

CONNECTIONS

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How mindfulness and dance can stimulate a part of the brain that can improve mental health

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Like a thick velvety headband, the somatosensory cortex arcs across the top of brain from just above one ear to the other.

I fell in love with the brain as an undergraduate student and pursued a career in neuroscience, but for years I had largely ignored this structure, since it appeared to be involved “only” in processing of bodily sensations. In my mind, that meant it was not as fascinating as areas implicated in emotion or higher cognitive function.

However, over the past decade, during my training in mindfulness-based interventions and dance movement therapy, I’ve come to realize that a well-functioning and developed somatosensory cortex may help us experience the world and ourselves more deeply and completely. It may enrich our emotional experience and improve our mental health.

For decades, the somatosensory cortex was considered to only be responsible for processing sensory information from various body parts. However, recently it became apparent that this structure is also involved in various stages of emotion processing, including recognizing, generating and regulating emotions.

Moreover, structural and functional changes in the somatosensory cortex have been found in individuals diagnosed with depression, anxiety and psychotic disorders. These studies suggest that the somatosensory cortex may be a treatment target for certain mental health problems, as well as for preventive measures. Some researchers have even suggested neuromodulation of the somatosensory cortex with transcranial magnetic stimulation or deep brain stimulation.

While training in mindfulness-based interventions and dance movement therapy, it became clear that a well-functioning and developed somatosensory cortex may help people experience the world and themselves more deeply. (Shutterstock)

However, before we decide to use an invasive technology, we may want to consider mindfulness-based interventions, dance movement therapy or other body-centred

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2.



Looking Ahead to 2026: We Want Your Ideas!

We are starting to plan programming and trainings for 2026 and we’d love your input!

Is there a topic, training, or type of support you’d like to see offered through the EAP/OD? Let us know by emailing your ideas to eap@cityofmadison.com by October 1st.

Your feedback helps shape programming that supports the well-being of all City employees!

Mindfully enjoy fall and all the weather changes that are so characteristically Wisconsin. Thank you for reading, we hope that you find something in our newsletter that is beneficial for you. As always, we are here for you! To contact us either call our office at 608-266-6561 or email us at eap@cityofmadison.com

In this edition of the newsletter, you will find:

- How mindfulness and dance can stimulate a part of the brain that can improve mental health
- Mindfulness tips for hard conversations
- Getting beyond answers like fine and nothing: 5 simple ways to spark real talk with kids
- Fall coloring activity
- Upcoming training
- Wisconsin Help numbers



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~ The EAP Team

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1.

approaches to psychotherapy. These methods use the entire body to enhance sensory, breath and movement awareness. Those factors can enhance overall self-awareness, which contributes to improvement of mental health through potential reorganization of the somatosensory cortex.

Functional significance of the somatosensory cortex

One of the amazing qualities of the somatosensory cortex is its pronounced plasticity — the ability to reorganize and enlarge with practice (or atrophy without practice). This plasticity is critical when we consider mindfulness-based interventions and dance movement therapy because, as mentioned above, through working directly with the body sensations and movement, we can modify the somatosensory cortex.

Another important aspect is its numerous connections with other areas of the brain. In other words, the somatosensory cortex has a power to affect other brain regions, which in turn affect other regions, and so on. The brain is heavily interconnected and none of its parts acts in isolation.

The somatosensory cortex receives information from the entire body, such that the left part of the cortex processes information from the right side of the body and vice versa. However, the proportion of the cortex devoted to a particular part of the body depends on its functional importance rather than its physical size.

For example, a large proportion of the somatosensory cortex is devoted to our hands, and so just moving and feeling our hands might be an interesting option for dance therapy for those with restricted mobility.

The somatosensory cortex mediates exteroception (touch, pressure, temperature, pain, etc.), proprioception (postural and movement information) and interoception (sensations inside the body, often related to the physiological body states, such as hunger and thirst), although its role in the interoceptive awareness is only partial.

