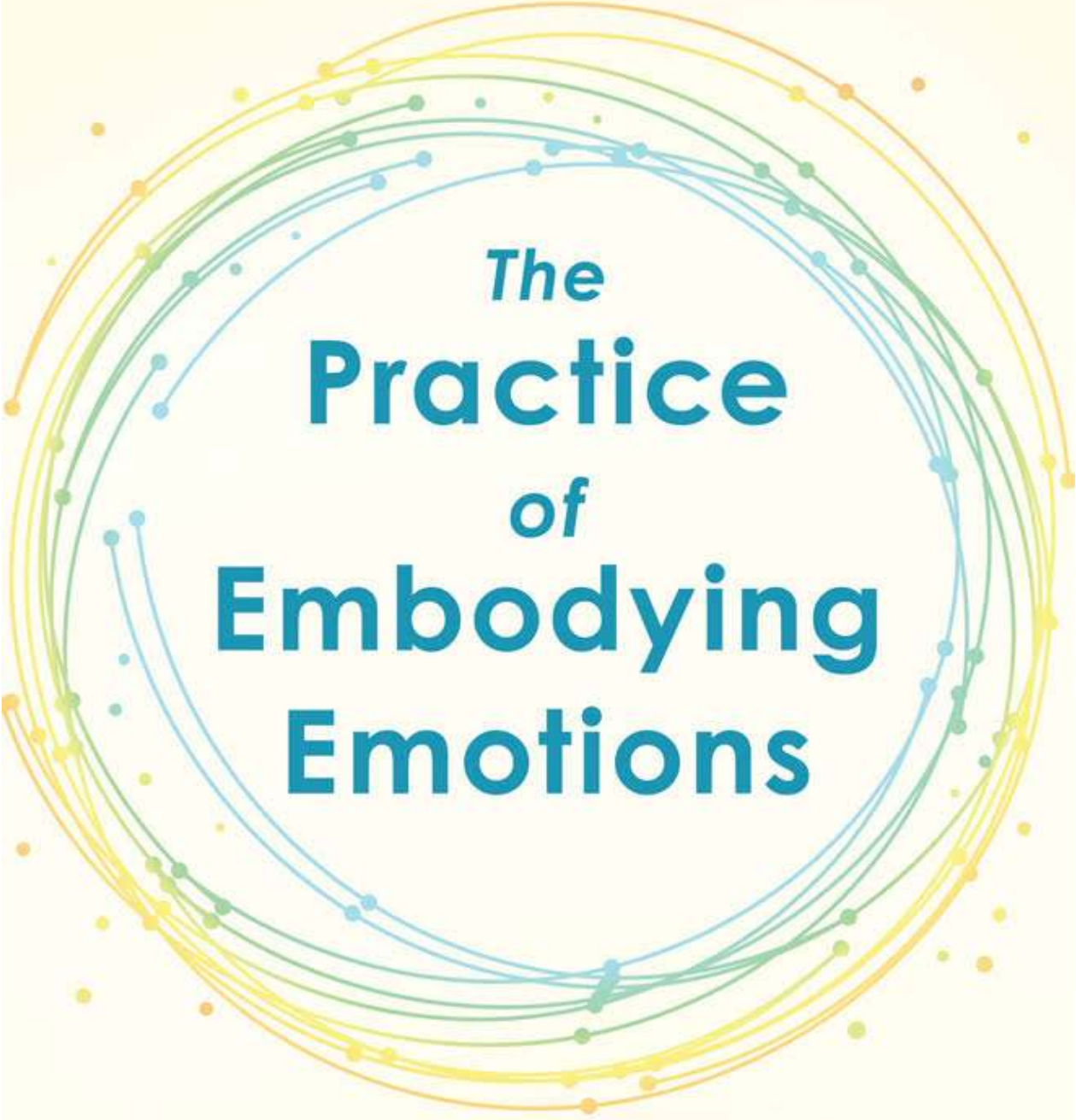


"A grand accomplishment."
—PETER A LEVINE, PhD, author of *In an Unspoken Voice*



The
Practice
of
Embodying
Emotions

A GUIDE FOR IMPROVING COGNITIVE,
EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES

Raja Selvam, PhD



Feelings were not allowed in my childhood home. We learned how to numb out, to banish emotions to the realms of distancing and dissociation. Peppermint fudge ice cream and chocolate chip cookies soothed pain-filled tears that quivered but never came to pass. We lived a bland life, no salt, no pepper, spices made my mother's fingers swell. No highs. No lows. Pure and simple neutrality. Not in the state that Buddhists reach for to end self-inflicted suffering but rather a state of nonexistence.

Writing today, I still struggle at times to sit with my emotions, or perhaps it's more accurate to say I still tend to block bodily sensations that start the experience of feeling something. My throat constricts when tears start. My neck is so tight my acupuncturist gave up trying to release it, and my massage therapist tenderly touches it without trying to dig in and create change.

