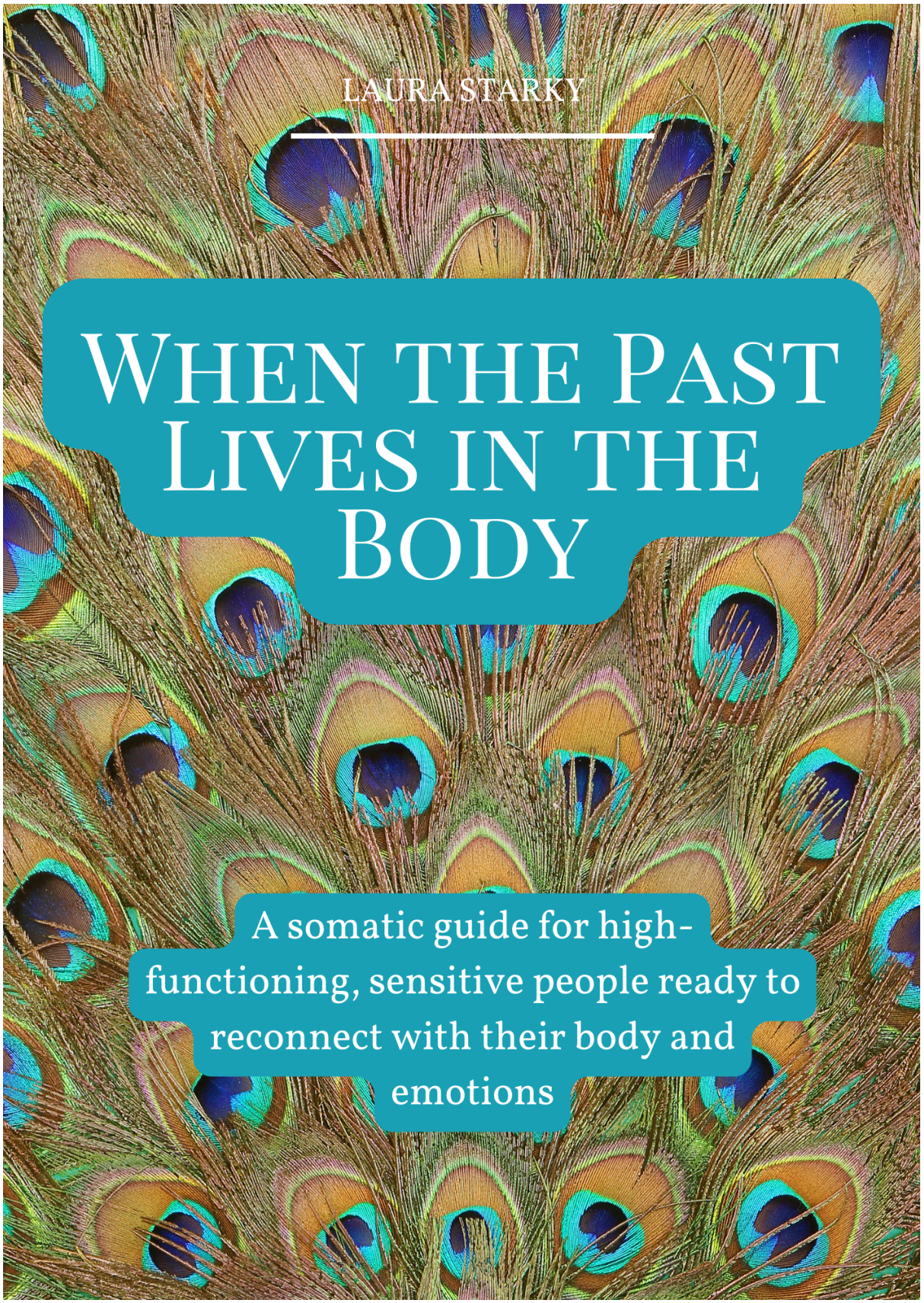
LAURA STARKY
When the Past Lives in the Body
A somatic guide for high-functioning, sensitive people ready to reconnect with their body and emotions

When the Past Lives in the Body

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This guide is not a substitute for therapy or medical support.
Please seek appropriate professional care if needed.

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 nervous system and expressed through the body.

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 most often brings people to somatic therapy is something known as an emotional flashback.

The term was developed by the therapist and author Pete Walker in his work on complex trauma, and it describes something that is quite different from the flashbacks commonly associated with post-traumatic stress. There are no vivid images, no clear memory playing back. Instead, an emotional flashback arrives as a sudden wave of feeling that seems to take over the whole system.

