

# *Somatic Patterning*

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How to Improve Posture and Movement  
and Ease Pain

Mary Ann Foster



Educational Movement Systems Press

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## PREFACE

This writing project got its start nearly 20 years ago when I began to notice that there was tremendous overlap in the principles and methods of the various somatic modalities. Different schools were often teaching exactly the same concepts and methods but using different terms. Although they claimed that their approaches were unique, it often seemed to me that they were unable to explain clearly why or how.

Despite the confusions within the field, I found what I identified as the somatic patterning modalities to be incredibly effective, both personally and professionally, and wanted to know why. To this end, I often found myself studying 20 or 30 books at the same time, and lugging a bag of books to refer to in movement classes I taught to bodyworkers, which was just too hard on my body! Finally, I decided to distill the most useful information I compiled on somatic patterning into one book, and here is that book.

The prolific anatomist John Basmajian mentions in the preface of one of his texts that “writing a book compares to minor marital infidelity.” Now I know what he means. With this in mind, I want to acknowledge the unconditional patience and support my husband, Gary, has given even when I have abandoned him to this project. I appreciate the volumes of feedback Gary has given me, the research he has helped me with, and the many hours he has spent with me discussing and ironing out theoretical conflicts. Also, many thanks to Mary Anne, my editor, whose patience and humor kept me going when I ran out of gas; to Teresa and Scott for their design and technical support; to Ed for computer help; to readers who gave me feedback; and to my many family members, colleagues, students, and clients for their undying enthusiasm about this project.

Lastly, one huge issue I had in creating this book was in producing the images of the many types of body patterns. In my opinion, many of the books about posture and movement today emphasize unflattering and posed pictures of what goes wrong with posture, or show incredibly beautiful shots of professional athletes and dancers who are able to move in a range far beyond the average person. In looking for a middle ground, I used a lot of unposed images of children, workers, or pedestrians to illustrate natural, spontaneous movement patterns. Also, I tried to keep the images of what is healthy more abundant than those of what goes wrong with the body. To this end, I want to extend a huge amount of gratitude to all the people who let me use their pictures, to those who generously let me raid their family albums (Lorraine, Kate, Deborah, Doug, Mary Lou and others), and to my beautiful models, especially Alicia, Ashley, Heidi, Nancy, Michelle, Deborah, Mary, and Stephanie, whose images bring the patterning exercises to life.

# ABOUT CHAPTER 1 REVISIONS

Chapter 1 revisions were made to more clearly relate the applications of somatic patterning to the practice of massage therapy. The chapter is divided into two sections:

- Section I covers “somatics,” looking at the role of body-mind therapies in massage and in the field integrative medicine.
- Section II covers “patterning,” looking at pattern recognition skills, the effect of early motor development on patterns of posture and movement, and integrating neuromuscular patterning skills for postural muscle education into bodywork.

We hope that massage therapists and educators find the Chapter 1 revision an improvement. If you are an educator using Somatic Patterning as a course text and would like to continue to use the original Chapter 1, please contact the author and request electronic copy, which will be provided free of charge.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Somatic Patterning (SP) is designed to enhance your understanding and use of posture and movement applications. It can be read and studied as a whole or used in sections. I'm pleased to say that SP now offers lots of new online resources as well, from videos and PowerPoints to instructor guides and curricula! Just go to [www.somatic-patterning.com](http://www.somatic-patterning.com) anytime for an always-growing collection of helpful resources.

Massage and bodywork students, instructors, and practitioners use this book and its online resources for many purposes:

- As a self-care guide to improve personal posture and movement patterns;
- As a textbook;
- As a reference book;
- As an exercise guide (with exercises that can be used with clients as well).

**Glossary terms** are in bold; **anatomical terms** as well as words or points of emphasis are in italics. Although I have attempted to explain anatomical or medical terms as they arise, you may need to consult a medical dictionary or anatomy book on occasion.

There are a number of special features in the book to help you integrate the material. They are designed to provide you with experiential exercises so that you can learn this material through personal experience. The words exercise and exploration are used interchangeably throughout the text because this version of exercise is a deliberate yet fluid exploration of body movement.

The special features icons follow with an explanation of what each feature offers.

### Body Story

**BODY STORIES:** These are case studies and historical stories provided for their educational value. To maintain the confidentiality of clients, the names and settings of the case histories have been changed.



