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# WHEN THE PAST LIVES IN THE BODY

A somatic guide for high-  
functioning, sensitive people ready to  
reconnect with their body and  
emotions



## **When the Past Lives in the Body**

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# When the Past Lives in the Body

*A somatic guide for high-functioning, sensitive people ready to  
reconnect with their body and emotions*



**| “Your body is always speaking. Healing begins the moment you decide to listen”**

Many people have spent years in and out of therapy, read widely about trauma and attachment, and developed a strong understanding of their patterns, yet still notice themselves reacting in ways they wish they could change.

Many people reach a point where they understand their history very well. They can see how certain relationships shaped them, recognise their triggers and explain the dynamics that still show up in their lives. Yet when something touches a deeper layer, the same emotional responses can return. Anxiety rises quickly. Shame floods the system. The inner critic becomes loud. At times the body goes into tension or shutdown before there is time to think.

Insight is valuable as it helps us make sense of our experience and often brings compassion for what we have been through. Yet understanding something intellectually does not always change how the nervous system responds.

This is because many of the patterns that shape our emotional lives are not held only in the thinking mind. They are also held in the body and nervous system.

Somatic therapy begins from this understanding.

Rather than working only with thoughts, explanations or interpretations, somatic therapy brings attention back to the body and to the moment to moment experience of being present. Over time this helps people develop a greater capacity to notice sensations, emotions and impulses as they arise.

Part of this process is becoming more embodied. This simply means learning to inhabit the body more fully and developing the capacity to feel what needs to be felt without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down. When the nervous system has enough support and steadiness, emotions can begin to move and settle in a more natural way rather than remaining trapped as repeating patterns.

This guide will explore why emotional patterns can continue even after years of insight, what emotional flashbacks and the inner critic are, and how working with the body can support a different relationship with those experiences.

## **Why Insight Does Not Always Change Patterns**

**| “We adapt to survive, but we can learn to feel in order to live”**

– Deb Dana

Insight can be powerful. Understanding how earlier experiences shaped your emotional life can bring relief and often a sense of compassion for yourself. Many people begin to see patterns that once felt confusing or overwhelming. They recognise the dynamics in their relationships, understand their triggers and begin to make sense of reactions that once seemed irrational.

Yet for many people there comes a moment of frustration. Even with all that understanding, certain reactions still appear. A situation that feels mildly stressful to someone else can trigger a wave of anxiety or shame. The inner critic becomes harsh and relentless. A conversation or disagreement leaves the body tense for hours or even days.

It can feel as though the mind understands something that the rest of the system has not caught up with.

This happens because emotional patterns are not stored only as memories or thoughts. They are also held in the nervous system. Over time the body learns certain ways of responding to stress, conflict, disappointment or perceived threat. These responses develop as protective strategies. At the time they often help us cope with situations that feel overwhelming or unsafe.

The nervous system is designed to react quickly. When something in the present moment resembles a past experience, the body may move into a familiar response before the thinking mind has time to interpret what is happening. This can look like anxiety, emotional overwhelm, shutting down, people pleasing, anger or withdrawal.

From the outside these reactions may seem disproportionate to the situation. From the perspective of the nervous system they make sense. The body is responding according to patterns that were learned earlier in life.

Insight helps us understand these patterns. Somatic work helps us begin to change how the nervous system responds.

Through careful attention to the body and to present moment experience, people can gradually learn to recognise the early signals of activation or shutdown. With practice and support, the nervous system can begin to develop new responses. This does not happen through force or willpower. It happens through increasing awareness, regulation and the capacity to stay with experience as it unfolds.

Over time, patterns that once felt automatic can begin to soften. The body learns that it does not always need to react in the same way it once did.

## **Who Often Finds Their Way to Somatic Therapy**

People arrive at somatic therapy for many different reasons.

Some have spent years in talking therapy and developed a strong understanding of their history and emotional patterns, yet still feel that certain reactions continue to live in the body.

Others come because they are experiencing symptoms of nervous system dysregulation such as anxiety, emotional overwhelm, shutdown or persistent tension that does not fully resolve through insight alone.

In my work, people often seek somatic support when they are navigating experiences such as.....

