



# Being Bodyful

This is How Structural Myofascial Therapy Supports Clients on their Path to Somatic Awareness

By BetsyAnn Baron

**T**utus and toe shoes, music and movement: I had been a professional dancer and I had danced it all. I lived in a passionate world! There were hours of rehearsal, traveling, hotels, theaters, performances, late-night after-performance dinners—and injuries, injuries, injuries.

# “Awareness is the space between intention and action.”

I was fortunate to have a wonderful team of manual health care professionals to help get me back into the rehearsal studio and onto the stage.

A professional dancer has a fairly short career. When it became time to hang up my toe shoes, I was drawn to study massage therapy, which had been a crucial part of my life as a dancer.

## A Myofascial Path

It was illuminating, in massage school, to learn anatomy in greater depth than we needed to know as dancers; to learn which muscles did what, why the joints moved in particular directions and how they interacted to make the glorious movements of my previous career possible.

Then came the a-ha moment: Eight years into my journey as a bodyworker, across my path came George Kousaleos and his CORE myofascial curriculum. This was the course that changed my way of seeing and understanding the body. My philosophical vision of the body began to shift away from muscle origins and insertions and open to the full-body, global connectivity enabled through the fascia.

As I dove into learning the hands-on work in the course, I quickly volunteered to be the first demo model. (I was and still am a kinesthetic learner. Once a dancer, always a dancer.) During those first few seconds of receiving the opening technique from George's hands, my gut told me this was the piece that had been missing.

Missing from what? Missing from my

bodywork treatments. Throughout my previous career as a dancer, fascia was not yet on our radar. That class profoundly affected me as I recognized the complete connectivity created by the myofascial tissue. Of course, I was only beginning to explore this realm, nearly 20 years ago.

I continued developing my skills within the myofascial field and landscape, studying structural integration and incorporating those new tools and ideas into my clinical sessions.

Whether I was offering myofascial treatments à la carte or in a 10-session series, my clients and I were fascinated by the results of working with this system. From discovering how a rather global myofascial session in the legs affects torso alignment to how more specific leg techniques avoided a gastroc fasciotomy

are only two examples of the results from working in what we fondly call the fascinating fascia.

Thus I became a myofascia-ist, totally immersed in the fascia, the myofascia and its geographical atlas.

Other massage therapists and bodyworkers asked questions about my methods. At that time, I was also an assistant teacher for the CORE myofascial continuing education curriculum. In 2006 I began building a few courses that became Structural Myofascial Therapy.

Structural Myofascial Therapy's main goals are increased range of motion, greater stability, more fluid alignment, finer proprioception and ease of breath. I am quite sure that all of us in the bodywork world wish all of that for our clients.



Teaching Structural Myofascial Therapy at a massage convention.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BETSYANN BARNON

## Two Key Elements

Structural Myofascial Therapy is developed around two key elements: postural somatic awareness, and hands-on myofascial techniques.

Postural somatic awareness means *body awareness*. It is a subjective evaluation tool at the beginning and end of the session. Although postural somatic awareness may only take less than one-tenth of the appointment time, it is equally important and at times *more* important than the hands-on work.

Postural somatic awareness is what allows exploration in order to develop treatment, allowing a learned protocol to evolve in order to target more specifically what that client needs that day. Don't get me wrong here; we all need to learn the protocols. It is the art of treatment that I'm discussing. This is one of the ways my dance and bodywork worlds blend and intermesh.

The myofascial system appreciates this work, as it is always affected when there has been injury or surgery. After injury, the fascia becomes less elastic and malleable.

Dehydration is also a big component in fascial stiffness. These and other elements affect the muscle tissue, which is housed within the fascial membranes. It cannot do what it was born to do: contract and release, enabling us to move. Bodies that are pushed to their maximum also undergo an overuse-type of situation that decreases plasticity and ease of movement. It's all about balance, right?

Let's continue to look at postural somatic awareness. I would like to share a quote I jotted down after a Feldenkrais class: "Awareness is the space between intention and action." If we are not aware, the process of change is pretty difficult.

## Being Bodyful

Postural somatic awareness brings clients into being *bodyful*. They tune into the sensation of how they feel in their body instead of being in their brain and *thinking* how they feel.

Take a moment to explore this right now. Either sitting or standing, tune into a physical sensation. Notice whatever comes



Becoming aware of relationships in body alignment, with a focus on how the clavicular girdle sits between the torso and the head. Photography: Michael Slobodian

to you first. Notice if you are *thinking* about how you feel in space or if you are *feeling* your body in space.

Taking breath as an example, if you were to verbalize, would you say, "I *think* I'm breathing fully" or "I *feel* my breath fully"? Changing verbal expression takes us out of the brain and into the body. Of course, we need both mind and body—but try tuning into bodymind.

Postural somatic awareness is our subjective assessment guide that gives voice to much more information than why the person made that appointment.