In the rare instance that someone asks me how I feel, my response is a courteous, "fine". Unless I'm hiking and then I'm "happy". When I look in the mirror, metaphorically and/or literally, I see my inherited neutrality. Stoic? Absent? Numb? Or perhaps never present and accounted for.

Emotions are a conundrum. I know I'm not alone. The plethora of materials available to "help" readers feel their feelings and heal their wounded past is immense. And as many of my readers know, I have read volumes, and I have experienced multiple modalities all in the name of healing. And still, I sit here "stuck" in my quagmire of knowing and still wanting. Every book I read brings me one step closer, and yet I never actually arrive. The closest I have ever come to feeling complete, so much so that 31 years of an active eating disorder simply disappeared, was with

an amazing therapist who understood the intimate dynamics of body psychotherapy, including resonance, attunement, containment, safe touch, and presence. She was a short-lived miracle in my life.

This morning I had another such connective epiphany. Reading Raja Selvam's new book, *The Practice of Embodying Emotions*, chapter 9 specifically, I felt like someone in the driver's seat actually knew where he was going, directed by an intuitive GPS taking him and me to an emotional place that made sense: sensorimotor emotions.

Yes, the phrase is genre specific and without time to read every word yourself, the meaning might be lost. So, I will share my conscious experience of Chapter 9 and in turn the entirety of Raja's book because he clearly offers clinicians and laypersons information and tools that are useful in one's journey.

Diving In

The first line in the Introduction states the book's purpose: "This book is about emotion." It is followed by the expansion that the book is about the body in relation to emotion. Raja's vision is to help clients/readers create the capacity to be with their emotions. The idea is that with greater body space to contain unruly moments in our lives we can tolerate them as they wiggle and waggle through our being and make their way out the back door.



He explains that when people expand an emotional experience to as much of their body as possible, they can create a greater body space for containing and tolerating it, as opposed to isolating and concentrating it in one area of the body or pushing it aside altogether. By expanding the experience of emotion throughout the body, he notes that people can improve their emotional health as well as physical, energetic, cognitive, relational, and spiritual lives. The central thesis of the book: “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” (pg. 2), rests on the definition of emotion as a “summary assessment of a situation’s impact on a person’s well-being” (pg. 2).

The book is divided into three sections. Part I (Chapters 1-4) is an overview of theory, practice, and diverse benefits of the practice embodying emotions with plenty of examples. Part II (Chapters 5 – 9) takes readers deeper into the science behind the practice and into Raja’s modality that he calls Integral Somatic Psychotherapy™ or simply ISP™. Part III (Chapters 10-14) focuses on tools and skills to ‘embody emotions’, including a four-step protocol of emotional embodiment and inter-personal resonance, to help therapists and other readers to start to use the work right away.

Raja writes that Integral Somatic Psychotherapy is a “comprehensive psychological approach to embodiment of all levels of the psyche, individual and collective, with emotional embodiment as its primary clinical strategy to improve cognition, emotional, and behavioral outcomes in all therapies and in everyday life.”

The text is personally written, a first-person narrator guiding readers through a foundational understanding of body psychotherapy in general and the practice of embodying emotions in particular, and then a deeper look at the theoretical support from the emerging science of embodied cognition, emotion, and behavior in affective neuroscience and cognitive psychology, and from the field of body psychotherapy.



INTEGRAL
SOMATIC
PSYCHOLOGY™

Parts I and II, well written and informative, are important for readers new to body psychotherapy and Integral Somatic Psychology, as well as for those of us immersed in the field yet unfamiliar with the current literature on these subjects. Raja brings a picture into focus layering past, present, and potential in a workable format that affords integration with the new and the known. The heart of the book for me was Part III, the skills needed to step one step closer to feeling whole.



Without Further Ado: Chapter 9

Did you know that researchers created extensive lists/charts of feelings (the basic 6 to 154), which may be categorized as “emotions, feelings, affects, motivations, drives (such as sexuality), attitudes (such as positive, negative, or ambivalent), and temperaments (such as optimism and pessimism)” and more? (pg. 185). Well, I didn’t. Sure, I’ve heard of the basics: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust, but more have been added. There’s amusement, contempt, contentment, excitement, guilt, pride, shame, etc.

Raja lays it all out including Robert Plutchik’s wheel of emotions that starts with an inner circle of eight so called basic emotions (joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation). From here Plutchik combines basic emotions in dyads and triads to arrive at secondary and tertiary emotions to account for most of our emotional experiences.

Raja also shares Gerrod Parrott's framework of emotions (pg. 146). It is a bit overwhelming to even consider.

From there, we enter several different realms of emotional perspectives and understanding: the dimensional approach, the constructionist approach, and more. Then on page 197 we hit paydirt. "The Missing Emotions: Simple and Complex Sensorimotor Emotions".

Raja's examples:

"I feel as though I have been run over by a truck."

"My body feels like a black hole."

"I felt as solid as a mountain."

