

BOOK REVIEW

The Practice of Embodying Emotion

A Method for Improving Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes

by Raja Selvam

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here comes a moment in each person's life when a choice is made, consciously or not, to either jettison the past and create a positive future, or stay mired in self-defeating patterns that lead nowhere. Fortunately, Raja Selvam chose to orient toward the unknown, to move from a past bookmarked by a near-death experience at birth, abandonment, and life with an abusive father, to successfully transition into the expansive realm of emotional embodiment.

His journey traversed continents and human consciousness to leave behind what was, and immerse himself in multiple modalities of sophisticated body psychotherapy systems, mainstream psychologies of intersubjective psychoanalysis and Jungian psychology, and the spirituality of enlightenment. The depth and breadth of his studies and experiences with prominent pioneers in the field of somatic psychology affords Selvam and his latest publication, *The Practice of Embodying Emotions: A Method for Improving Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes*, a lasting place in body psychotherapy.

After noting that there is often an intimate relationship between psychological systems and the personal histories of their founders, Selvam adds: "Looking back over my life and my choice of orientations in psychology, I find that my relationship with the work of emotional embodiment in Integral Somatic Psychology (ISP) is no exception. I developed ISP as a comprehensive psychological approach to the embodiment of all levels of the psyche, individual and collective, with emotional embodiment as its primary clinical strategy, to improve cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes in all therapies" (p. 4).

The Practice of Embodying Emotions is a valuable guide for therapists and readers alike who are looking not just for help but also deep transformation. Selvam introduces new concepts, solid theory, and grounded practice to embody emotions in gentle and innovative ways. The reader will walk away with cutting-edge scientific knowledge on the physiology of emotions in the brain and the body, the extent to which cognition and behavior depend not just on the brain but also on the body, how the capacity to experience and tolerate emotions in as much of the body as possible is important for potentially improving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes in all therapies, and how to go about the process of embodying emotions, especially difficult ones, in a systematic manner in therapy and life.

His concept of sensorimotor emotions is a unique and much-needed contribution to the field of human consciousness. Also, his presentation on how to use interpersonal resonance, the innate ability our bodies have to exchange information with each other through electromagnetic and quantum mechanical means, will be of considerable help to therapists in somatically attuning to their clients to emotionally regulate them. Refreshing in its presentation, Selvam's book offers a clear guide for readers on a path of discovery toward embracing their whole being.

Selvam writes from a place of intimate and intuitive knowing. His personal stories are shared in conjunction with illustrative case studies to teach the concepts he is presenting. The book is divided into three parts: Part I: Overview, Part II: Theory, and Part III: Practice: The Four Steps of

Emotional Embodiment. For people who may be in a hurry to read through the book or who want to get to the hands-on experience quickly, he recommends to read Part I and then skip to Part III, saving the more in-depth theoretical explanations in Part II for later. In light of this review, and limited space, I opted to follow Selvam's guidance. As an aside, his theoretical presentations that form the rigorous scientific basis of his work are well worth going back to read if you, too, should jump from Part I to III.

Part I: Overview

The four chapters in Part I establish the foundation for understanding Selvam's core thesis – "involving more of the body in emotional experience can create a greater capacity to tolerate emotion and stay with it for a longer period of time" (p.2).

Chapters 1 and 2 provide overviews of the concepts, methods, and outcomes of the practice of embodying emotions in the context of case studies of clients learning to embody their emotions with higher and lower levels of emotional intensity, from earlier and later phases of development of the work. Chapter 3 considers concepts, methods, and outcomes in clinical settings with clients who are dealing with individual, collective, and intergenerational traumas as they learn how to embody emotion. Chapter 4 presents the benefits that can be derived from emotional embodiment, as observed in different therapeutic modalities and clinical contexts in short-term as well as long-term treatment. Along the way, Selvam also introduces the major paradigm-shifting research findings from neuroscience, body psychotherapy, cognitive psychology, and general psychology to explain the range of benefits of the practice of embodying emotions that have been observed in diverse therapy settings.