**BRIDGE TO PRACTICE:** These are practical applications to help massage and bodywork students use the material in practice sessions and practitioners apply the material to work with clients.



**CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS:** These questions are sprinkled throughout the text to spur problem solving and creative ways for thinking on your feet about somatic patterning and its application in therapeutic sessions.



**EXAMINING MYTHS:** These short pieces look at the logic (and lack of it!) behind popular myths about posture and movement.



**KEY TERMS:** These general terms are commonly used in somatic studies but may or may not be common in other areas of massage and bodywork study. Each chapter ends with a list of key terms as a review of the main points covered in that chapter.



**LINKS TO APPLICATION:** These short tips offer practical ways to apply somatic patterning to daily living activities.

Patterning Exercise	
<p><i>The patterning exercises are the meat of the somatic patterning practice.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They are simple movement exercises and visualizations that correlate to the text. All the patterning exercises can be done alone or in a classroom setting.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Some are designed to practice with a partner to integrate touch with movement. Although the patterning exercises in Part 2 relate to the text, they are not meant to represent the techniques of any one school unless specifically stated.</li> </ol>

**PATTERNING EXERCISES:** These simple movement exercises and visualizations, correlated with the text throughout the book, are the meat of the somatic patterning practice. All the patterning exercises can be done alone or in a classroom setting. Some are designed to practice with a partner to integrate touch with movement. Although the patterning exercises in Part 2 relate to the text, they are not meant to represent the techniques of any one school unless specifically stated. A list of all the patterning exercises can be found at the end of the book.

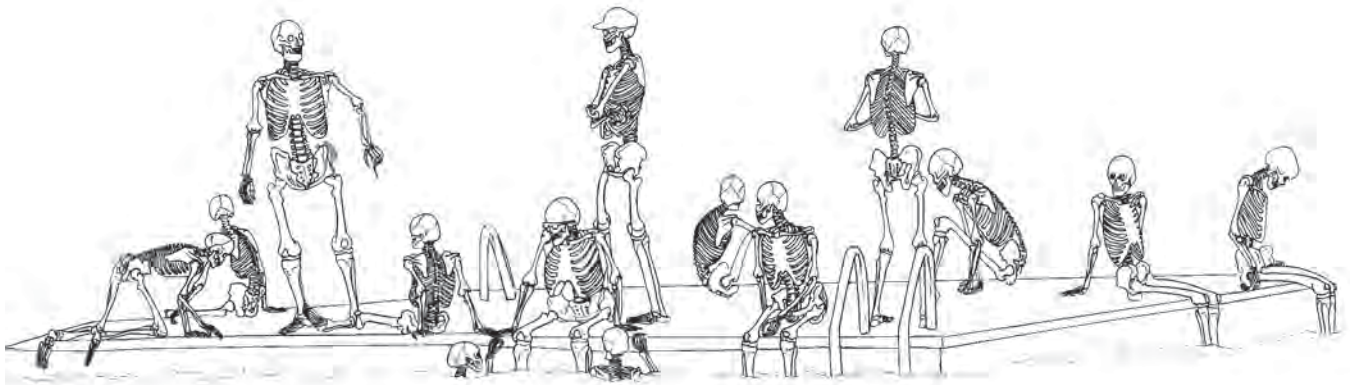
*To make this book user friendly as an educational guide, you have my permission to copy up to 10 exercises for each client or student with whom you want to share the patterning exercises.*

It is my hope that you will enjoy this book, that it will inspire a new perspective, that it will provide you with a background to understand whatever intuitive patterning you may already be doing, and that it will help you feel better and move with more ease.

*In fact, just reading this book will help you, whether you actually do the exercises or just start thinking about your posture.* Many of the people who read it prior to publication commented that after reading it, they found themselves sitting straighter, practicing the exercises while at their jobs or in their cars, and becoming more aware of their posture and body-use habits in all aspects of their lives. Just the fact that you have read this far indicates you are interested in change, so it is highly likely that this information will seep into your awareness whether you actively apply it or not.

You may be thinking that this is beginning to sound like a pep talk. Well, it is—one specifically designed to motivate you to take charge of your body and free yourself from the clutches of faulty body-use habit and poor posture. I guarantee that if you begin reading this book your awareness of your posture and movement will change. Also, you may improve your body patterns, you may feel better and look better, your body may last longer, and you might even have a better quality of life. You only get one body, so let this book help you make it work well for you. Why wait? Begin now!