- emotional flashbacks, shame or a persistent inner critic
- anxiety, overwhelm or patterns of nervous system activation and shutdown
- neurodivergent nervous systems that feel easily overstimulated or exhausted
- spiritual or energetic awakening experiences that are difficult to integrate
- strong openings through yoga, meditation or other contemplative practices
- a sense of disconnection from the body or difficulty feeling emotions safely
- long standing patterns of people pleasing, self pressure or burnout

Although these experiences can look very different on the surface, they often share something in common. The nervous system has learned certain ways of responding that are now asking for a different kind of support.

Somatic therapy offers a space where these experiences can be explored slowly and with attention to the body, helping the nervous system develop more steadiness and flexibility over time.

## **Understanding Emotional Flashbacks**

One of the experiences that often brings people to somatic therapy is something known as an emotional flashback.

The term was described clearly by the therapist and author Pete Walker in his work on complex trauma.

Unlike the flashbacks that are sometimes associated with post traumatic stress, emotional flashbacks do not usually involve vivid memories or images of the past. Instead they appear as sudden waves of feeling that seem to take over the system.

A person may suddenly feel overwhelmed by shame, fear, sadness or despair without a clear reason in the present moment. Something relatively small may trigger a strong reaction. A conversation, a tone of voice, a stern look on a face, a misunderstanding or a moment of criticism can suddenly create a powerful emotional response.

When an emotional flashback occurs, the nervous system is responding to the present situation as though it carries the emotional weight of earlier experiences. The body reacts quickly and often automatically.

People often describe experiences such as.....

- a sudden sense of shame or self blame
- intense inner criticism or harsh self judgement
- anxiety or panic that appears quickly
- a feeling of becoming very small, powerless or exposed
- a strong urge to withdraw, hide or escape
- emotional overwhelm that is difficult to explain

Because these reactions happen so quickly, it can be confusing. Someone may understand intellectually that the present situation is not especially threatening, yet their emotional response feels intense and difficult to regulate.

This is where the body's role becomes important.

Emotional flashbacks are not only thoughts or memories. They are nervous system responses that involve the body. The heart rate may increase, the chest may tighten, the stomach may clench or the body may feel suddenly heavy and exhausted.

In these moments the system is reacting according to patterns that were learned earlier in life. At the time those responses were often protective. They helped the nervous system cope with situations that felt unsafe, overwhelming or unpredictable.

Somatic therapy helps people learn to recognise these responses as they begin to arise. Rather than becoming lost inside the reaction, it becomes possible to notice what is happening in the body and gradually bring support and regulation to the nervous system.

Over time this can create more space between the present moment and the emotional patterns of the past.

The reactions may still arise from time to time, but they no longer have to take over the entire system in the same way.

## **The Inner Critic and Protective Strategies**

Alongside emotional flashbacks, many people notice the presence of a strong inner critic.

This voice can be relentless. It may appear as harsh self judgement, constant pressure to perform or a persistent sense of not being good enough. For some people it sounds like an internal commentator that criticises mistakes, anticipates failure or warns that something terrible will happen if they relax or stop trying so hard.

The inner critic is often deeply misunderstood. It is easy to assume that this voice is simply negative thinking or a personal flaw. In reality, the critic often developed as a protective strategy.

During earlier periods of life, especially when relationships or environments felt unpredictable, the nervous system learns ways to anticipate danger and reduce the risk of rejection or harm. The critic may have formed as a way of trying to stay safe.

For example, it may push someone to be perfect in order to avoid criticism. It may encourage constant vigilance so that mistakes are caught early. It may urge someone to please others or stay small so that conflict is avoided.

Although these strategies may once have helped a person adapt to difficult circumstances, over time they can become exhausting. The voice that once tried to protect now creates tension, anxiety and self pressure. It can keep the nervous system in a state of alertness long after the original conditions have changed.

From a somatic perspective, the inner critic is not only a pattern of thinking. It is also connected to the body and nervous system. When the critic becomes active, the body often responds with tightening, holding or a sense of urgency. The breath may become shallow, the shoulders tense or the stomach contract. The whole system begins to organise itself around the need to correct, control or prevent something from going wrong.

Part of somatic work involves learning to recognise when the critic has taken over the system. Rather than fighting the voice or trying to suppress it, people begin to notice what is happening in the body when it appears. This creates space to respond differently.

Over time, as the nervous system develops more steadiness, the critic often softens. Its role as a protector is gradually understood and appreciated, while the system learns that it no longer needs such constant vigilance.

