

# The Somatic Shapes of Depression

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## **Abstract**

Depression is a response to excitatory overwhelm. It is a compacted bundle of reflex anatomic shapes that forms a continuum of behavior—helplessness, hopelessness, despair and resignation. These body shapes are part of an excitatory cascade that threatens to overwhelm the cortex. As the soma tries to diminish this threat, body shapes become rigid, dense, compacted; excitatory pulses in the brain become extremely inhibited; it is as if the cortex loses contact with the body. We call this state of understimulation depression. Overstimulation and excitatory explosion leading to inhibition and exhaustion are also called depression. Learning to influence reflex shapes allows us to differentiate compacted behaviors, minimize extremes and reinstitute self-management.

## **Keywords**

Depression – Body Shape – Bundle of Somatic Shapes

## Depression and the Formative Process

Depression brings about changes in body shape, organization and activity as well as changes in perception, feeling and subjective image. It is a somatic state that we adopt when faced with obstacles we cannot resolve. It can be a way to mask panic, anxiety, or conflict. Depression resembles hibernation, in which body processes slow and a person withdraws from contact. Because thinking and feeling are anatomic behaviors, depressive states can be changed through somatic intervention.

We are all conceived to be adults. From the moment of our conception, a universal, inherited biological program grows and forms our body. This forming is an organizing process, a continuum of pulsatory excitement that brings individual shapes into existence from conception to death. In my work, I am interested in how we can use the organizing process to grow a personal body and a personal world.

We live many shapes in our lifetime. The ability to influence our shape affects the quality of our daily existence. When we cannot influence our inner or outer worlds, we become depressed. Depression is a continuum of complex anatomic and emotional behaviors that accompany the body shapes of helplessness, hopelessness, despair and resignation. (see figure 1)

Almost fifty years of practice have taught me that the ability to create and manage our life, through voluntary participation in our organizing process, is a very powerful tool for living the varieties of our human experience. All our life we are undergoing change, and every day we have a chance to form ourselves and our relationships.

As I conceive of the Formative organizing process, pulses of excitement create a dialogue between the body and its brain. This pulsatory dialogue—especially the dialogue between muscle and cortex—not only makes order in the events of daily existence but also creates new behavior and new anatomic structure. The Formative method uses voluntary effort to create and vivify this dialogue. Using voluntary effort enables us to influence our somatic states and is an effective tool for self-management.

