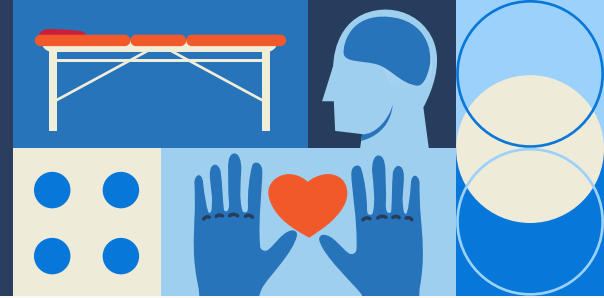


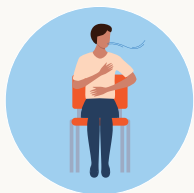
What is Somatic Education in TCI-Massage?



TCI-Massage (Trauma-Informed and Culturally-Responsive Integrated Massage Therapy) was developed for forced migrants and torture survivors. TCI-Massage integrates somatic education into hands-on massage therapy, which is based on practices from an evidence-based approach called *Mindful Awareness in Body-Oriented Therapy* (MABT) (see [Center for Mindful Body Awareness](#)). Somatic education typically uses touch, movement, and sensory awareness to help people better understand their bodies and support their physical and emotional well-being. The somatic education in TCI-Massage specifically includes three components: (1) breath awareness, (2) noticing sensation, and (3) self-compassion. MABT research shows evidence that these somatic education components may: increase body awareness, reduce stress responses, strengthen emotional regulation, improve the early recognition and management of pain, reduce pain catastrophizing, and reduce pain. The same may be true for TCI-Massage.

Massage creates an ideal physiological state for learning. Massage engages the relaxation response, which makes learning easier. This is especially important for forced migrants and torture survivors, who often experience chronic states of fight, flight, or freeze (heightened physiological states of stress) due to past trauma and ongoing stressors. Providing somatic education during the massage session (at intake, while the client is on table, and at end of session) also reinforces the embodied nature of somatic education, helping forge direct links between education, awareness, and physical experience.

In the TCI-Massage ten-week series, each session builds on the somatic education content of the previous sessions, deepening the client's understanding of their bodies, their response to pain and related symptoms of distress, and equips them with practical self-management strategies.



Breath Awareness is the first somatic education component of TCI-Massage.

Breath awareness and slow diaphragmatic breathing can normalize stress responses, reduce cortisol levels, improve vagal tone, and support emotion regulation. Somatic education on breathing begins with bringing awareness to the natural and unaltered breath. The massage therapist begins with suggestions on how and where one may notice the breath such as feeling the rise of the chest and belly, air moving through the nostrils, ribs expanding, etc., and affirms that they do not need to change anything about how they are breathing but simply notice. During the massage, the massage therapist asks questions to bring the client's attention back to the breath, like: "Where do you feel your breath moving in your body?" ... "Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly; do you feel them moving with your breath?" In later sessions, the massage therapist invites the client to deepen and lengthen the breath. They remind the client about breath awareness and offer guidance on taking deeper breaths during the massage. They explain the benefits of slow, deep breathing: it helps to release muscle tension and increases feelings of relaxation. The therapist guides them through specific exercises. A popular exercise among clients is the soup metaphor: "imagine you have a cup of soup; slowly breathe in the smell of the soup through your nose; slowly blow out to cool the hot soup." The therapist invites and reminds the client to continue the breathing exercises during the massage session. Breath awareness supports the relaxation response and is an essential skill for the next component of somatic education.

“ [When] the pain is coming, or... an uncomfortable spot ... there's something I can do to alleviate the pain it's breathing into that spot that is sore, or into the pain in my spine.... It has really been helping me, and I hope that it will continue helping me.”



Noticing Sensation is the second somatic education component of TCI-Massage.

Once the client is able to bring awareness to their breath, the therapist guides the client to expand their awareness to the rest of the body. Noticing sensation is the practice of bringing awareness to the physical body. Can you feel the ground beneath your feet? The touch of your clothes on your skin? Are your teeth touching or parted? Noticing sensation is a mindfulness tool for healing. It helps one to ground in the present moment, to slow down and begin to recognize sensations. The therapist invites the client to notice a place of tension or discomfort. The therapist then asks the client to take the time to notice the sensation and to describe what they notice. During the massage, they ask the client to notice how sensations change or do not change. This process is repeated in different body areas and over multiple sessions. Collaborative, embodied noticing activities build skills in body awareness and naming sensation (also referred to as “body literacy” in MABT). Building vocabulary to describe sensations helps clients develop a more nuanced and accurate relationship with pain and other sensations, including those associated with relief and relaxation. Noticing and naming can help people recognize early cues or signs of somatic discomfort or pain, prompting them to engage in pain self-management earlier than they might have prior to learning these skills. Noticing sensation is also a pathway to reconnecting with the physical body, which is a central component of healing from trauma. Noticing sensation provides the skills needed for the final component of this somatic education protocol.

“ There was a tennis ball that was given to me to roll on myself ... and taking that deep breathing.... It helped me to understand my body, [how to be less] tense, and how to feel relaxed. To be honest, I think before the massage, I had a couple of pains in my body but right now, I don't feel that anymore ... the therapist did some massage on it and then just tell me how to notice my body and breathing.... there are changes in my body.”



Self-Compassion is the final somatic education component of TCI-Massage.

Self-compassion involves non-judgmental awareness and acceptance, with added qualities of care, kindness, and understanding for what is being experienced. Compassion helps regulate threat-based emotions like fear and supports the natural release of oxytocin and endorphins. Self-compassion can reduce negative affect, pain catastrophizing, and pain intensity. Throughout the entire ten-week series, the therapist models compassion through safe, supportive touch, and in the final sessions, the therapist introduces self-compassion as a skill that can be used to respond to pain or other sensations. The massage therapist and the client collaborate to identify a specific area of the body or sensation to offer self-compassion. The therapist supports the client to identify an expression of self-compassion that resonates for them, possibly love, kindness, patience, acceptance, tenderness, care, or something else. During the massage, the therapist guides the client in noticing sensations or emotions in the identified area of their body. While the massage therapist holds or massages this area, they prompt the client to silently be with themselves in a self-compassionate way and to offer their expression of self-compassion word or feeling and “send” it into that area.

“ During the sessions, [the massage therapist] tells you to invite some positivity... into spots when you breathe in. It gave the element of, ‘I know what I'm doing,’ and ‘I know that we can do this if we do it together’ She will use words like ‘invite kindness,’ and she has used the element of colors. And at first, I was like, what is this thing all about? But she tells me, close your eyes, and then what color do you see? It has a way of sending the message to the brain. You say something like green, and then you think about the green grass. And what is the significance of green grass? Rebirth, a new beginning.”

➔ [Learn more about the research: cvt.org/what-we-do/advancing-research/](https://cvt.org/what-we-do/advancing-research/)