This does not mean the inner critic disappears completely. What changes is the relationship to it. Instead of dominating the system, it becomes one voice among many, no longer holding the same power over the body and mind.

## **What Somatic Therapy Actually Looks Like**

Many people are curious about somatic therapy but are not quite sure what happens in a session. The word *somatic* simply means “of the body”, so this approach places attention on the body and the nervous system alongside thoughts and emotions.

In practice, somatic therapy is usually much simpler and slower than people expect.

A session often involves talking about what is happening in your life, just as you might in other forms of therapy. The difference is that attention is also gently brought to what is happening in the body while you speak. You might notice sensations such as tightness in the

chest, a knot in the stomach, warmth in the face, a change in breathing or a sense of heaviness or energy in the body.

Rather than analysing these sensations or trying to get rid of them, the work involves learning to notice them with curiosity and patience.

Over time, this helps develop what is sometimes called **somatic or embodied awareness**. This means becoming more familiar with the signals of the body and learning how the nervous system responds to different experiences.

A somatic session may include practices such as.....

- noticing sensations in the body as they arise
- learning how to recognise signs of nervous system activation or shutdown
- slowing down emotional responses so they can be felt safely
- gently tracking how sensations shift and change over time
- learning simple ways to support regulation in the body

These practices are usually very small and gradual. The intention is not to force emotions to surface or to relive difficult experiences in an intense way. Instead the focus is on building the nervous system's capacity to stay present with experience without becoming overwhelmed.

As this capacity grows, people often begin to notice subtle changes. Emotional reactions may still arise, but they move through the body more easily. The inner critic may appear, but it no longer dominates the whole system. Situations that once triggered strong reactions begin to feel more manageable.

In this way, somatic therapy is less about fixing symptoms and more about helping the nervous system develop greater flexibility and steadiness. Over time this can allow emotions, sensations and experiences that were once difficult to tolerate to move and settle in a more natural way.

## **Simple Ways to Begin Reconnecting with the Body**

Becoming more embodied does not require complicated practices. It begins with small moments of noticing what is already happening in the body.

Many people who have lived with anxiety, emotional overwhelm or strong inner criticism have learned to move quickly into their thoughts. The mind becomes busy analysing,

anticipating or trying to solve problems. Over time it can become easy to lose contact with the body's signals. Reconnecting with the body is often a gradual process. It involves slowing down enough to notice sensations and learning that it is safe to stay with those sensations for a few moments at a time.

The following practices are simple ways to begin building that awareness.

### **Noticing the Support of the Body**

Take a moment to notice how your body is supported right now.

If you are sitting, feel the weight of your body resting in the chair. Notice the contact between your back and the support behind you. If your feet are on the floor, see if you can feel the ground beneath them.

There is no need to change anything. Simply noticing support can help the nervous system settle and reminds the body that it does not need to hold itself up alone.

### **Orienting to the Present Moment**

Slowly look around the space you are in.

Let your eyes gently take in shapes, colours and objects around you. Notice something that feels neutral or pleasant to look at. This could be light coming through a window, a plant, a familiar object or simply the feeling of space in the room.

Orienting in this way helps the nervous system recognise that it is in the present moment rather than reacting to something from the past.

### **Noticing the Breath**

Bring a little attention to your breathing.

There is no need to control the breath or breathe in a special way. Simply notice the natural rhythm of the inhale and the exhale. Some people find it helpful to gently allow the exhale to be slightly longer than the inhale.

Breath awareness can help the body shift from a state of tension towards a more settled state.

These practices may seem simple, but with repetition they help rebuild the connection between awareness and the body.

Over time, small moments of noticing like this can create more space between a triggering event and the nervous system's reaction. Instead of being immediately carried away by thoughts or emotions, it becomes possible to pause and sense what is happening in the body.

This is one of the foundations of somatic work.

## **My Story**

I did not come to this work because I was naturally calm, regulated or deeply connected to my body. In many ways I came to it because for much of my life I experienced the opposite.

On the outside I functioned well. I worked hard, carried responsibility and cared for the people around me. Yet internally I often felt numb, overwhelmed or bracing against life in ways I did not yet understand.