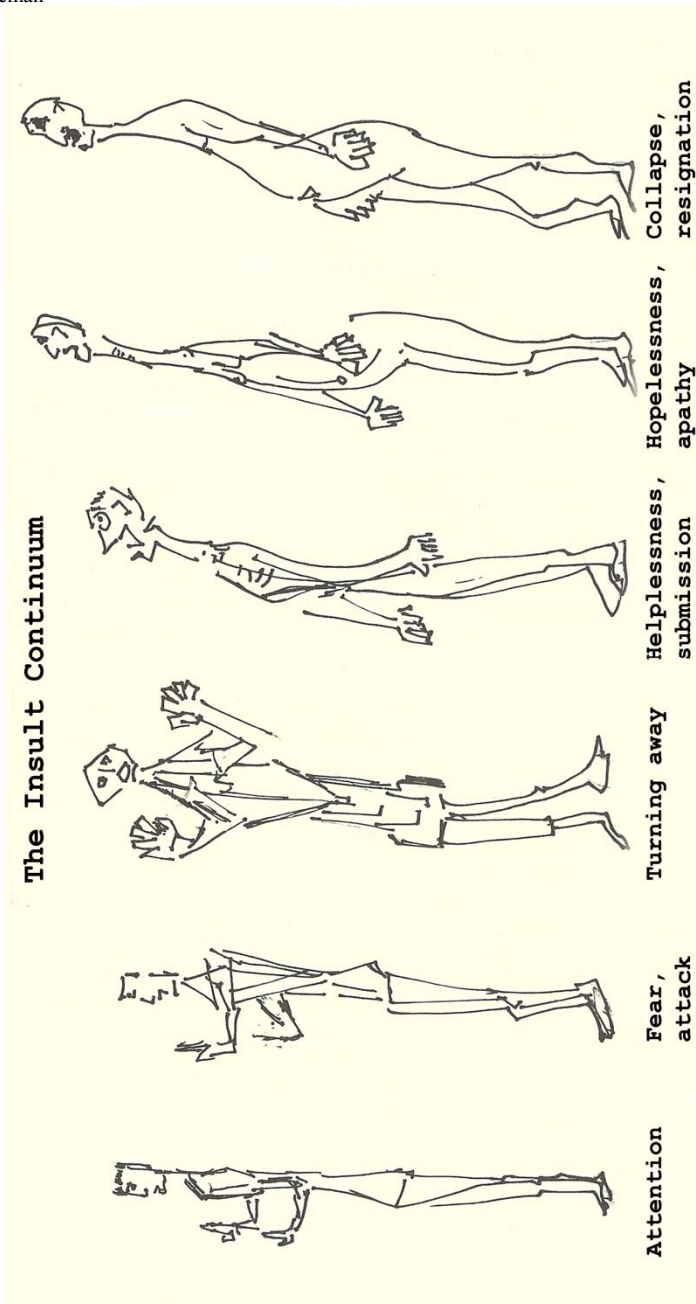


Figure 1

All behavior has an anatomic structure. As behavior is forming, assembling and disassembling, it goes through stages of motility, porosity, rigidity and density. When we learn to recognize these anatomic shapes and learn to influence behavior, we have a method for self-management. By increasing or decreasing the muscle tonus of a reflex shape or a body pattern, we heighten the excitatory dialogue of muscle and cortex. This seemingly simple practice is the key to growing and managing a personal somatic life. I call this method voluntary muscular-cortical effort.

#### Excitatory Overwhelm and Reflex Responses

When the organism experiences a great enough challenge, either from outside or from inside the body, there can be what I call excitatory overwhelm. Reflex responses are evoked that are intended to protect and maintain the integrity of the organism by shutting down or ejecting the excitement. The behavior that results from this attempt to mute the body's excitement manifests as a lack of responsiveness, but it is actually masking internal excitatory storms. Sometimes the excitement cannot be contained and there are emotional explosions followed by inhibition and exhaustion. Either way, when there is difficulty processing and managing excess excitement the relationship between the cortex and the rest of the body changes. The pulsatory dialogue is disrupted, and movement and expression are inhibited. We have difficulty forming responses and maintaining interpersonal bonds. Behavior may be muted and

responses diminished, or behavior may be overactive and spill out all over. The body's reflex patterns to shut down or eject excitatory overwhelm create the behavior that we recognize as depression.

### Depression as a Bundle of Reflex Somatic Shapes

When stress reaches a certain level of intensity, it becomes an insult. When this happens, metabolic activity increases. The first reflex response to increased excitation is to still and stiffen the muscles of the body wall—to investigate in preparation for fight or flight. If this response does not diminish the excitation, the body responds along the continuum of reflex shapes of helplessness, hopelessness, apathy and resignation. When the body wall is rigidified, movement and expression are inhibited. The ability of the soma to differentiate experience and expression is restricted. When the body wall is profoundly dense, the pulse pattern of the body is compressed, and the soma is even less responsive and more withdrawn. Or the opposite may occur: when there is not enough muscular tonus, the body wall is too porous and excitement cannot be contained; it leaks or pours out. Rigid and dense shapes also have the capacity to eject excitation by exploding. All of these reflex patterns lead to apathy and resignation.

All the body shapes along the reflex continuum influence the functioning of the cortex; we may have trouble thinking, expressing emotions, and forming appropriate social behaviors. We may act withdrawn, apathetic, or helpless; or we may act manic, or attack or flee. When the stress is unremitting, these somatic shapes solidify into a compacted bundle of shapes and behaviors. This compacted bundle can be difficult to influence or unpack.

Depression diminishes the excitatory pulsation and growth of the cortex, allowing inherited reflex patterns of behavior to dominate. Important body patterns, sensory and emotional contact, expressions of affection, all atrophy from disuse. When the dialogue of excitement between the cortex and rest of the body is greatly diminished, there is a kind of cortical senescence. When we can learn to influence and vivify the pulses of excitement, we have the ability to reinstitute the dialogue between muscle and brain. We are empowered to modify and manage our behavior.

### The Continuum of the Shapes of Depression

The four shapes and behaviors that I look for when working with depression are (1) motility, overexcitement; (2) rigidity, too much form; (3) porosity, diffuseness; (4) density, compacting. These somatic shapes and patterns of behavior that make up depression have a profound effect on the cortex. The motile shape floods the cortex with excitement; the porous shape diffuses excitement; the rigid shape channels and localizes excitement; the dense shape seeks to shut down excitement. Altering any of these somatic shapes by voluntary muscular-cortical effort alters the state of the cortex and thereby alters experience and behavior.

Each shape in the bundle of shapes that form the depressive pattern has its own function and its own associated feelings. Each shape in the continuum has its turn to dominate and narrow the focus of cortical activity. If any shape becomes habitual, it sets the behavioral mood and cognitive orientation. Because these reflex shapes are compacted and bundled, it may be difficult to distinguish among them. Voluntary muscular-cortical effort helps to make the shapes more distinct, and more readily available to be influenced.

#### *The Motile Shape*

The motile shape is always in flux; it lacks stability and duration. The urgency to give form to excitement keeps boundaries under constant pressure. Shape must change or excitement disperses. Motility is seen in embryological development, the cradle of developing form. Many motile adults are like contortionists, able to change behavioral shape easily. The extreme behavior of motility can be mania or hysteria.