# Part 1: Theory

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Somatic patterning is so broad a field that its essence is often obscured by the diverse approaches it encompasses. Simply put, *somatic* refers to anything involving the “body-mind” relationship, and *patterning* refers to the process of intentionally changing body-mind patterns to improve posture and movement. Part 1 introduces the eclectic field of somatic patterning to the reader by presenting its theoretical underpinnings.

Chapter 1 is divided into two sections. Section I covers Somatics, with a focus on the role of the body-mind therapies in massage. Section II introduces key concepts in Patterning, such as autonomic and neuromuscular approaches, pattern recognition skills, and the primary forces that shape posture and movement—sensorimotor learning, early motor development, and postural muscle support. An emphasis in Chapter 1 is how patterns of posture and movement are not only molded and conditioned by early emotions and environmental conditions, but also manifest our deepest thoughts and feelings throughout our lifetimes. This body-mind congruency is stressed throughout the text.

Many somatic patterning methods grew out of the need to address dysfunctional body-mind patterns that show up as general discomfort and ill-health, and can lead to pain and injury. Chapter 2 addresses muscular holding patterns and pain, discussing what occurs in the body under conditions of chronic pain and tension, and how to work with dysfunctional patterns.

Because there are so many different somatic schools and methods, knowing how to choose which technique to use when and to apply where can be confusing. To attempt to clear up this confusion, Chapter 3 presents the primary concepts and principles of somatic patterning that have been compiled from an extensive survey of the field. Chapter 4 categorizes the primary approaches and their application to specific types of body-mind issues.

This first part introduces simple patterning exercises for readers to build somatic awareness, learn relaxation techniques, deal with patterns of pain, work with breathing, and begin sensing the body both at rest and in movement. It concludes with a look at the steps of the patterning process in Chapter 5 to launch the reader into fundamental patterning practices and exercises presented in Part 2.

# OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 1

## *SECTION I: SOMATICS*

### DEFINING BODY-MIND AND SOMATICS

- The Language of the Body-Mind
- Massage as a Body-Mind Therapy
- Massage, Bodywork, and Somatic Therapy

### OUR CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF THE BODY-MIND RELATIONSHIP

- Pros and Cons of Body-Mind Connection and Separation
- Body-Mind Considerations in Western Medicine
- The Role of Stress in Health and Illness
- The Biopsychosocial Basis of Integrative Medicine
- National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

### THE PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE BODY-MIND RELATIONSHIP

- The Psychophysiological Roots of Muscular Patterns
- The Role of Touch and Movement in Human Development
- Somatic Responses to Touch
- Body-Mind Considerations in the Treatment of Chronic Pain

## *SECTION II: PATTERNING*

### PATTERNING APPROACHES AND SKILLS

### PATTERN RECOGNITION

### FORCES THAT SHAPE MOVEMENT

- Sensorimotor Learning
- Defense Mechanisms and Somatic Feedback
- Parallels Between Humans and Other Animals

### MOVEMENT AS THE BODY-MIND INTEGRATOR

- Integrated Posture and Movement
- Somatic Integration

# *Somatic Patterning and the Body-Mind Connection*

## **SECTION I: SOMATICS**

**W**hen we touch another human being with therapeutic massage, we are working with a whole person, a being far more complex than the composite of body systems and tissues we learn about in school. Massage clients come to us with more than just tight muscles or sore backs. They bring their hopes and fears in their bodily tensions. They carry their stresses related to work, health, and family in their muscular imbalances. They wear their psychological disposition and family histories in their body patterns.

All of us have a personal story and life context, with diverse influences that produce stresses, affect moods, and lead to physical tensions. Some clients seek massage to help them cope with multiple health issues. Others get massage to release the stress of family or relationship issues. Many other people receive massage to let down from demanding jobs that take a toll on the body and mind, such as physical labor that requires standing all day and performing repetitive movements, or working at a computer and sitting for extended periods.

The two most common reasons people receive massage treatments are to relieve pain and reduce stress.<sup>1</sup> Because the causes of pain and stress are often complex and closely related to the context of our clients' lives, massage can provide a refuge in which people can find relaxation and rejuvenation. It can give people grappling with stress in their lives a place to let down and begin to process issues affecting them.

