

## The Use of Balls in Kinetic Awareness

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### **Article:**

Somatic education provides a wealth of body-mind systems and approaches that allow us to become aware of our inner psycho-physical selves and movement capabilities. This focus on an experiential understanding of the holistic functioning of mind and body may enhance performance and expressiveness. Kinetic Awareness is one approach to somatic education that provides an opportunity to explore movement potential and develop movement possibilities. This system of body-mind reeducation, developed by Elaine Summers, focuses on increased movement efficacy and ease through heightened awareness of automatic and conscious movement. It enhances the understanding of the language that the body uses to communicate with ourselves.

Because this system of body discovery and therapy uses graduated rubber balls to enhance body awareness and release excess muscular tension, Kinetic Awareness is often referred to as "the ball work." Balls placed under various parts of the body provide contact with inner sensations, bringing to awareness inefficient patterns and psycho-physical processes. Through this internal kinetic dialogue, we may begin to transform ourselves by creating movement choice, affirming the process of change, and reaching a richer understanding of our whole selves.

### **The Kinetic Awareness System and the Use of Balls**

Although the Kinetic Awareness System is often characterized by the use of rubber balls, the ball work is actually only one part of the system. The complete Kinetic Awareness course consists of five phases, with each phase incorporating time spent on body awareness, movement, and the ball work:

**Phase 1.** Students learn to become aware of each part of the body, and to move each part by itself in all the directions it will go, as slowly as possible.

**Phase 2.** Students can now articulate freely more than one part of the body at a time, slowly and without unnecessary tension. Slow movement using all the parts of the body simultaneously with minimum tension is practiced.

**Phase 3.** Student use what was learned in phases 1 and 2 to explore moving at different speeds, while still remaining aware and without unnecessary tension.

**Phase 4.** Students learn to change tension levels at will through the entire scale from minimum to maximum tension, while maintaining the awareness and skills gained in phases 1, 2, and 3.

**Phase 5.** Movement through space and interactions with others are added. Students' concentration and awareness of movement articulation, tension levels, and speed are fully developed and can be maintained in performance if desired (Saltonstall, 1988, pp. 30-31).

Kinetic Awareness classes typically begin with "listening to the body," where students become aware of sensations within their bodies and recognize habitual tension patterns that block free movement. Before the

balls are introduced, students also usually explore a specific body part, moving it in all the directions it can go. This brings awareness of the mobility and movement possibilities as well as any limitations caused by injuries, pathologies, or physical responses to our psychological histories. During this "multidimensional movement," students must consciously initiate a movement in any part of the body. Some parts move actively while others move passively. For example, when moving the shoulder, active movement occurs in the deep muscles of the shoulder joint, while the upper arm moves passively (Powell, 1985, p. 199).

After experiencing listening to the body and multidirectional movement without the balls, students begin to explore body awareness and kinetic body movement using graduated rubber balls. Soft, hollow balls ranging from two to seven inches in diameter are placed under various parts of the body.

The balls serve several purposes. Generally, they help individuals self-massage the body and provide gentle pressure to specific areas. The balls also serve as a tactile aid that locates areas of frozen tension and help students release habitual stress. Furthermore, by rolling on one to as many as five balls, students can suspend a body part, This frees the part from strain and places the body in a position for which there is no body image, thereby reducing the unnecessary tension required to hold self in a frozen position. In this the balls help students overcome poor habitual posture (Powell, 1985, pp. 199-200; Wooster, 1988, p.62).

The suspended body part is also able to move more freely. Thus, the balls help facilitate exploration of movement in directions that would be difficult to achieve without the support created by the balls.

Moreover, the balls help deepen concentration by providing a point of focus. They increase sensory in-put and awareness and contribute to an experiential knowledge of specific body area (Powell, 1985, pp 199-200). As Ann Sargent Wooster (1988) points out, "They provide a focal point—a psychic device to increase concentration and mediation" (p. 62).

The balls can also provide a direct link to integrative body-mind experience and processes. They achieve this by helping detect specific body-mind connections, such as tensions related to psychological stress and learned habitual holding patterns, or the suppression of emotional responses.

The rubber ball system helps individuals discover these benefits and integrate body-mind experience and processes in three ways: It (1) facilitates proprioceptive communication; (2) fosters movement ease, flexibility, and mobility; and (3) helps students experience the interrelationship of the overall body systems.

*Proprioceptive communication* is increased through a focus on inner sensations. Students learn to listen to what the body has to say by observing the body's messages and inner changes. As Saltonstall (1988) suggests:

It is important not to judge the feelings that come or to think that some are more important than others. As we listen more to all the body's messages, we are fine-tuning that bodymind connection. We are allowing sensations to surface that may have been censored because of pain, our self-image, or our own fears of the body. By being aware of the whole range of our sensations from the inside, we can choose how to use the body (pp. 34-35).

The rubber ball system provides a physical connection to these inner sensations. Through direct tactile stimulation, the rubber balls help to open sensory' channels, intensify inner sensory communication, and bring lived bodily experience to awareness.

