helps individuals, couples and groups move toward authentic wholeness and bold, joyful shamelessness. She lives with her Person and her friendly pitbull in wet and beautiful Portland, Oregon. For more information see [www.shamelesslotus.com](http://www.shamelesslotus.com).

QUYNH PHUONG NGUYEN



Quynh Phuong Nguyen is a somatic sex educator, sexological bodyworker, poet, painter, dancer, and researcher. She lives a Mermaids' life by the sea and writes poetry and prose to help heal herself and the entire collective. Quynh's core belief is that nature is life's greatest teacher and her craft involves the aligning and balancing of objects, people, and energies to create better flow. Her passion is to empower people to create authentic, loving, pleasurable relationships with themselves, others, and Mother Nature. See her website: <http://quynhtess.wixsite.com/sacred-connection>.

## CHRISTIANE PELMAS



Christiane Pelmas has been in the business of sitting with people – in circles, dyads, community groups and more – since 1984. By training, she is a clinical social worker, psychotherapist and somatic sex educator. She spends her professional time teaching, supervising/mentoring and supporting deep community by guiding individuals and couples to be more emotionally and erotically intelligent. Christiane’s endeavors come from a deep and unyielding desire to encounter and feed soul; the shy, voracious, genuine creature at the core of our being. Right now, it is our nourished and courageous souls that The World is most hungry for, and in desperate need of. Christiane lives in Boulder CO with her partner, her two young adult sons and a rich community of humans and more than humans. Previous work includes the Women’s Wisdom Guidebook and Card Deck available via her website [www.TheReWilding.com](http://www.TheReWilding.com) or on Amazon.

MEREDITH REYNOLDS

# Meredith



*integrate your erotic*  
**Reynolds**

A long-standing interest in the joy potential of human sexuality prompted Meredith to train as a Certified Sexological Bodyworker in 2014. As a sex and embodiment coach, Meredith teaches pleasure as a way to profoundly enrich the whole of people's lives, not just the sexual. Meredith also works with gender diversity and altered bodies, including scar tissue remediation. Their teaching is underpinned by Dr. Betty Martin's Wheel of Consent. Meredith lives in London, England with their partner, child, and an enormous stripy cat. See their website at [www.meredith-reynolds.com](http://www.meredith-reynolds.com).

DR. LIAM ‘CAPTAIN’ SNOWDON



dr. liam ‘captain’ snowdon lives uninvited on the territory of the Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ peoples on Vancouver Island. Their background is in social justice, street outreach, counselling, harm reduction, somatic sex education and poetry with youth and adults. Some current incarnations of captain’s work are in the anti-violence-movement, working with folks who have done harm, co-teaching the Canada and US Sexological Bodywork/Somatic Sex Education trainings, and bringing somatic work wherever they go. They run the Sex Positive Art and Recreation Center. They are in love with the ocean. For more information see [www.captainsnowdon.ca](http://www.captainsnowdon.ca).



KATIE SPATARO



Katie Spataro is a mother and doula who works across the full spectrum of pregnancy experiences including miscarriage, abortion, birth and postpartum. She holds the belief that our sexual health and reproductive choices are basic human rights. Katie is a certified Sexological Bodyworker, somatic sex educator and a Holistic Pelvic Care practitioner. Her practice, Sacred Womb Services utilizes ritual, touch, breath and movement to tap into the wisdom of the body to support our personal and collective healing. For more information see [www.sacredwombservices.com](http://www.sacredwombservices.com).

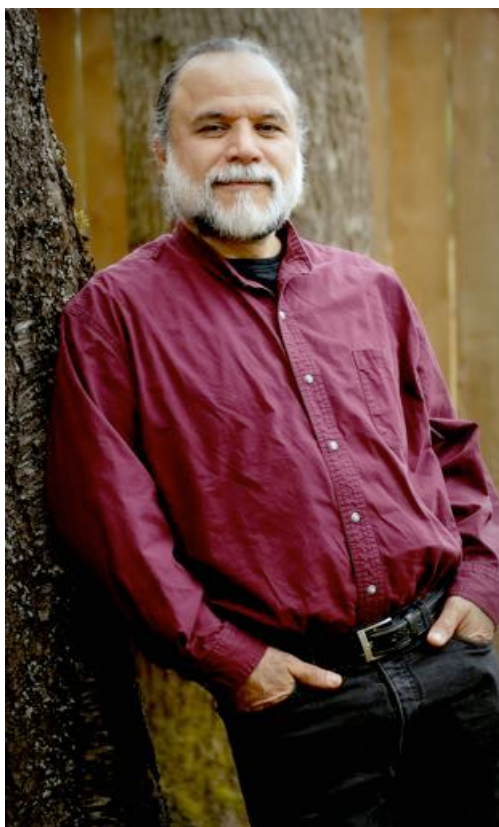
ROI TURPIN



Roi TurPin, MA, CSB, SEP, is Certified in Body Therapy, Sexological Bodywork and Somatic Experiencing. Located in the San Francisco Bay area, he is a graduate of JFK University's Transpersonal Counseling Program. Roi has also completed advanced training in Hakomi Therapy, Diamond Heart and Pelvic Release work. With over 30 years of experience sharing healing presence, he offers a holistic model of wellness called Touching The Source focusing on mental, physical, emotional and spiritual integration. Roi's work with individuals and couples is completely confidential and respects any relationship orientation or gender identification. For more information see [www.EnneagramBodywork.com](http://www.EnneagramBodywork.com).



MEHDI DARVISH YAHYA



Mehdi Darvish Yahya, MA, CSB, is an artist and a psychotherapist trained in the conventional therapy methods, creative arts therapies, sexological bodywork, and body-mind treatment modalities. He is deeply interested in holistic integrative approaches to trauma, the body, and relationship. *Perfect Touch* is his model for healing psychological wounds through the body's natural processes of pleasure and healing. He can be reached through his website: [www.theTouchingCure.com](http://www.theTouchingCure.com).