A person may find themselves flooded with shame, fear, grief or despair with no obvious explanation in the present moment. Something relatively small can trigger a powerful response. A tone of voice, a moment of criticism, a misunderstanding or even a quiet afternoon with nothing to do can send the nervous system into a state that feels far larger than the situation warrants.

This is because in an emotional flashback, the nervous system is not responding to the present moment. It is responding from an earlier one. The body moves back into a survival state that was once necessary, and for a time, the emotional age of that earlier experience can feel more real than the present.

People often describe experiences such as:

- a sudden sense of shame or self-blame with no clear cause
- feeling very small, exposed or powerless
- intense inner criticism or harsh self-judgement

- anxiety or panic that appears quickly and is hard to explain
- a strong urge to withdraw, hide or disappear
- emotional overwhelm that feels disproportionate to what has happened

What makes emotional flashbacks particularly disorienting is that the thinking mind may understand perfectly well that the present situation is not threatening. Yet the body is already responding as though it is. The heart rate rises, the chest tightens, the stomach clenches, or the whole system becomes heavy and exhausted. These are not irrational responses. They are the nervous system doing exactly what it learned to do, in conditions where that response once made complete sense.

Walker's work also identifies something important about the relationship between the inner critic and emotional flashbacks. The critic is not only a companion to the flashback. In many cases it is what triggers it. A moment of self-judgement, a sudden comparison, a sense of having failed or not been enough, can send the system into a flooded state before there has been any time to register what is happening.

Part of what supports recovery from emotional flashbacks is developing what might be called the capacity of the Adult Self. This is the part of you that exists in the present, that has resources, history and a capacity for perspective that the younger, flooded part does not have access to in the moment. When a flashback arises, one of the most stabilising things possible is for that adult presence to gently recognise what is happening, rather than being swept entirely into the experience.

This does not mean overriding the emotion or pushing through it. It means something quieter: noticing that the body has moved into an old survival state, and responding with the kind of steadiness and compassion that the original situation did not offer.

Somatic therapy supports this process. By learning to recognise the early signals of a flashback in the body, people gradually develop the capacity to stay present alongside the experience rather than being consumed by it. The feelings may still arise. But they no longer have to take over the entire system in the same way.

The Inner Critic and Outer Critic

The Inner Critic

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

This voice can feel relentless. It may appear as harsh self-judgement, constant pressure to perform, or a persistent sense of not being quite good enough. For some people it sounds like an internal commentator that anticipates failure, catalogues mistakes, or warns that something will go wrong if they slow down or stop trying so hard.

The inner critic is often deeply misunderstood. It is easy to assume it is simply negative thinking, or a personal flaw to be overcome. In reality, it developed as a protective strategy.

During earlier periods of life, particularly when relationships or environments felt unpredictable, the nervous system learns to anticipate danger and reduce the risk of rejection or harm. The inner critic often formed as part of that process. It may have pushed someone toward perfectionism in order to avoid criticism. It may have encouraged constant vigilance so that mistakes could be caught before anyone else noticed them. It may have urged someone to stay small, work harder or please others, because at the time those strategies helped maintain connection and reduce the threat of punishment or abandonment.

Although these strategies may once have served an important purpose, over time they become exhausting. The voice that once tried to protect now creates chronic tension, self-pressure and anxiety. 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 has a felt presence in the body. When the critic becomes active, the body often responds with tightening, bracing or a sense of urgency. The breath may become shallow, the shoulders tense, the stomach contract. The whole system organises itself around the need to correct, control or prevent something from going wrong.

The Outer Critic

Less often discussed, but equally significant, is what Pete Walker calls the outer critic.

Where the inner critic turns judgment inward, the outer critic directs it outward. Rather than attacking the self, it scans relationships and the behaviour of others for signs of threat, disappointment or betrayal. It may present as a tendency to find fault in people, a reluctance to trust, or a chronic sense that others will let you down if you allow yourself to need them.

The outer critic is also a protective strategy, though it operates differently. If the inner critic tries to make the self acceptable enough to avoid rejection, the outer critic tries to avoid the risk of closeness altogether. By maintaining a vigilant, sometimes judgmental distance from others, it offers a form of protection against the vulnerability of genuine connection.