Researchers have identified a number of benefits from massage that demonstrate the powerful relationship between the body and the mind.<sup>2</sup> Massage can reduce depression and anxiety, lower stress hormones and boost immunity, elevate mood, and improve the overall quality of life and sleep. Many people first receive massage for pain relief, but then find that it helps them to get in touch with themselves on a deeper level. Once massage clients realize how thoughts and feelings affect their physical state, they often start listening to the signals coming from their bodies. The self-awareness that massage facilitates empowers people to utilize the positive, healing aspects of the connection between the body and mind in order to release long-held tensions and improve overall health.

This text offers many body-mind tools to use in massage education and clinical practices to promote integrative healing and wellness. This section provides a foundation for the theory, practice, and historical context of somatics and body-mind therapies. As you are reading, keep in mind that the material we will explore throughout this chapter and the entire text is designed to help you transform your instinctive abilities into effective professional skills. Whether you are a student or practitioner, information about somatic patterning can be used for



Your body hears everything your mind says.

—Naomi Judd

both personal development and in therapeutic applications in your massage and bodywork practice.

## DEFINING BODY-MIND AND SOMATICS

The term **body-mind** is used frequently in complementary approaches to health care. What it signifies may seem obvious, but let's look more closely at what it really means. Body-mind generally refers to the relationship between physical and mental health, the interrelated functions of physiological and psychological processes, and the integral and ongoing interplay between a person's physical condition and mental state.

In the same manner that anatomists and physiologists isolate integrally connected body systems to study and treat them, we segregate physical and psychological aspects of health in massage education to study them and learn to maintain a professional boundary between them in our work. This implies an unnatural separation, yet body-mind processes are actually inseparable. To hyphenate body and mind implies the inherent relationship between these two elemental aspects of human beings as well as a reunification of an artificial split.

The order of the terms can also have significance. The National Institutes of Health (NIH), for example, uses the term "mind-body" to "focus on the interactions among the brain, mind, body, and behavior, with the intent to use the mind to affect physical functioning and promote health."<sup>3</sup> This inversion emphasizes the use of mental therapies such as visualization, psychotherapy, and meditation for the treatment of physical conditions. Think of the body and mind as separate entrances to the same room. Massage is referred to as a "body-mind" therapy because it is a hands-on therapy for the physical body that affects a person's mental state. However, many in the health-care world do not adhere to this distinction, so you may hear and read the terms "mind-body" and "body-mind" used interchangeably.

The realm of the body-mind is so much a part of our human experience that it's like gravity, a constant force that we rarely notice but that always affects us. Gravity exists outside our field of awareness until we fall or drop something; then its powerful downward pull catches our attention. The same dynamic occurs with the body-mind relationship. Every thought, emotion, belief, and memory we have occurs in the body as well as the mind and has a physical effect. Just the memory of an intense experience or conflict can elicit physiological and emotional responses similar to those that occurred during the initial experience, such as an increase in heart rate and respiration and a flush of anger, joy, or fear. Obsessive negative thoughts and toxic emotions can cause stress responses that we may not notice until the cumulative effects snowball into ill health. This is why it is important to monitor self-talk and process intense and unresolved feelings.

The term **somatic** unifies the body-mind concept into a single word. Somatic comes from the Greek root *soma*, which means "the living body in its wholeness." The late philosopher and Feldenkrais teacher Thomas Hanna coined the term **somatics** in 1970 to describe an emerging field of body-mind therapies that use movement explorations as a primary tool to improve posture and enhance ease of movement.<sup>4</sup> Hanna felt that most people have little awareness of their body and lack the ability to sense movement in their body. This condition, which he described as **sensorimotor amnesia**, leads to a lack of neuromuscular control over body movement, which results in muscular imbalances underlying habitual responses that cause stress, pain, or injury.

Throughout this text, the terms body-mind, mind-body, and somatic will be used interchangeably to discuss and explore the body-mind experience. The intention behind using these terms as synonyms is to avoid repetition and confusion, and to assist massage students and practitioners in becoming comfortable with the multiple expressions of the body-mind concept that they will encounter in the health-care field.

## The Language of the Body-Mind

Just as each of us has our own language and dialect that have developed out of our culture and background, every person communicates through somatic channels that are as unique to that individual as a signature (Figure 1.1). Likewise, each massage practitioner has her or his own personal way of speaking, moving, and touching that communicates directly with a client. Effective communication is essential to building a successful practice because for therapeutic massage to be effective, we must first gain our clients' trust, which they will convey to us through the language of both the body and the mind.