#### *The Rigid Shape*

The rigid shape is stiff and generally very firm or even hard. Boundaries contain and compartmentalize excitement. Rigidity enables people to control their actions and feelings. Rigid people appear reserved, compulsively busy, self-occupied. Ritualizing behavior gives these people a sense of power. In the extreme, rigidity can be like a spasm—painful muscularly, emotionally and mentally. Because rigid people avoid the experience of porosity and motility, they have difficulty being intimate or spontaneous.

#### *The Porous Shape*

The porous shape is malleable and inclusive. It has a low muscular tonus, but can also have a semi-rigid organization. The porous shape has a slow organizing pattern, with rounded peaks of excitement that dim responses and can lead to lethargy or depression. Boundaries have limited firmness and duration; excitement leaks into the environment. Porous people find it difficult to hold their boundaries for very long; they tend to be receptive and accommodating. Their bonding pattern is to blend and merge.

### *The Dense Shape*

The dense shape is the end phase of the developmental continuum. It gives stability and duration. When the body of a dense person is compacted and squeezed into an unresponsive and impenetrable mass, there is little in, little out. This compacting of the dense shape is not rigidity; it is a hyperplasia, a thickening of the tissue. The powerful dense shape generates an internal pressure that gives the body the appearance of hunkering down to preserve and protect. Although it has the capacity for explosion, the reflex shape of density is more toward a slowdown, shutdown pattern where pulsations are flattened and the body cannot easily expand. The dense person has difficulty integrating motor and emotional expression. The effect of density mimics cortical senescence. Dense shapes are clinging, squeezing; they dampen arousal patterns and discourage differentiated and situational expression. The over dense shape has a shrunken somatic existence that is experienced as suffering.

#### The Relationship between Motility and Density, Porosity and Rigidity

Fear and anxiety are motile, overactive, excitatory processes. When excitement rises to the level of inflammation, the experience is panic. Surging excitation is a hot and invasive force that breaks boundaries. Fearing that it will be invaded or overwhelmed by its own excitement, the soma tries to minimize the excitement by ejecting it. We see highly motile behaviors such as flailing, crying and screaming. Sometimes the soma has the opposite response of trying to contain the excitement by becoming rigid, immobile, silent and catatonic.

When the threat of overwhelm does not diminish, the body compacts into a dense restraining structure. This dense structure creates a powerful interior pressure that, for a time, contains the excitement and protects the cortex from further excitatory storms. At this point, motility and density have either a cooperative or a conflicting relationship. The excitation of over motility, with its urge to flood and the effort of density to hold back are most commonly at war, and we see behavior that swings between motility and density.

A cooperative relationship between motility and density can be encouraged by learning to differentiate the intensity of either the motile or dense shape. Making variations in the layers of density gives the shape some porosity. This porosity can be formed into self-contact and intimacy. Gradations of density also give structure and duration to motility. Giving some density to the body wall contains motile movement and curtails the process of continual emptying. When some degree of rigidity is given to porous form, it modifies the leaking of excitement and produces a sense of identity. Influencing the intensity and duration of motile-rigid and porous-dense shapes creates layers of differentiation that encourage self-management.

#### Using Voluntary Muscular-Cortical Effort to Influence Depression

A Formative view orients us toward the changing of anatomic shape, toward forming a new gestalt from a present shape. The use of voluntary muscular-cortical effort is a developed skill that mobilizes the ability of the cortex to alter shape and give expression to excitement. Voluntary muscular-cortical effort can help to manage unstable or over stable shapes. With practice, we can learn to identify muscular patterns, and then to assemble and disassemble them by organizing different levels of muscular intensity.

When I use voluntary muscular-cortical effort to work with people, I ask them to show me an anatomic shape by organizing a present motor pattern. I might ask them, for example, to organize and intensify the muscular pattern of grabbing the throat, squeezing the eyes, or compressing the chest—all these patterns are meant to prevent or control excitatory storms. A shape that has been voluntarily organized can be voluntarily disorganized. By practicing increasing and decreasing muscular intensity of a reflex shape or a habitual emotional pattern, we learn to differentiate our body shapes and to form alternatives to behavioral extremes.

The ability to experience a body shape and to make muscular distinctions within it, empowers us to make order of and meaning from our experiences. Cortical functioning is intensified, and the forming process is affirmed. Over time we can learn to make fine distinctions in a motor pattern. As we learn to use voluntary muscular-cortical effort to influence excessive responses, we experience the possibilities of self-influence and have a different contact with ourselves and others.

Depression literally squeezes us out of our world. The ability to differentiate the somatic shapes of depression is how we grow new neuromuscular connections and generate new feelings, images and thoughts. When we disorganize thick and unresponsive shapes, we have the potential to assemble a different shape, a different pulse pattern. As we learn to organize, disorganize and reorganize patterns of behavior, we become a responsive person, with a different life potential, a different future. Using voluntary muscular-cortical effort to influence anatomic shapes and reflex patterns, we are empowered to differentiate and reorganize our somatic shapes and to continue growing and forming our personal adult. This is the basis of optimism.