People often recognise the outer critic in experiences such as:

- a tendency to notice what is wrong with others before what is right
- difficulty trusting that people are reliable or well-intentioned
- a pattern of withdrawing from relationships when they begin to feel close
- hypervigilance about being let down, criticised or abandoned
- finding intimacy uncomfortable, even when it is genuinely wanted

Like the inner critic, the outer critic is not a flaw in character. It is a learned response to relational environments where trust was not consistently safe. It developed to protect against hurt, and at the time it may have done exactly that.

The difficulty is that this same protection, carried into adult life, can make genuine closeness feel impossible. The very connection that the nervous system most needs for healing becomes the thing it most works to prevent.

Working with Both

Somatic work does not aim to silence either the inner or the outer critic through force or willpower. What shifts over time is the relationship to these voices.

Rather than being at the mercy of the critic, it becomes possible to notice when it has taken over the system, to feel where it lives in the body, and to

respond with a steadiness that gradually reduces its dominance. As the nervous system develops more capacity for regulation and safety, the critic tends to soften. Its protective function is recognised and appreciated, while the system slowly learns that it no longer needs such constant vigilance.

What changes is not that the critic disappears entirely. What changes is that it becomes one voice among many, rather than the one that governs everything.

When the Personality Organises Around Survival

One of the frameworks that can bring a great deal of clarity to the question of why patterns persist, even after years of insight and self-awareness, comes from what is known as structural dissociation theory.

This model, developed by trauma researchers Onno van der Hart, Ellert Nijenhuis and Kathy Steele, describes how overwhelming early experience can lead different aspects of the personality to organise around different functions. It is not about dramatic splitting or losing time. For many people it is much more subtle than that, and much more familiar.

The basic idea is this. When a child grows up in an environment where emotional needs are not consistently met, where attunement is unpredictable or where expressing certain feelings leads to rejection or punishment, the nervous system finds ways to manage. Part of the personality learns to function, to get on with daily life, to appear capable and organised. Another part carries the unresolved emotional experience: the fear, the shame, the grief, the anger that could not be fully expressed or processed at the time.

These are sometimes described as the Apparently Normal Part and the Emotional Part, though these names are somewhat clinical and do not quite capture how these aspects of experience actually feel from the inside.

The part that manages daily life is often highly capable. It can work, maintain relationships, appear composed and even thrive in certain areas. It tends to stay focused on what needs to be done, and often does so by keeping a certain distance from deeper emotional experience. This is not a conscious choice. It is a nervous system strategy that developed because functioning required a degree of emotional containment.

The part that carries unresolved experience operates differently. It holds the body states connected to earlier survival responses: the helplessness of freeze, the urgency of fight or flight, the collapse of shutdown, the anxiety of not

knowing whether connection is safe. When something in the present moment resembles the original conditions, this part can become activated suddenly and intensely, in ways that can feel bewildering or disproportionate.

This is one of the reasons emotional flashbacks can feel so disorienting. The part of you managing daily life may understand completely that the present situation is not dangerous. But another part of the system is responding from an entirely different time, with an entirely different set of experiences.

It is also one of the reasons the inner critic can feel so relentless. The critic often sits at the boundary between these parts, working hard to prevent the emotional experience from surfacing in ways that feel threatening to daily functioning. It keeps the lid on, at considerable cost.

Healing as Integration

What this framework offers is not a diagnosis or a label. It is a way of understanding why the system can seem contradictory: why a person can feel capable and overwhelmed at the same time, grounded and flooded within minutes of each other, clear-headed in one context and completely undone in another.

Healing, in this model, is not about eliminating any part of the system. It is about gradually building more communication and cooperation between these different aspects of experience. The part that manages daily life begins to develop more tolerance for emotional experience. The part carrying unresolved survival responses begins to receive more support, more recognition, more of the steadiness it never had access to originally.

This is slow work and it cannot happen through understanding alone. It requires the nervous system to have enough safety and support to begin to soften the boundaries between these parts, a little at a time.

Somatic therapy offers one of the most effective ways into this process, because it works directly with the body states that these different parts inhabit. Rather than trying to talk across the divide, it becomes possible to meet each aspect of experience where it actually lives, in sensation, in posture, in breath, in the felt sense of being present in a body that has its own history and its own intelligence.

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 begins with talking, much as it might in other forms of therapy. You might share what has been happening in your life, what feels difficult, what has been present since the last time we met. The difference is that alongside that conversation, attention is also gently brought to what is happening in the body as you speak. You might notice a tightening in the chest, a heaviness in the belly, a change in your breathing, a sense of bracing or of wanting to pull back. These signals are not interruptions to the work. They are the work.

