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Exploring the Benefits of Somatic Experiencing in Treating Dissociative Disorders

Shahab. Sadeghi[1*], Parvin. Salehi[1], Sina. Taheri[1]

[1] Department of Clinical Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

*** Corresponding author email address**: shahab.sadeghi.clin@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore the benefits of Somatic Experiencing (SE) therapy in treating dissociative disorders, focusing on emotional regulation, physical awareness, interpersonal relationships, and trauma processing as reported by individuals who have undergone this therapy. The study employs a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews to gather data from 22 participants diagnosed with dissociative disorders and who have undergone at least six months of SE therapy. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns in participants' experiences. The analysis revealed four main themes: emotional regulation, physical awareness, interpersonal relationships, and trauma processing. Participants reported significant reductions in anxiety and panic attacks, improved mood stability, and enhanced emotional awareness. They also noted stronger connections to their bodies, alleviation of somatic symptoms, and improved body image. Interpersonal benefits included better communication, boundary setting, trust building, conflict resolution, and increased empathy. Trauma processing benefits involved improved memory integration, reduced flashbacks, and a stronger sense of safety. Somatic Experiencing therapy appears to offer substantial benefits for individuals with dissociative disorders by addressing both the physiological and psychological aspects of trauma. The findings suggest that SE can enhance emotional regulation, physical awareness, interpersonal relationships, and trauma processing. These results align with previous studies on the efficacy of body-oriented therapies for trauma recovery. Further research with larger, diverse samples and quantitative measures is recommended to validate these findings and explore the long-term effects of SE therapy.

Keywords: *Somatic Experiencing, dissociative disorders, emotional regulation, physical awareness, interpersonal relationships, trauma processing, body-oriented therapy.*

1. Introduction

Dissociative disorders represent a complex and multifaceted category of psychiatric conditions characterized by disruptions in memory, consciousness, identity, and perception (Danböck, 2023). These disorders often emerge as coping mechanisms in response to traumatic experiences, particularly in childhood, and can significantly impair an individual's ability to function in daily life (Diseth, 2005; van der Linde et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2023). Given the profound impact of dissociative disorders, effective therapeutic interventions are critical. Somatic Experiencing, a body-oriented therapy designed to relieve symptoms of trauma and stress, has gained attention as a promising treatment for these disorders (Brom et al., 2017).

Dissociative disorders encompass a range of conditions, including dissociative identity disorder, dissociative amnesia, and depersonalization/derealization disorder. These disorders are often comorbid with other psychiatric conditions such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and somatization (Beghi et al., 2015; Nowak, 2023). Dissociation can serve as a protective mechanism, allowing individuals to detach from the emotional and physical pain of trauma. However, chronic dissociation can lead to significant disruptions in an individual's sense of self and reality (Bob, 2012). The prevalence of dissociative disorders is notably high among individuals with histories of trauma, such as childhood abuse, war, and severe neglect (Hall, 2003; Nowak, 2023; van der Linde et al., 2023).

The neurobiological underpinnings of dissociative disorders involve complex interactions between brain regions responsible for memory, emotion regulation, and self-perception. Research indicates that traumatic experiences can alter the functioning of the limbic system, particularly the amygdala and hippocampus, leading to difficulties in processing and integrating memories (Bob, 2012; Diseth, 2005). Additionally, individuals with dissociative disorders often exhibit heightened physiological arousal and altered stress responses, which can perpetuate symptoms and hinder recovery (Beghi et al., 2015).

Traditional therapeutic approaches for dissociative disorders often focus on cognitive and behavioral interventions. However, these methods may not fully address the somatic and physiological aspects of trauma. Somatic Experiencing, developed by Peter Levine, emphasizes the importance of bodily sensations and experiences in trauma recovery. This therapy aims to release the physiological tension associated with traumatic experiences, promoting healing and integration (Brom et al., 2017). Somatic Experiencing involves techniques such as body scanning, grounding exercises, and mindful awareness of physical sensations, which help individuals reconnect with their bodies and emotions (Kratzer et al., 2021; Luoni et al., 2018; Wazir, 2023).