My words:

"My heart is singing."

"My soul is embracing dawn as the start of all that is new."

"I'm drowning in darkness."

"Dear God, when will this end? I honestly can't take it."

Okay. I've been called a "Drama Queen". A repugnant phrase people use to connote what they define as an over dramatization of my experience. Basically they want me to feel happy or sad while I feel embroiled in massive vaults of . . . okay you get it. But here, on the page, Raja spoke to me: "We find such expressions abundantly in fiction and poetry, but rarely in our clinical settings . . ." (pg. 200). Then he postulates that these descriptive phrases of emotion used to capture psychologically meaningful body states that are not usually recognized as emotions might be called body or sensorimotor emotions. He values and encourages these expressions as they are often easier to access and work with than emotions on various lists.

Descriptive phrases of emotion used to capture psychologically meaningful body states that are not usually recognized as emotions might be called body or sensorimotor emotions.



Not to mislead you, it isn't just over the top expressions. Someone can say, "I don't feel good about this", or "I'm uncomfortable", and this is where Raja starts. Because we can easily access experiences of feeling good, bad, or neutral, we can start working with our emotional experiences right away. Raja demonstrates, with many examples throughout the book, that working with such simple sensorimotor emotions in the body first often builds capacity for more differentiated emotions such as loneliness to emerge with less difficulty than before. Any small vocalization referencing one's affect state is one possible entry point to embody one's emotions.

At this point, Raja expands his discussion to include the body and the physiology of emotions. He discusses how our facial affect system (head, face, and neck) plays a part (yes, the Polyvagal Theory is addressed) and ways to intervene using awareness, mindfulness, touch, self-touch, visualization, breath, tracking sensations, and movement. He devotes time to all areas of the body and their significance in connecting to emotions and healing what needs attention by using what he calls "simple area-to-area expansion strategies with just awareness and intention" (pg. 252). He notes that the phrase "expanding the physiology" means "undoing defenses against emotions to involve more of the physiology in the emotional experience."

Some examples:

"As you feel the anxiety in your chest, please enlarge your awareness to include your arms. You can go back and forth between your chest and your arms in your awareness, or you can hold them both in your awareness at the same time. How does that change your experience of anxiety in your chest? Does the chest feel more expanded or a little less constricted? Does the anxiety expand more in the chest area? Does it feel more tolerable than before? What about your arms? Do they feel more expanded? Do you now feel in your arms any of the qualities of the anxiety you feel in your chest?" (pg. 252).



Raja works with easy-to-implement self-touch and movement strategies to help undo defenses that block/constrict our emotions in our clients and ourselves. Through awareness, self-touch, and movement, we can expand an emotional experience locally in one area of the body and connect the experience to other parts in in our brain and body physiology.

"When facial muscles are being blocked during emotional experiences, processing of the emotion and the situation in the brain is severely compromised. When the face and throat physiology become involved in emotional experiences in the rest of the body through facial and vocal expression, greater clarity about one's emotional experience is possible" (pp. 253-254).

"As you feel the fear in the chest, open and close your mouth to loosen the jaw muscles, open and close your eyes to expand the muscles of the eyes, turn your head and neck in different directions, or express the fear through facial expression and vocalization. Do one or more of the above actions and notice what you experience in your chest and in your head as a result" (pg. 255).

To connect the experience of sadness in the face and throat to the abdomen Raja offers the use of awareness to bring the experience from one area to the other, to try to move the sadness down into the abdomen to see what happens. And to place one hand on your throat and the other on the abdomen with the intention of connecting the two areas.

His conversation about the neck muscles (based on Bodydynamic Analysis) was an eye opener for me. According to Raja, our neck muscles allow us to cope with or defend against high levels of stress, fear, and shock. Simply moving the neck or gently touching it can help undo defenses, especially when dealing with fear, terror, or grief—touching the back of the neck can help release tension and holding in the throat.

Beyond Chapter 9

There is more to this book than Chapter 9. Each chapter in Part III addresses one of the four steps of emotional embodiment work: the situation, the emotion, expansion, and integration. Readers learn the importance of available situational details to evoke and maintain emotional responses. Different ways to access and stay with emotions are addressed as well as ways to expand emotional experiences to as much of the body as possible to increase tolerability over a longer period of time. A seven-step protocol for embodying emotion also helps readers gain more from their practice. The book ends with a fascinating discussion on the importance of resonance—its mechanisms and ways to consciously access it to regulate our own and others' emotional experiences.

Knowing its time to close, I offer an invitation to check out the book yourself and a shout out of appreciation: readers have free online access to videos that offer visual demonstrations and guides to complete the steps involved in embodying emotions. To learn more, visit Raja's website at www.integralsomaticpsychology.com.

Raja Selvam, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist, is the developer of Integral Somatic Psychology™ (ISP™). His book *The Practice of Embodying Emotions: A Guide for Improving Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes* will be available March 22, 2022 and is currently being translated into several languages.

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