The somatosensory cortex and emotion

A scent, a song or an image can suddenly bring a deeply buried and forgotten event to mind. Similarly, feeling a texture — like cashmere — against our skin, or moving our body in a certain way (such as doing a backbend, or rocking back and forth) can do the same and more. It can bring repressed memories to the surface, provoke emotional reactions, and create state shifts. This is one of the superpowers of mindfulness-based interventions and dance movement therapy.

This response is mediated via the somatosensory cortex, just like emotional and cognitive reactions to a song are mediated via the auditory cortex, and reactions to scents are mediated via the olfactory cortex. Nevertheless, if the information stopped flowing

at a purely sensory level (what we feel, hear, see, taste and smell), then a significant portion of the emotional and cognitive consequences would be lost.

Some evidence comes from studies of meditation and mindfulness-based interventions, which often involve the practice of body scans and/or returning to bodily sensations as anchors in meditation. (Shutterstock)

Dance/movement therapists and body-centered practitioners have known about this connection between posture/movement and emotion/cognition since the inception of the field. Neuroscientists have now delineated — still roughly — the implicated neural networks. For example, research shows a relationship between developing our sensory sensitivity and emotion regulation.

Some evidence comes from studies of meditation and mindfulness-based interventions, which often involve the practice of body scans (paying attention to parts of the body and bodily sensations in a gradual sequence, for example from feet to head, and/or returning to bodily sensations as anchors in meditation).

Overall, the studies show that people who train in body scans and/or develop sensory awareness of the breath (feeling the breath travelling through the nostrils, throat, etc.) are less reactive and more resilient. This effect is mediated, at least partly, through the somatosensory cortex.

Clinical implications

Given the emerging role of the somatosensory cortex in emotion and cognitive processing, it is not surprising that alterations in the structure and function of this brain region have been found in several mental health problems, including depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

For example, reductions in the cortical thickness and the gray matter volume of the somatosensory cortex have been observed in individuals with major depressive disorder (especially those with early onset) and in the bipolar disorder. In schizophrenia, lower levels of activity in the somatosensory cortex have been observed, especially in unmedicated patients.

Activating the somatosensory cortex may help us connect to our bodies, develop our sensitivity, sensuality and capacity to feel pleasure. That is how moving mindfully, dancing consciously and meditating with the whole body may help people regulate their emotions and connect with themselves and the world more deeply and meaningfully.

LEADERSHIP *Matters*

Mindfulness Tips for Hard Conversations

Author **Gillian Florence Sanger**
Published on www.gottman.com

You can do more than “agree to disagree.” Learn how to communicate with shared humanity and boundaries in mind.

At the best of times, debates around the kitchen table can be uncomfortable. At election time, when political tensions feel to be at an all-time high, many want to avoid the difficult subjects altogether or cut ties after heated interactions about hot topics (online or otherwise). Can people communicate about these important and timely issues in more mindful, healthy ways? Is there a way to discuss polarizing topics in a less-than-polarizing manner?

Mindful communication, whether about politics or anything else, is not about having no opinion or never feeling uncomfortable. Discomfort is often a part of the process, and yet at the same time, mindful communication does not require that we engage in any and all discussions.

Communicating in more mindful ways about politics especially is simply about paying attention to how you relate to the other person in the exchange. It is simply an invitation to consciously consider:

What might I want to bring with me to the table?

How am I approaching this and is there a different way?

What nourishing things can I do when tensions run high?

Tips for Hard Conversations

Whether you engage in political debate online, at dinner, or somewhere in-between, there are a handful of practices and insights you can consider to maintain a sense of peace or at least to make peace possible. Consider the following during your next political debate or difficult conversation.

Remember that we share our humanity

Remaining mindful of our shared humanity is one of the most important insights that we can connect with when discussing difficult topics. It is something that is easy to forget, but at the end of the day, we all long for the same things: to be loved, to be safe, and for our loved ones to be loved and safe. When you are mindful of shared humanity, you are more likely to be curious about why another person holds the views that they do rather than jump to judgments or condemnation. If you are in the midst of a heated debate, take an inward pause by tuning into the heart space and reconnecting with the capacity for compassion despite our differences.