Rather than analysing these sensations or trying to make them go away, the process involves learning to notice them with curiosity and without pressure. Over time this builds what is sometimes called somatic awareness: a growing familiarity with the body's signals and a developing capacity to stay with experience as it arises, rather than moving away from it quickly or becoming overwhelmed by it.

A Developmental Approach to the Body

What distinguishes this work from more general somatic approaches is its attention to the developmental history.

The nervous system does not only respond to what is happening now. It responds through the lens of everything that has shaped it: the relational environments of early life, the ways connection was available or unavailable, the survival strategies that formed when the conditions required them. Different areas of the body tend to hold different layers of that history. The heart and chest often carry the imprint of relational experience, of connection and disconnection, of grief and longing. The belly and gut hold deeper survival responses, the more instinctive reactions to threat and safety. The throat, the jaw, the muscles around the eyes: these are connected to the social engagement system, to the experience of being seen, heard and responded to.

Attending to the body in this way is not about analysing which part holds what. It is about developing a relationship with the body's intelligence, and learning to listen to what different areas of experience are communicating.

This work also holds a particular orientation. It is not only focused on reducing symptoms or calming activation, though both of those things matter and both happen. It is equally oriented toward what lies beneath the survival patterns: the vitality, the capacity for connection, the inherent health that was always present and that trauma has temporarily obscured. Part of what the work does is create the conditions for that deeper aliveness to gradually become more available.

What Sessions Might Include

A somatic session may include practices such as:

- noticing sensations in the body as they arise and learning to stay with them gently
- recognising the early signals of nervous system activation or shutdown before they take over
- slowing down emotional responses so they can be felt safely rather than suppressed or flooded
- gently tracking how sensations shift and change over time, and what that movement communicates
- building the capacity of the Adult Self to remain present when younger, more flooded parts of the system become activated
- developing simple, reliable ways to support regulation in the body between sessions

As a foundation develops - a growing capacity to feel more settled in the body, to recognise what is happening in the nervous system and to meet experience and stay within the window of tolerance - it gradually becomes possible to move into deeper work. This might include processing unresolved experiences that have been held in the nervous system for a long time: not by forcing them to the surface, but by creating enough safety and inner resource that they can begin to move through naturally. This is careful, paced work. It follows the nervous system's readiness rather than any predetermined timeline.

These practices are gradual and paced to what the nervous system can comfortably hold. The intention is never to force emotions to surface or to move faster than the system is ready for. Healing does not happen through

intensity. It happens through accumulation: small moments of presence, of regulation, of being met with steadiness, gradually building a different kind of experience in the body.

As that capacity grows, people often begin to notice subtle but meaningful changes. Emotional reactions may still arise, but they move through the body more easily. The inner critic may appear, but it no longer dominates everything. Situations that once felt unbearable begin to feel more manageable, not because they have changed, but because the nervous system has developed more room to meet them.

In this way, somatic therapy is less about fixing what is wrong and more about restoring what has always been there.

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 a strong inner critic 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 and outer critic, and the way different parts of the personality can organise around survival can bring a great deal of clarity. For some people, simply having a framework that makes sense of their experience begins to shift something. The reactions do not change immediately, but they become less mysterious. There is a little more space between the experience and the story about what it means.

At the same time, understanding is only part of the journey.

If you recognise yourself in these pages, you may have spent years developing insight into your patterns. You may understand a great deal about your history, your nervous system and the ways early experience shaped you. And yet certain reactions still return. The flashbacks still arise. The critic still becomes loud at particular moments. The body still moves into states of tension, shutdown or overwhelm that are difficult to navigate alone.

This is not a failure of understanding. It is simply the nature of patterns that are held in the body and nervous system rather than only in the thinking mind. They respond to a different kind of engagement, one that works not only with what we know but with how we feel, where we feel it and what the body needs in order to gradually learn something new.

When these patterns have been present for a long time, working with another person can make a significant difference. Not because the therapist has answers that you do not, but because the nervous system heals in relationship. The steadiness, attunement and consistent presence of another person offers

something that insight alone cannot: a lived experience of safety that slowly begins to update what the body expects.

In our work together we move slowly and with care. We follow the body's pace rather than pushing toward a particular outcome. We explore how survival patterns show up in the nervous system, develop ways to meet those experiences with more steadiness and gradually support the system to develop new responses. Over time this can allow emotions and sensations that were once overwhelming to move through the body more naturally, and the parts of you that have been working so hard to keep everything together to begin to soften and rest.