*Movement ease, flexibility, and mobility* are increased through the use of slow movement, movement with as little muscular effort as possible, and multidirectional movement. Slow movement helps students become aware of possible movement paths that may have previously been unexplored. For example, when moving quickly without awareness, an individual is likely to repeat habitual movement patterns. If someone has learned to raise the arm by hiking up the shoulder with accompanying excessive tension in the trapezius muscle, chances are

this pattern will continue whenever the arm is raised quickly. But by slowing down this movement and using as little effort as possible, individuals will recognize frozen tension patterns because they will feel uncomfortable. Also by slowing down, students begin to experience the full pathway of the arm. By fully experiencing every step along the way, students recognize every part of the movement, and movement may become more fluid and smooth.

Rolling slowly on a rubber ball placed under the shoulder blade can also make students aware of the amount of work necessary to raise the arms. For example, if the trapezius muscle becomes tense when the arm is raised, a student may feel an uncomfortable sensation near the ball. This may be a clue to try another pathway; for example, raise the arm by stretching it outwards while releasing the trapezius muscle. But if the student is moving fast and with a great degree of "frozen tension," she or he will never be able to feel the inner sensation that signals a need for change. By initially working on the balls in a slow mode, however, the student learns efficient movement patterns experientially and has a chance to replace inefficient patterns.

Kinetic Awareness also increases ease, flexibility, and mobility by enabling the student to explore movement possibilities. When the body moves all the ways it can, moving parts that have never been moved, muscles and joints find a healthy, centered tone and the skeleton finds a balanced alignment (Saltonstall, 1988, p. 37). Without having to use excess work to hold the body in a rigid position, the student is freer to move with greater ease. The balls enable individuals to further explore movement in all directions by changing the body's relationship to gravity, and providing a support to free parts of the body.

*The overall body systems'* holistic functioning and interrelationships are emphasized. For example, the interrelationship between the tension/energy system and breathing is very significant. Holding the breath causes muscles to tense, or tensing the muscles causes breath to be held or become labored (Summers, 1987). What benefits one system often positively affects another system. Exhaling stimulates lung tissue while increasing heart function, thereby increasing circulation. This may, in turn, reduce frozen tension which may facilitate breathing. Unblocking frozen tension may also release muscles near the spinal column, thereby stimulating the nerves (Summers, 1987).

The rubber ball system may help students experience a connectedness between these systems and facilitate a healthy functioning of the whole person. By rolling on the balls, students may reduce habitual tension and effort, freeing the muscles to help move the bones, rather than carry or support the body's weight (Powell, 1985, p. 190). When the muscles are freed to help the bones move, connected systems may also benefit. Muscular release, through the ball work, may also release built-up lactic acid in the muscles and move this toxin through the body via the lymph system. Furthermore, since unnecessary muscular tension affects breathing, release of the muscles involved in breathing allows the bronchial tubes to function properly.

By rolling on balls on or near the spine, individuals stimulate the nervous system and enhance bodily communication. In one Kinetic Awareness exercise, "the five ball wonder," five five-inch balls are placed under the body. This beneficial exercise for the nervous system supports the body in the air, thereby suspending the spine without pressure and helping to restore the rhythm of the spinal fluid within the spinal cord (Summers, 1987). Rolling on a five-inch ball between the skull and second cervical vertebra may release muscles that are habitually contracted, causing pinched nerves in that area, and increase blood flow to the brain. Rolling on two balls down the spine benefits the peripheral nervous system (1987).

The nerves also transfer emotion into a physical response. Psychologist Wilhelm Reich (1945) found that very often responses to emotional pains, trauma or memories are suppressed in the muscles through a physical "character armor." Summers (1987) refers to this process as "somatization," or the expression of emotional concerns in parts of the body. The balls provide a direct tactile link, making it possible for the individual to integrate these psycho-physical responses.

## **Kinetic Awareness Practice**

There are many reasons why individuals engage in somatic practices. Kinetic Awareness, as well as other body-mind systems, attract dancers, athletes, singers, actors, musicians, artists, psychologists, health professionals, and other individuals in many walks of life (Saltonstall, 1986). Some come to rehabilitate injuries and learn to move more efficiently.; some come to enhance movement performance, expand movement range and flexibility, and discover movement choices; some come in an attempt to deal with physical and emotional pain; others are interested in exploring creative and expressive possibilities.

Whatever the reasons for engaging in this process, Kinetic Awareness affirms the integrity of the individual by emphasizing uniqueness, independence, and personal responsibility 'or growth. The balls, by providing a direct tactile aid, offer entrance to the inner self. In this way, individual.) ultimately may become more self-aware and empowered, discovering well-being from the inside out.

### **Note:**

Summers does not claim that tension in and of itself is detrimental. Size describes tension in terms of a scale or continuum and believes in exploring tension levels. It is when tension becomes habitual or frozen, however, that it is unhealthy.

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