In an ideal massage practice, all of your massage clients would be totally receptive and responsive to your work. They would be able to completely relax under your care



Figure 1.1 Each person has a preferred way of listening to messages coming from body-mind experiences.



## Patterning Exercise #1: The Power of Thought

1. To feel the power of your own body-mind connection, sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes for a few minutes.
2. Then bring to mind the most pleasurable time you've ever had. Remember where you were, what you were doing, and whether you were with others or alone. Recall what your surroundings were like. Were you outside or inside?

- Was it day or night? What was going on around you? What did you see, hear, smell, or feel?
3. Next, think about how you're feeling after recalling this experience. Are the sensations and emotions evoked by your pleasant memory similar to your initial experience?

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and experience profound relief. At the end of each massage, your clients would remark how much better they felt than when they came in and would express appreciation as they rescheduled for another session.

In a more typical massage practice, there will be clients who say they want the benefits of massage but are too guarded in their bodies to receive many benefits. One practitioner recounted difficulties treating the spinal injuries of an insurance client recovering from a motor vehicle accident who refused to lie face down on the massage table, for no apparent physical reason. She was able to lie prone in the chiropractic office to receive spinal adjustments, but felt too threatened in this position during massage. Another client was prodded by his wife to get massage to reduce stress. He said he wanted the massage treatment, but wrote "n/a" (no answer) in response to every question on the health history. When the practitioner asked questions about his replies, he claimed to be completely free of any health problems though he had a complex network of surgical scars covering his chest and reflexively guarded his body during the massage. In both cases described here, the body and mind each spoke its own language and sent very incongruent messages.

Communication experts estimate that 90 percent of communication is nonverbal. The body communicates through a somatic language of muscular and neural responses, gestures, and facial expressions. The mind communicates through the vocalization of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that reflect patterns of cognition.

Touch takes communication to an even deeper, more primal level of tactile sensations and somatic response. The language of the body-mind is often an unconscious expression. To effectively communicate with clients, massage prac-

tioners need to recognize how the body communicates what a client feels, where this person has been, and where he or she does or does not want to go. Practitioners also need to learn how to track and respond appropriately to these subtle bodily signals, particularly when clients' bodies are sending signals of somatic distress and pain that may not be matched by their verbal communication.

### Massage as a Body-Mind Therapy

Because the body and mind are integrally connected, massage can tap into body-mind issues (Figure 1.2). A person lacking knowledge of body-mind dynamics might interpret the mixed messages coming from the two clients described in the last section as confusing and challenging, or even dishonest and deliberately resistant. In both cases, the massage practitioner was well versed in body-mind dynamics and sensed the source of confusion in the somatic histories of each client. As the treatments unfolded, both clients told compelling stories to explain their resistance. Over a series of sessions, the client who refused to lie face down gradually shared a history of severe and repeated childhood abuse, often in the prone position. The client who claimed a clean bill of health, when questioned about his complex surgical scars, spent the entire massage session recounting a history of many frightening childhood surgeries in which most of the other children on his ward, who had become his friends during his lengthy hospitalizations, did not survive.

On the surface, massage may seem simple: the client lies on the table and appears to be passive as we manipulate soft tissues with the goal of relaxation and tension release. But what is really going on inside the client is often much more complex. Unconsciously or consciously, massage clients may use their time



Figure 1.2 Massage therapy can tap into body-mind issues.

while receiving massage to process conflicts, think through problems, or focus on letting go of emotional pain. Even when the client is just relaxing, psychological body-mind issues can arise, whether or not the practitioner intends to work on this level. This is because when muscular tensions that have developed around emotional pain are released, repressed emotions held within those tensions can rise to the surface, often unexpectedly. Massage can tap into emotions and psychological issues and redirect the flow of body-mind processes.<sup>5</sup>

Approaching massage as a body-mind therapy has several benefits. It can orient massage students and practitioners to the possibility of emotional and psychological issues arising in both massage training and practice. It can assist massage educators in identifying and standardizing “soft subjects” that address the body-mind components of massage so we can improve our educational standards. It can equip students and practitioners with well-established somatic concepts and skills to work effectively with the complex psychological, interpersonal, and emotional issues that can arise in therapeutic massage. And it can help prepare massage professionals to navigate the evolving role of therapeutic massage in integrative medicine, a new branch of our rapidly changing health-care field.