This process is not about becoming someone different or fixing what is broken. It is about developing a more compassionate and embodied relationship with your own experience, and gradually reconnecting with the aliveness and steadiness that have always been part of you, even when they felt out of reach.

If you recognise yourself in these pages and feel curious about exploring this work, you are welcome to find out more or arrange an initial conversation. There is no pressure and no particular place you need to have reached before reaching out. Wherever you are is a reasonable place to begin.

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 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 women's 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.

Further Reading

The Body Keeps the Score — Bessel van der Kolk

One of the most widely read books on trauma of the last thirty years. Van der Kolk draws on decades of research and clinical work to explore how traumatic experience is held in the body and nervous system, and what helps people heal. Comprehensive, accessible and often deeply recognising for people who have spent years trying to understand their own responses.

Recent neuroscience has revisited some of the mechanistic claims underlying van der Kolk's central metaphor, particularly around where exactly trauma resides and how it is maintained. This does not diminish the book's clinical value or the recognition it offers to many readers. It is worth knowing, however, that the science in this area continues to develop, and that the metaphor of the body keeping score is now understood as a partial rather than complete picture.

When the Body Says No — Gabor Maté

Maté explores the connection between emotional experience, stress and physical illness, drawing on both research and vivid clinical stories. Particularly relevant for people who have spent years prioritising others' needs above their own and are beginning to understand the cost of that pattern in the body.

Waking the Tiger — Peter Levine

Levine's foundational book on somatic approaches to trauma. He explores how the body holds unresolved survival responses and how, with the right conditions, those responses can complete and release. Readable and illuminating, with a strong emphasis on the body's inherent capacity for healing.

Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving — Pete Walker

An essential resource for anyone healing from childhood relational trauma. Walker writes with both clinical clarity and personal honesty about the lasting effects of growing up in environments that lacked consistent safety and attunement. Covers emotional flashbacks, the inner and outer critic, the four survival responses and practical steps toward recovery. Accessible and deeply validating.

The Tao of Fully Feeling — Pete Walker

A shorter and more personal companion to Walker's main work. This book focuses specifically on the importance of grieving childhood losses and developing the capacity to feel emotions fully rather than managing or suppressing them. Gentle, honest and quietly powerful.

Strong at the Broken Places: Overcoming the Trauma of Childhood Abuse — Linda T Sanford

A warm and hopeful book about resilience in the context of childhood abuse. Sanford draws on the stories of people who have moved through significant early trauma to explore what supports genuine recovery. Encouraging without being simplistic.

Adult Children: The Secrets of Dysfunctional Families — John and Linda Friel

A clear and practical exploration of how growing up in a dysfunctional family system shapes adult patterns of behaviour, relationship and self perception. Particularly helpful for people who struggle to name or validate their early experience because it did not involve obvious or dramatic abuse.

Healing the Shame that Binds You — John Bradshaw

Bradshaw explores toxic shame as a core wound underlying many patterns of self criticism, addiction and emotional disconnection. He distinguishes between healthy shame and the kind of internalised shame that becomes a fundamental sense of being defective or unworthy. A significant and often transformative book for people carrying deep self judgement.

The Courage to Heal — Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

Originally written for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, this book has become a landmark resource in trauma recovery more broadly. It offers a compassionate and thorough guide to the healing process, including the difficult terrain of self blame, memory and reclaiming a sense of self. Readers whose trauma does not involve sexual abuse may still find much that is relevant, particularly in its emphasis on self compassion and the validity of the healing journey.

The Drama of the Gifted Child — Alice Miller

A slender but profound book about how sensitive, perceptive children learn to suppress their own emotional needs in order to meet the needs of their parents, and what that costs them in adult life. Miller writes with great compassion for the child who adapted in order to survive, and for the adult who is still living within those adaptations.

For Your Own Good — Alice Miller

Miller examines how childhood experiences of control, punishment and emotional suppression become internalised and perpetuated across generations. Challenging and at times uncomfortable, but deeply illuminating for anyone trying to understand the roots of harsh self criticism or difficulty with self compassion.

The Body Never Lies — Alice Miller

In this book Miller turns her attention to the body, exploring how unacknowledged childhood suffering eventually expresses itself through physical symptoms and illness. A natural companion to the somatic themes running through this guide.