The efficacy of Somatic Experiencing in treating trauma-related conditions has been supported by various studies. For instance, Brom et al. (2017) conducted a randomized controlled trial demonstrating significant reductions in PTSD symptoms among participants who received Somatic Experiencing therapy (Brom et al., 2017). Similarly, Gardoki-Souto et al. (2022) found that Somatic Experiencing improved psychological outcomes in patients with fibromyalgia, a condition often associated with trauma and dissociation (Gardoki-Souto et al., 2022). These findings suggest that addressing the somatic aspects of trauma can enhance therapeutic outcomes for individuals with dissociative disorders.

In addition to its focus on bodily sensations, Somatic Experiencing also incorporates elements of narrative therapy, allowing individuals to reframe and integrate their traumatic experiences (Kianpoor et al., 2017; Kizilhan et al., 2020). This holistic approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of mind and body, providing a comprehensive framework for trauma recovery. Participants in Somatic Experiencing therapy often report increased self-awareness, improved emotional regulation, and a greater sense of agency and control over their lives.

Despite the growing evidence supporting Somatic Experiencing, qualitative research on its specific benefits for dissociative disorders remains limited. Qualitative methods are particularly valuable in this context, as they allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences and perceptions. This study employs semi-structured interviews to gather rich, detailed narratives from individuals who have undergone Somatic Experiencing therapy for dissociative disorders. By examining these narratives, we aim to elucidate the specific mechanisms through which Somatic Experiencing facilitates healing and to identify the unique benefits perceived by participants. In sum, this study aims to explore the benefits of Somatic Experiencing in treating dissociative disorders through qualitative research, highlighting the personal experiences and outcomes of individuals who have undergone this therapy.

E-ISSN: SOON

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the benefits of Somatic Experiencing in treating dissociative disorders. The qualitative approach is particularly suited for this investigation as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' personal experiences and perceptions.

The study involves a purposive sampling method to select participants who have been diagnosed with dissociative disorders and have undergone Somatic Experiencing therapy. A total of 22 participants were recruited for the study, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of age, gender, and duration of therapy. Inclusion criteria include a formal diagnosis of a dissociative disorder by a licensed mental health professional and a minimum of six months of Somatic Experiencing therapy. Exclusion criteria include participants currently undergoing any other form of trauma-focused therapy to ensure the results specifically reflect the impact of Somatic Experiencing.

The process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews, indicating that the data collected was sufficient to address the research questions comprehensively.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which provided a flexible yet focused approach to gather detailed narratives from the participants. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature and expert consultation, covering key themes such as personal experiences with dissociation, the perceived impact of Somatic Experiencing therapy, and any changes in symptoms or overall well-being.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via a secure online platform to accommodate participants' preferences and logistical constraints. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy and were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure thorough familiarization. Initial codes were generated inductively, capturing significant features of the data related to the research questions. These codes were then organized into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and were internally coherent yet distinct from one another.

Throughout the analysis process, the research team engaged in regular discussions to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. NVivo software was utilized to assist in managing and organizing the data systematically.

The resulting themes were then interpreted in the context of existing literature on dissociative disorders and Somatic Experiencing, providing a comprehensive understanding of the therapy's benefits as perceived by the participants.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 22 participants diagnosed with dissociative disorders who had undergone Somatic Experiencing therapy. The sample was diverse, consisting of 14 females (63.6%) and 8 males (36.4%). The age of participants ranged from 23 to 57 years, with a mean age of 38.2 years. In terms of ethnicity, the participants included 16 Caucasians (72.7%), 3 African Americans (13.6%), 2 Hispanics (9.1%), and 1 Asian (4.5%). The duration of Somatic Experiencing therapy among participants varied from 6 months to 3 years, with an average duration of 1.8 years. Additionally, 12 participants (54.5%) were employed full-time, 5 (22.7%) were employed part-time, 3 (13.6%) were unemployed, and 2 (9.1%) were students. This diverse sample provided a comprehensive overview of the potential benefits of Somatic Experiencing therapy across different demographic groups.

