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# Somatics exercises described as a 'toolbox' for coping with pain



***ELLIS CHOE***

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Somatics instructor Martha Peterson, white shirt, works with student Evelyn McGhee, in a workshop in Calgary. **LORRAINE HJALTE / CALGARY HERALD**

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Debra Denison can stand and move for 30 minutes at a time after two years of intense chronic pain left her on crutches.

Sue French is back to running these days after barely being able to walk for months due to severe back and hip pain.

Jude Ewan can finally move and control her arm after suffering a stroke that left her entire right side nearly paralyzed six years ago.

All three believe they have reclaimed their bodies and their lives because of simple exercises called Hanna Somatics.

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“I’ve seen many doctors, therapists, specialists in the United States,” says Denison. “I’ve had more X-rays than I can count, MRI’s, cat scans, injections, prolotherapy. I used to tell my doctors my body feels unstable, disorganized. I kept complaining of severe lower back and right hip pain but no one really knew what was wrong with me.” She ended up doing her own research and discovered Hanna Somatics through a chat group on Facebook. That eventually led her to Elizabeth Wakley, a longtime yoga instructor turned Somatics coach.

“I’m incredibly grateful I have Elizabeth,” says Denison. “In fact, I cried when I found her.”

Unlike Denison, French was skeptical.

“Because [Wakley] is a good friend, I didn’t want to see her,” laughed French, a former journalist. “But I was so frustrated I decided I had nothing to lose. I only had two sessions with Elizabeth. Within the first week, I was doing the run-10-minutes-walk-one-minute pattern. It was shocking. I don’t completely understand it but it works.”

Ewan feels the same way.

“I don’t know how we did it, but suddenly I could lie down on my right side without pain and I can control my arm,” says Ewan who learned about somatics through her daughter, Anna Ewan, who incorporates somatics in her Pilates classes at her Freebird Pilates studio.

“It creates healthy movement patterns in the body,” explains Anna Ewan of the exercises that are taught to people who then practise them on their own.. “It’s the awareness piece that’s so important ... Before somatics, I wouldn’t have noticed that my hip has shifted from carrying a baby on one hip for so long and that it’s not happy for my

back ... It's not fun to live in pain and exhaustion and there are too many people doing that these days."



Somatics instructor Martha Peterson, white shirt, watches over a group of students taking a workshop in Calgary. **LORRAINE HJALTE / CALGARY HERALD**

American philosophy professor and author, Thomas Hanna based his somatic treatment on the mind-body-connection work of his teacher, Israeli physicist Moshe Feldenkrais and pioneering research on stress by Austrian-Canadian endocrinologist Dr. Hans Selye. Hanna researched, developed, trained and wrote about somatics until a car accident took his life in 1990.

Self-described as a "philosopher who works with his hands," Hanna designed a sequence of slow, gentle movements that relax chronic muscle tension by re-educating the brain. According to Hanna, when a muscle is stuck in contraction and cannot voluntarily relax, it has what he calls "sensory motor amnesia." According to practitioners, specific exercises help the mind notice and regain control of these forgotten

muscle groups. He believed these exercises reprogrammed the body's sensory-motor system freeing people from stiffness, aches, and pain.

Wakley says she has seen some positive change in everyone she's worked with including herself.

"I only teach what I've experienced myself," says Wakley. "From the first day, (somatics) made me realize that I couldn't change the patterns of contraction in my body by working with my muscles. I had to work with how my brain was controlling my muscles."

Wakley had tried a myriad of treatments for her own health issues and chronic pain she'd suffered over the years since undergoing multiple surgeries since childhood.

"Somatics has improved my life tremendously," says Wakley who is keen on learning more. "Yoga was a great help dealing with chronic pain but nothing addressed the root cause until I started somatics."

With her nudging, the Clinical Somatic Education Professional Training program is being offered for the first time in Canada on Oct. 3 in Calgary.

Teaching the three-year training program in Calgary are clinical somatic educators: Theresa Evans, a yoga teacher and former critical care nurse from Wisconsin and Martha Peterson, a former dancer and former massage therapist from New Jersey who is making it her mission to spread the message about somatics around the globe.

"My goal is to see a somatic educator in every town in the world," says Peterson, who received her somatic training from one of Hanna's own students. She and Evans are two of only 155 certified Hanna Somatic educators in the world with 14 in Canada.

Medical professionals are quoted praising Hanna's philosophy in his book, *Somatics*, as well as in Peterson's book, *Move Without Pain*, but very few in the medical or body therapy communities in North America are familiar with it.

A number of Calgary doctors contacted for this story would not comment or said they did not know enough about the treatment to comment on its effectiveness.

That doesn't surprise local osteopathic manual therapist Blaine Skleryk.

“These groundbreaking things take a long time to evolve,” says Skleryk, owner of Laser Health Solutions. “Acupuncture 30 years ago was considered voodoo. Now it’s become mainstream. It’s the same thing with low-intensity laser. When we started it 12 years ago, people were looking at us strange. Now we see a lot of doctor referrals.”

For Skleryk who holds a master’s degree in biomechanics and biomedical sciences, Hanna’s Feldenkrais connection is what piqued his interest in somatics. He’d just read about the benefits of Feldenkrais’ principles in *The Brain’s Way of Healing*, the latest book by international bestselling author and psychiatrist Norman Doidge. “[Somatics] is another part of the whole truth about our bodies,” says Skleryk who has taken Peterson’s coaching course. “I’m still exploring it. It’s still new for me but I’ve seen people benefit from it.”

Eleanor Criswell Hanna admits the field of somatics is relatively young but the demand is growing around the world thanks to educators like Peterson and the Internet.

“I see more people doing it, more people wanting to enrol in training,” says Criswell Hanna, director of the Novato Institute for Somatic Research and Training that she co-founded with her late husband in 1975. “It makes sense and it works ... It’s a first person experience. It’s about working yourself from the inside out ... I’ve worked with thousands of clients including doctors, surgeons, nurses and one of the things they love about it is that it’s pure physiology. They always say ‘of course this makes perfect sense.’”



Somatics instructor Elizabeth Wakley, green shirt, works with student Debra Denison during a workshop. **LORRAINE HJALTE / CALGARY HERALD**

B.C. kinesiologist Brian Justin decided to give it a try by taking the somatics coaching course in Calgary last month upon learning that renowned American strength coach and author, Dan John, recommended it.

“I am always looking for new ways to enhance movement,” says Justin, a kinesiology instructor at the University of the Fraser Valley. “I think somatics is the missing link for the recovery and restoration of movement ... It provides a very powerful and pharmaceutical-free method to handle muscular tension and pain.”

Osteopathic manual therapist Ed Paget would like to see more body therapy practitioners include it in their practices. With a kinesiology degree and an osteopathy degree from the U.K., the owner and director of Intrinsi was chosen to accompany the Canadian long track speedskating team to the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics.

“For example, we all feel fantastic after a good massage, but how much better would it be if the therapist could recommend a few simple exercises that help the muscles retain a relaxed set point,” says Paget.

But Evans stresses somatics is not a quick fix. It’s a lifelong process that requires daily practice like brushing your teeth.

“We’re so hard on ourselves,” says Evans. “Pushing and pulling and yanking with the no-pain-no-gain mentality. This is the polar opposite of that. I tell people: you’re going to have a tool box that you’re going to carry away and you’re going to know how to get yourself out of pain.”