## Massage, Bodywork, and Somatic Therapy

It is important to know the boundaries of massage therapy to be able to utilize body-mind techniques within our scope of practice. Massage practitioners are allowed to practice massage, bodywork, and somatic therapies within the limits of their training, certifications, and licenses.

**Massage** is usually defined as a system of structured palpation or movement of the soft tissues of the body (Figure 1.3). There are multiple goals of massage palpation and movement of the tissues, such as pain relief, relaxation, passive realignment, and neuromuscular treatments. Overall, state laws legislating the practice of massage have fairly consistent parameters for massage practices and restrictions. The professional organizations for massage also provide clear and consistent ethical codes of practice to ensure that massage therapists provide high quality of care and honor a commitment to safe, respectful, confidential, and honest business practices.

The definition of bodywork is a bit more elusive. **Bodywork** is a broad term that includes many different methods of massage. Because no universal definition exists, we will define bodywork according to the more common uses of the term. Bodywork combines massage technique with movement or posture education to improve overall muscular balance and alignment and to restore normal motion to the body. Bodywork systems generally combine various methods of manipulation and sometime use movement re-education and patterning to affect positive struc-

tural changes in the client’s body.

The definition of **somatic therapy** is even more elusive than bodywork. Somatic therapy is usually described according to the common methods used in prominent somatic modalities, which are covered in the first part of Chapter 3. We are defining somatic therapy as a client-centered process of consciously changing maladaptive mind-body patterns, such as painful postures and movement habits. Somatic therapies such as Structural Integration and Aston Patterning recognize the body-mind aspects of physical patterns—the thoughts and feelings that perpetuate faulty body habits. Somatic therapy has a strong educational component that requires client participation and is usually offered in both private sessions and classes. In somatic therapy classes, students practice body awareness and movement exercises designed to alleviate pain and discomfort and to restore ease of movement.



**Figure 1.3** Massage is more than a system of structured touch, it is a human connection.

## OUR CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF THE BODY-MIND RELATIONSHIP

Humans have been thinking about the relationship between the body and the mind since we developed self-awareness, with philosophers from Aristotle to Descartes devoting extensive thought and discourse to the relationship between physical and mental realities.

The notion of a body-mind duality, or separation, is an easy assumption to make because of the physical structure of the human body. With the head towering over the body and housing the dominant organs of perception—the brain as well as the eyes and ears—the illusion of a separation between the mind and body is reinforced. We look, listen, speak, and think from the head; it is what we relate to as the center of consciousness, as the mind. From the head, we can look on the body and view it as distinct and separate, which further reinforces the impression of the body-mind split.

On a functional level, the illusion of a body-mind separation is solidified by an aspect of consciousness unique to human beings: our ability to be aware of awareness. Unlike other animals, we have developed the capacity for reflective thought: we can think about thinking. This ability, a process called metacognition, is an important part of learning. Being able to stop and examine what we think and how we behave gives us the capacity to override



Figure 1.4 A reflective moment

and suppress emotional responses in order to reflect upon them (Figure 1.4). While this capacity can be useful at times, it comes at the price of detaching us from sensate experiences.

Despite this ability to override emotional responses and detach ourselves from sensate experiences, our understanding of the depth of the body-mind connection continues to unfold every day. This connection can be felt in the combined mind and body euphoria we might feel after a peak performance or in the encompassing bliss of a gentle touch between lovers. It is now widely accepted that cognitive development is built upon early motor development in the first few years of life, and that motor development is nourished

by touch and loving relationships. Researchers are also discovering the incredible plasticity of the brain, which was once thought to reach maximum growth in early adulthood. We now know that the brain can continue to develop as a person ages with appropriate stimulation, social influences, and behavioral changes. Our changing understanding of the body-mind relationship has important implications for the way we approach and deliver all aspects of health care, including complementary modalities such as therapeutic massage.

## Pros and Cons of Body-Mind Connection and Separation

A natural part of the human experience is moving through cycles of feeling body-mind connections and disconnections. Each has its pros and cons. Feeling the body-mind connection can be exhilarating and transcendent, such as a runner's high. Connecting with others on a somatic level can also be subtle and deep, such as the gut feelings or heartfelt sensations that occur in response to relationships and circumstances. Our bodies carry an innate wisdom that helps us discern right from wrong and make choices about the best course of action to take in many situations (Figure 1.5). The changing sensations that we feel in our bodies are important guides for daily living, letting us know when we need nourishment, rest, or even protection from danger.