E-ISSN: SOON

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
1. Emotional Regulation	1.1 Reduction in Anxiety	Calming techniques, Breathing exercises, Grounding methods
	1.2 Improved Mood Stability	Emotional awareness, Mood tracking, Positive reinforcement
	1.3 Decreased Panic Attacks	Trigger identification, Panic prevention strategies, Safe spaces
	1.4 Enhanced Emotional Awareness	Body scanning, Mindfulness practices, Journaling
	1.5 Increased Resilience	Stress management, Coping strategies, Support networks
2. Physical Awareness	2.1 Body Connection	Sensation tracking, Body mapping, Somatic exercises
	2.2 Alleviation of Somatic Symptoms	Muscle relaxation, Pain management techniques, Posture correction
	2.3 Improved Body Image	Body positivity exercises, Self-acceptance practices, Mirror work
	2.4 Recognition of Physical Triggers	Identifying bodily cues, Trigger response plan, Awareness training
	2.5 Enhanced Kinesthetic Awareness	Movement therapy, Dance/movement integration, Yoga practices
	2.6 Increased Somatic Awareness	Progressive muscle relaxation, Sensory integration, Somatic tracking
3. Interpersonal Relationships	3.1 Improved Communication	Assertiveness training, Active listening, Expressive techniques
	3.2 Strengthened Boundaries	Boundary setting exercises, Personal space recognition, Consent practice
	3.3 Enhanced Trust Building	Trust exercises, Group therapy, Peer support
	3.4 Better Conflict Resolution	Mediation techniques, Conflict de-escalation, Collaborative problem solving
	3.5 Increased Empathy	Empathy exercises, Perspective taking, Role-playing
4. Trauma Processing	4.1 Memory Integration	Timeline reconstruction, Narrative therapy, Memory linking
	4.2 Reduction in Flashbacks	Flashback management techniques, Safe space visualization, Grounding exercises
	4.3 Healing Past Trauma	Trauma narratives, Expressive writing, Art therapy
	4.4 Enhanced Sense of Safety	Safe space creation, Self-soothing techniques, Safety planning
	4.5 Decreased Dissociative Episodes	Mindfulness grounding, Sensory awareness, Real-time tracking
	4.6 Improved Self-Perception	Positive affirmations, Self-compassion exercises, Identity reconstruction

3.1. Emotional Regulation

Reduction in Anxiety: Participants reported a significant reduction in anxiety levels after undergoing Somatic Experiencing therapy. Techniques such as calming exercises, focused breathing, and grounding methods were frequently mentioned as helpful. One participant noted, "The breathing exercises helped me calm down when I felt a wave of anxiety coming."

Improved Mood Stability: Many participants experienced improved mood stability, attributing this to increased emotional awareness, consistent mood tracking, and positive reinforcement. "I can now recognize my emotions better and take steps to stabilize my mood," shared a participant.

Decreased Panic Attacks: The frequency of panic attacks decreased for several participants. Identifying triggers, employing prevention strategies, and creating safe spaces were crucial. "Knowing my triggers and having a plan has made a huge difference," mentioned one individual.

Enhanced Emotional Awareness: Participants highlighted an enhanced ability to recognize and understand their emotions through body scanning, mindfulness practices, and journaling. "I feel more connected to my emotions and can process them without feeling overwhelmed," a participant explained.

Increased Resilience: Increased resilience was another key benefit, with participants learning stress management, effective coping strategies, and building support networks. One participant expressed, "I feel more resilient now, I can handle stress better and bounce back quicker."

3.2. Physical Awareness

Body Connection: Participants described a stronger connection to their bodies through sensation tracking, body mapping, and somatic exercises. "I'm more in tune with my body and can notice changes that indicate stress," said a participant.