As we continue into the session, we begin with our client in their familiar standing posture. (As an aside, many North Americans are not familiar with a standing posture without smart phone in hand, and I hesitate to even mention lack of awareness while seated in front of the computer! But I digress....)

The client is often looking for what standing means, and thus begins the very opening of postural somatic awareness. We ask a few basic questions in order to offer guidance as the client tunes into their physical impressions and becomes bodyful.

A few examples of questions are: "When you take larger-than-normal breaths, is it easy and fluid? If not, where do you feel the difficulty?"; "Are you standing evenly on both legs?" and

"Where do you feel your weight in the soles of your feet?"

There are no wrong answers. And none of this takes much time: five to 10 seconds for each answer is ample. Longer than that, the person is thinking too much and not feeling. This too is part of the exploration in postural somatic awareness and being bodyful. Responses are clues, as you become duo-detectives in exploring "What else or where else could it be?"

Within the Structural Myofascial Therapy curriculum and treatments, postural somatic awareness bookends the hands-on work. It is the piece that addresses the process of change and neuroplasticity (very short definition: changes in the brain). Terms such as interoception and exteroception, along with the more familiar proprioception, add dimension in addressing both the body's physiologic needs as well as the kinesthetic senses.

Using this assessment method in subsequent sessions keeps the focus absolutely in the present moment. It is a stronger tool than you can even imagine because it offers the person an allotted time to tune into their physical awareness and find words to express it.

We work with simplicity and support. It is all about awareness and the possibility of moving into a process that supports change and better being.

## The Duo-Detective Team

In this article, I will not be describing actual techniques, maneuvers and strokes; I'm simply offering my experiential thoughts on where they fit into clients' geography in response to your duo-detective work.

The basic technique concepts are built around increasing myofascial plasticity from superficial to greater depth within this very integrated system. Globally, we are utilizing slow strokes that feel as though we are deeply spreading the connective tissue.

At other moments we use more specific techniques, also slow, that allow us to delve deeper, as if sculpting through the myofascial layers and interfaces that can feel gluey and stiffened.

Our goal is to enable freer movement and greater possibility to recruit muscle. This goal is very synergistic. Fascia is the form. Muscle is the mover.

During a session, we remain duo-detectives with our client. From the information gathered in the opening postural somatic awareness focus, we create that session's protocol.

Tuning in with awareness continues throughout the hands-on techniques, working with your client and asking what they are feeling. Here lies great opportunity to develop communication

skills between the detectives.

We, as the bodyworker, notice what the client does or does not express as to what they feel or don't feel. This has its own significance as we work with the process of being bodyful. Information gathered can be very surprising and is extremely important for both client and therapist.

As an example, let's say that the client's original complaint was left low-back pain. During the opening postural somatic awareness, the client has discovered a standing imbalance. Their back pain is taking primary attention, so the person isn't able to tune into much else. It's table time!

When you are working through the myofascial continuum, you both may discover that the ipsi-lateral gluteal area and hamstrings are contracted, or that the opposite hamstrings are tight and pulling on the pelvis unequally. Could it be that the left hip flexors are shortened, adding to the imbalance? (Of course, there could be other reasons for this particular discomfort.)

## Any Change is Good

Each session ends in standing postural somatic awareness so that the client can tune into how they feel after receiving the table work. Be ready for their feedback, as it can range from "I can take an easier, fuller breath" to "I'm not sure" to anything

else. Any feedback indicating a change is positive, as it means *something* has changed.

Heavier or lighter, more grounded or more wobbly; something has changed.

Your clients' discoveries are often surprising to them at the first appointment, after which they become interested, curious and excited to more fully explore their personal process and evolution in subsequent sessions.

With any session, always finish with a simple, grounding and stabilizing exercise. This offers a proactive take-home tool as the client integrates that day's session. Discussion of a treatment plan adds an element of support as clients work through their process of being bodyful.

## Develop Artistry

My inspiration comes from the work developed by Ida Rolf, PhD, and those who follow her. Add to the mix the masters of the ballet, who inspire me and allow the mover in me to keep dancing around my massage table and in the Structural Myofascial Therapy classroom.

As I continue to explore my own art form that is no longer part of someone else's choreography, I encourage you to develop your own artistry as a bodyworker who creates a dynamic practice in tandem with your clients. **M**



Checking in on hand placement and depth of contact with tissue. Photography: Michael Slobodian

Originally from Toledo, Ohio, BetsyAnn Baron ([baronbodyworks.ca](http://baronbodyworks.ca)) lives and treats clients in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Her Structural Myofascial Therapy® teaching schedule has her busily booked in the province of Quebec, offering her three-day intensives in French. She is available for courses taught in English. She is a National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork-approved provider, a massage therapist (FQM) and a Board Certified Structural Integrator (IASI).

▶ Watch a video about Structural Myofascial Therapy at [massagemag.com/smtvideo](http://massagemag.com/smtvideo) and on MASSAGE Magazine's YouTube channel, at [youtube.com/user/massagemag](http://youtube.com/user/massagemag).