According to Selvam, emotions ultimately enable us to assess the impact different situations have on the wellbeing of our whole organism, our whole body. When the impact is distributed throughout the body, there is more support to subjectively tolerate the feelings, versus slipping into patterned reactions. People who tend to lack coping skills often turn to defense mechanisms to protect themselves from unwanted and overwhelming emotions – constriction being one such defense, which in turn limit emotions to a few places in the body while increasing the level of stress and dysregulation throughout the organism. (Another unique contribution of this book is a detailed treatment of all kinds of physiological mechanisms involved in generating as well as defending against emotional experiences, in chapter seven of Part II).

In his work, Selvam defines "expanding the body" as a way to "undo such physical and energy defenses to improve all of these vital flows from one part of the body to another, to help distribute the emotional experiences to more places in the body to make it more bearable, and to improve the level of regulation throughout the brain and the body to resolve psychophysiological symptoms" (p. 22).

Part III: Practice: The Four Steps of Emotional Embodiment

Here, Selvam presents four concrete steps – The Situation, The Emotion, The Expansion, and The Integration – for embodying emotions, with demonstrative examples.

The Situation is the specific circumstance that is impacting the client emotionally, with one's reaction contingent on the concrete detail of the situation. Here, Selvam shows how to access the specific details of the situation – the perceptions, the meanings, and the feasible behaviors – that are of critical importance in evoking the emotional responses.

The Emotion step involves helping people grasp the impact the situation has on them as emotional reactions. It might involve educating clients about the different kinds of emotions that can arise, including sensorimotor emotions that could be as simple as feeling uncomfortable. Chapter 9 in Part II offers a detailed treatment on different kinds of possible emotions, including the always-present but often-overlooked sensorimotor emotions. It might also involve recognizing and working with various innate and psychological defenses against emotions.

One innovative and effective way in which he uses the specialized emotional physiology of the face and the throat to help clients get into their feelings is to have them imagine another person expressing uncomfortable feelings through vocalizations and facial expressions, and then actually

do the acts themselves. From here he invites clients to “embody the simple sensorimotor emotion of feeling distressed or painful to as much of the brain and body physiology as possible” (p. 237) in the Expansion step.

The section on the Expansion step includes numerous methods for expanding different areas of the body, and why specific areas are critical in certain situations. Being able to work with specific body areas can help clients undo their defenses against emotions in those areas. Although numerous tools are available to work with physiological and energetic defenses to expand the emotional experience locally or from one area to another, Selvam limits his discussion to awareness, intention, and self-touch to make it easier for the practice to be adopted across as many therapy modalities as possible.

The optional step of Integration involves the conscious use of the improvements in body, energy, cognition, emotion, and behavior that begin to accrue when a person starts to improve their capacity for tolerating an emotion as resources for further emotional capacity building. Selvam even offers a seven-step protocol involving all four steps to help people with low levels of affect tolerance, such as those with borderline tendencies.

Emotional Embodiment Is Not for Every Body

Selvam acknowledges the reality that all methods have limitations, and there are times when emotional embodiment may be ineffective or contraindicated. Instances where emotional embodiment is unlikely to work are with clients whose lack of emotional development is severe; clients who cannot sense into/feel their body; and with clients whose window of tolerance is easily breached when they sense their body.

In Conclusion

Dr. Selvam has provided us with an innovative and clearly articulated contribution to the field of somatic psychology, and to the larger field of all those seeking to manage human suffering and expand consciousness, especially in these troubled times. The clarity of his theory, and examples and protocols for the reader to experience his methodology firsthand, greatly facilitate experiential learning of the book’s contents.

He acknowledges the contributions of other researchers and practitioners on which his work is built. His synthesis brings a new dimension to the work at hand, that of emotion and the body, that has not previously been articulated in such a novel and complete way. This book is well worth the exploration, for oneself and for those working with or researching emotions in any field.



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