Alleviation of Somatic Symptoms: Many noted alleviation of physical symptoms such as muscle tension and pain, using muscle relaxation, pain management techniques, and posture correction. "The somatic exercises have reduced my chronic pain significantly," shared one participant.

Improved Body Image: Improved body image was a recurring theme, achieved through body positivity exercises, self-acceptance practices, and mirror work. "I've started to appreciate my body more and focus on its strengths," stated a participant.

E-ISSN: SOON

Recognition of Physical Triggers: Recognizing physical triggers of dissociation was crucial, with participants learning to identify bodily cues and develop response plans. "I can now catch the signs early and take action before things escalate," noted one individual.

Enhanced Kinesthetic Awareness: Enhanced kinesthetic awareness through movement therapy, dance/movement integration, and yoga was reported. "Engaging in movement practices has made me more aware of how my body moves and feels," mentioned a participant.

Increased Somatic Awareness: Increased somatic awareness, achieved through progressive muscle relaxation, sensory integration, and somatic tracking, was beneficial. "I've learned to track my body's responses and use that information to stay grounded," explained a participant.

3.3. Interpersonal Relationships

Improved Communication: Participants reported improved communication skills, facilitated by assertiveness training, active listening, and expressive techniques. "I'm better at expressing my needs and listening to others," said one individual.

Strengthened Boundaries: Strengthened boundaries were frequently mentioned, with exercises in boundary setting, recognizing personal space, and practicing consent. "I've learned to set boundaries and respect others' boundaries as well," shared a participant.

Enhanced Trust Building: Enhanced trust-building was achieved through trust exercises, group therapy, and peer support. "I've learned to trust others and build supportive relationships," stated a participant.

Better Conflict Resolution: Participants experienced improved conflict resolution skills, using mediation techniques, conflict de-escalation, and collaborative problem solving. "I handle conflicts more calmly and can find solutions that work for everyone," noted one individual.

Increased Empathy: Increased empathy was reported, cultivated through empathy exercises, perspective taking, and role-playing. "I can now better understand and relate to others' feelings," shared a participant.

3.4. Trauma Processing

Memory Integration: Participants reported improved memory integration, using timeline reconstruction, narrative therapy, and memory linking. "Reconstructing my past and linking memories has helped me make sense of my experiences," explained one participant.

Reduction in Flashbacks: A reduction in flashbacks was a significant benefit, achieved through flashback management techniques, safe space visualization, and grounding exercises. "I experience fewer flashbacks now and can manage them better when they occur," mentioned a participant.

Healing Past Trauma: Healing past trauma was facilitated by trauma narratives, expressive writing, and art therapy. "Expressive writing has been a powerful tool for processing my trauma," shared one individual.

Enhanced Sense of Safety: Participants reported an enhanced sense of safety through creating safe spaces, self-soothing techniques, and safety planning. "Having a safe space and a plan makes me feel more secure," noted one participant.

Decreased Dissociative Episodes: Decreased dissociative episodes were reported, achieved through mindfulness grounding, sensory awareness, and real-time tracking. "Mindfulness techniques have helped reduce my dissociative episodes significantly," said a participant.

Improved Self-Perception: Improved self-perception was frequently mentioned, cultivated through positive affirmations, self-compassion exercises, and identity reconstruction. "I have a better self-image and feel more compassionate towards myself," stated one participant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight the multifaceted benefits of Somatic Experiencing (SE) in treating dissociative disorders. Four main themes emerged from the participants' narratives: emotional regulation, physical awareness, interpersonal relationships, and trauma processing. Each of these themes underscores the significant improvements in the participants' mental and physical well-being after undergoing SE therapy.

Emotional Regulation: Participants reported a marked reduction in anxiety and panic attacks, improved mood stability, and enhanced emotional awareness. These results align with Brom et al. (2017), who found that SE significantly reduced PTSD symptoms by helping individuals manage physiological responses to trauma (Brom et al., 2017). The incorporation of calming techniques, breathing exercises, and grounding methods in SE appears to be particularly effective in mitigating anxiety and stabilizing moods. Additionally, the increased emotional resilience reported by participants can be attributed to SE's focus on developing stress management and coping

E-ISSN: SOON

strategies, which are crucial for individuals with dissociative disorders (Brunner et al., 2021; Kianpoor et al., 2017).