Can the body and mind be too connected? Some people think so. An overly sensate person, for example, is often overwhelmed by a flood of heightened feelings and sensations, particularly when under stress. This can

cause difficulties when intense feelings or stressors cloud thinking in situations that require rational decision-making. Stress reactions tend to magnify sensitivity and exacerbate physical and emotional symptoms such as pain and anxiety. Cognitive therapies provide effective treatment for such dysfunctions by teaching a hypersensitive person how to use reflective awareness to cope with strong physical sensations and turn down sensate noise from the body.

At the other end of the spectrum, our uniquely human ability to separate thoughts from feelings gives us the capacity to create the illusion of a separation between the mind and body, which can be advantageous at times. When emotions or physical sensations become overwhelming, we can intentionally ignore them or distract ourselves with something else to disconnect from the uncomfortable feeling. This capacity also allows us to develop emotional intelligence, which is the ability to understand and relate to others with self-awareness and control to balance empathy with rational thinking. To develop **emotional intelligence** skills, a person learns how to inhibit intense emotional reactions during conflicts in order to find creative and rational responses that lead to resolution. This is an important skill to develop for those times when we are in the throes of overwhelming conflicts and need to take time out to think clearly and formulate healthy rather than reactive or hurtful responses.

On the downside, though, our ability to disconnect thoughts from feelings gives us the not always positive capacity to repress physical and emotional needs. When ignoring or overriding bodily sensations and emotional feelings becomes habitual, an unhealthy mental detachment can develop toward physical and emotional needs that can cause dysfunction on many levels. Ignoring the needs of the body and repressing emotions can make a person sick, create discord in relationships, and lead to destructive belief systems, values, and behaviors.

Recognizing the positive and negative impacts of the body-mind connection, as well as our ability to function at times as if the body and mind are disconnected, is important for self-development. It also helps us as massage therapists to understand and work more effectively with body-mind dynamics that



Figure 1.5 Making decisions about the best course of action



can show up during massage, such as a client's psychological defenses and emotional responses to touch.

## Body-Mind Considerations in Western Medicine

The entire issue of whether the body and mind are separate or connected might seem theoretical and unimportant to day-to-day life, let alone to the study and practice of massage and bodywork. But in fact the evolving understanding of body-mind issues in our society underlies many current changes occurring in our health-care system. To understand where massage and bodywork therapies fit into this system, we need to first consider the changing dynamics of how Western medicine has viewed the body-mind relationship over time.

What we often refer to as Western medicine, or allopathic medicine, is a relatively new development. The beginning of Western medicine in the United States could be pinned to 1847, when the American Medical Association was founded to promote the scientific advancement of public health.<sup>6</sup> Allopathic medicine was built on a foundation of linear, cause-effect thinking in which health was measured by the absence of disease, illness was believed to be caused either by physical injury or an invasion of pathogens or germs, and treatment options were based on the use of pharmaceuticals and surgeries.

Many of the health standards and treatment modalities we have today are a direct result of allopathic research and advances in medicine. For example, penicillin, the miracle antibiotic of the twentieth century that transformed common infections from a death sentence to a curable illness, was only discovered in 1928 and first available to the general public around 1945. Another example is Western medicine's response to polio, a disease eradicated in the United States as recently as 1962 by a polio vaccine widely distributed in a public health campaign.

Despite the many positive health advances that modern Western medicine has produced, the allopathic paradigm of treating the body as an entity separate from the rest of the person's life has perpetuated cultural tendencies toward body-mind fragmentation. As a result, many people view their body as a machine with numerous parts. An ill person with this view takes his or her body to a medical specialist, as one would take a car to a repair shop, to have a "broken" part singled out for "repair," usually through the use of drugs or surgery. In a similar approach to injuries, when a muscle or joint becomes dysfunctional, it is isolated for treatment and immobilized, often through the use of numbing injections or even surgical repair.

People seek massage to alleviate pain and suffering associated with many stress-related conditions that are often a direct result of a body-mind separation and reductionist thinking. In contrast to the allopathic focus of treating a single problem, therapeutic massage usually addresses the whole body and promotes general wellness, which explains why so many people in recent decades have started turning to massage to improve their health.

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## The Role of Stress in Health and Illness

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During the late 1970s and early 1980s, neuroscientist Candace Pert and colleagues at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) discovered opiate receptor sites



**Figure 1.6** Health-care providers acknowledge the complex connections between the body and mind in an integrative medical approach.