Looking back now, I can recognise that I spent many years living in what is sometimes called functional freeze. I appeared capable and steady, yet there was a constant background tension in my nervous system. Alongside this was a powerful inner critic that pushed me to do more, try harder and hold everything together.

At times I would experience what I now understand as emotional flashbacks. Waves of shame, anxiety or overwhelm would appear quickly and feel far larger than the situation itself. Alcohol became one of the ways I tried to soften the intensity of that inner world. For a time it helped numb the discomfort, until eventually it stopped working.

My professional life moved through environments that required strength and steadiness. I worked in the ambulance service, in child protection, in substance misuse and in mental health. These roles were meaningful, yet they also allowed me to stay in constant motion. Helping others often felt easier than turning toward what was happening inside myself.

Even when I trained as a meditation teacher and immersed myself in yoga and spiritual practice, much of what I was doing came from the neck up. I was committed and disciplined, yet still disconnected from the very body I was encouraging others to inhabit.

Eventually I realised I had spent years trying to think my way out of patterns that were living in the body.

Slowly and with support I began learning how to reconnect with my body and emotions. Not all at once, but gradually. One sensation, one breath and one moment at a time.

Somatic work changed the direction of my life. It helped me understand the emotional flashbacks that had shaped many of my reactions and recognise the role the inner critic had played in keeping my nervous system under constant pressure.

Over time this work also changed the direction of my career. I trained as a somatic therapist and began supporting others who were navigating similar patterns in their own lives.

At the same time my relationship with yoga and meditation evolved. Rather than focusing only on practices on the mat, I became more interested in how awareness could be brought into everyday life. My teaching gradually shifted toward embodied meditation and the practice of living with greater presence and connection to the body.

Today my work brings together somatic therapy, meditation teaching and small group circles where people can explore embodied awareness and connection in a supportive space.

The people who seek my work often remind me of who I once was. Sensitive, high functioning adults who appear capable on the outside yet quietly feel overwhelmed, anxious or disconnected within.

## **When It May Be Time for Deeper Support**

Reading about emotional flashbacks, the inner critic and the role of the nervous system can bring a great deal of understanding. For some people, simply recognising these patterns begins to shift how they relate to their inner experience.

At the same time, there are moments in life when it becomes clear that deeper support may be helpful.

You may recognise yourself in this guide if you have spent years developing insight into your patterns but still find certain reactions appearing again and again. Emotional flashbacks may arise quickly, the inner critic may feel relentless or the body may move into states of tension, overwhelm or shutdown that are difficult to regulate alone.

When these patterns have been present for a long time, working with another person can create a very different experience. Somatic therapy offers a space where the nervous system does not have to navigate these responses in isolation.

In our work together we move slowly and with attention to the body. We explore how emotional patterns show up in the nervous system and develop ways to meet those experiences with greater awareness and steadiness. Over time this can help the system learn new responses and allow emotions that were once overwhelming to move through the body more naturally.

This process is not about fixing yourself or becoming someone different. It is about developing a more compassionate and embodied relationship with your own experience. If you recognise yourself in these pages and feel curious about exploring somatic therapy, you are welcome to learn more about my work or arrange an initial connection call.

## Meet Laura

*Laura Starky is a somatic therapist, meditation teacher and the founder of the Somatic Wellness Hub.*

*With over 25 years' experience working in trauma, mental health and substance misuse, her work brings together somatic therapy, nervous system awareness and embodied meditation to support people who feel stuck in patterns of anxiety, emotional overwhelm, inner criticism or disconnection from their body.*



*Laura's approach is shaped not only by her professional training but also by her own lived experience of high functioning anxiety, addiction and long periods of nervous system dysregulation. After years of trying to understand and manage her patterns through insight alone, it was through somatic work that she began to reconnect with her body and develop a steadier relationship with her inner world.*

*Today Laura supports sensitive, thoughtful adults who appear capable on the outside yet often feel overwhelmed, anxious or emotionally flat beneath the surface. Her work focuses on helping people understand emotional flashbacks, soften the inner critic and develop greater nervous system regulation so they can reconnect with their body, emotions and inner sense of steadiness.*

*Alongside her therapy practice, Laura teaches meditation and holds small group circles that explore embodied awareness and presence in everyday life. Her work is grounded, compassionate and practical, offering a body based path for people who are ready to move beyond insight alone and develop a more embodied relationship with themselves.*