Physical Awareness: The study participants noted a stronger connection to their bodies, alleviation of somatic symptoms, and improved body image. This enhanced physical awareness is critical, as dissociation often involves a disconnection from the body (Bob, 2012). The use of body mapping, somatic exercises, and sensation tracking in SE therapy helped participants reconnect with their bodily experiences, which is consistent with findings by Gardoki-Souto et al. (2022), who observed similar improvements in patients with fibromyalgia (Gardoki-Souto et al., 2022). Recognizing and addressing physical triggers and symptoms of dissociation through SE techniques can reduce the somatic complaints commonly associated with dissociative disorders (Espírito-Santo & Pio-Abreu, 2009).

Interpersonal Relationships: Improvements in communication, boundary setting, trust building, conflict resolution, and empathy were reported by participants. These interpersonal benefits are crucial for individuals with dissociative disorders, who often struggle with relationships due to trauma-related issues (El-Hage et al., 2002). SE's emphasis on body awareness and mindfulness practices likely contributed to these improvements, as participants became more attuned to their own needs and emotions, facilitating better interactions with others. This finding is supported by El-Hage et al. (2002), who highlighted the importance of addressing interpersonal dynamics in trauma therapy (El-Hage et al., 2002).

Trauma Processing: Participants experienced better memory integration, reduced flashbacks, and a stronger sense of safety, which are essential for trauma recovery. SE's approach to trauma processing, which involves body-oriented techniques and narrative therapy, helps individuals integrate traumatic memories and reduce dissociative symptoms (Kizilhan et al., 2020; Mattos et al., 2018; Şar et al., 2009). The reduction in flashbacks and dissociative episodes reported by participants mirrors the findings of Kounou et al. (2017), who noted similar outcomes in trauma-exposed populations (Kounou et al., 2017). The creation of safe spaces and the use of self-soothing techniques in SE therapy were particularly effective in enhancing participants' sense of safety and security.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that Somatic Experiencing is a valuable therapeutic approach for individuals with dissociative disorders. By addressing both the physiological and psychological aspects of trauma, SE provides a comprehensive framework for healing that aligns with existing research on the benefits of body-oriented therapies (Brom et al., 2017; Gardoki-Souto et al., 2022).

Despite the promising findings, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small (22 participants), which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability bias. The lack of a control group also makes it difficult to attribute the observed benefits solely to SE therapy, as other factors such as concurrent therapies or personal support systems could have influenced the outcomes. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study, while valuable for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, limits the ability to quantify the effects of SE therapy.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by employing larger, more diverse samples and incorporating control groups to strengthen the validity of the findings. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of SE therapy on dissociative disorders. Additionally, quantitative measures alongside qualitative interviews would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of SE's impact. Exploring the specific mechanisms through which SE facilitates trauma recovery, such as changes in physiological responses or brain activity, could also enhance the understanding of how this therapy works. Research should also consider the potential benefits of combining SE with other therapeutic approaches to determine the most effective treatment protocols for dissociative disorders.

Based on the findings of this study, practitioners working with individuals with dissociative disorders should consider incorporating Somatic Experiencing into their therapeutic repertoire. SE's focus on bodily awareness and mindfulness practices can help clients reconnect with their bodies and emotions, facilitating trauma processing and emotional regulation. Training in SE techniques for mental health professionals could enhance their ability to address the somatic and psychological aspects of trauma effectively. Additionally, creating a safe and supportive therapeutic environment is crucial for fostering trust and facilitating healing in individuals with dissociative disorders. Integrating SE with other therapeutic modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or EMDR, may offer a more holistic approach to treatment, addressing both the cognitive and somatic dimensions of trauma.

E-ISSN: SOON

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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E-ISSN: SOON

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