Consider what motivates views and beliefs

Where you grew up, the types of parents you had, and the obstacles and opportunities you encountered along your life journey all influence the views and beliefs you hold. It's easy to forget this, mistaking your own perspective to be universal and your personal experiences to be indicative of an absolute truth. Due to life's complexity, this isn't the case. As you become more curious about what makes others think the way they do, consider the journey and experiences that have led someone to hold differing views to our own.

Take breathing breaks

Breathing breaks can happen wherever you are. If you are seated around the table, you might take a quiet moment to soften your belly and notice your breath's flow. Take a longer pause by heading to the bathroom. If you are communicating online and the conversation is heated, remember that you don't need to respond right away and by taking a longer pause before getting back to the keyboard, you allow time for strong emotions to settle and greater clarity and compassion to enter through your responses.

Take the debate offline

Talking about politics online leaves plenty of room for misinterpretation, little room for nuance, and risks forgetting that shared humanity. If you find yourself in a heated debate with someone you know and who you can trust, consider proposing a conversation over the phone or in-person instead. This can help you to remember that you aren't debating with a computer. You are talking to a human with feelings, emotions, and needs not so unlike your own.

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Create and uphold healthy conversational boundaries

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, it is not possible to converse about politics in a healthy, respectful way. Regardless of what you bring to the table, you cannot control the way that another shows up. If, for instance, the person you are speaking with cannot recognize the shared humanity of all and is not bringing their own compassion and curiosity to the conversation, consider your boundaries. What are your limits in conversation? How will you create a healthy boundary for yourself? There is no conversation that you are obliged to engage in, and so if a conversation does not hold mutual respect and a willingness to listen, you might mindfully choose to step away from the discussion entirely.

Listen with a yearning to understand

Lastly, the quality of listening skills is crucial when in the midst of polarizing discussions. It's not uncommon to blame the other person for not listening, yet not practice mindful listening yourself. When someone else is sharing their views, opinions, and feelings, see if you can pick up what it is they care about beneath surface appearances. What universal human need are they wanting to protect? What is it that they care about? The better you are able to offer your full attention to another, the more likely they will try to do the same for you in return.

As you find yourself in the midst of political conversation over the coming weeks, months, and years, remember that it isn't always smooth sailing, you won't always see eye-to-eye, and you might sometimes be misunderstood. Sometimes, your best move will be to step away from a discussion altogether. At other times, you might lean in, opening your heart, and together seeing where you might reconnect at a level deeper than political perspective.

Focus on what you yourself can bring to the conversation when you choose to engage. Where there is openness, curiosity, and compassion, new possibilities for relating might just blossom overtime. While it might be difficult to see eye-to-eye on political issues, you might just find that at the same time, it is possible to see heart-to-heart.

About the Author

Gillian Florence Sanger is a yoga and meditation teacher, writer, and poet. She writes primarily about mindfulness, spirituality, and self-development, and is a contributing writer for **MindfunessExercises.com**.





IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Getting beyond answers like ‘fine’ and ‘nothing’: 5 simple ways to spark real talk with kids

Author **Shelbie Witte**, Dean, College of Education and Human Development, University of North Dakota

Posted on www.theconversation.com

Each afternoon, a familiar conversation unfolds in many households.

“How was school today?”

“Fine.”

“What did you learn?”

“Nothing.”

In the classroom, teachers also struggle with stonewalling students. They’ll pose a question, only to be met with blank stares. They might incorporate “wait time” to give students a moment to gather their thoughts. But even then, their students offer brief or vague responses. Students, meanwhile, often get nervous about asking for clarification or diving deeper into a topic in front of their peers.

This can have consequences. Children who hesitate to ask or answer questions risk becoming adults with the same habits. Adults who avoid asking questions or avoid admitting what they don’t know can become willfully ignorant: They skirt the consequences of their lack of knowledge and the impact it can have on themselves and others.

With the start of school just around the corner, it’s an important time to create opportunities for children to stretch their conversational and curiosity muscles.

I’m an educator, researcher and parent who studies adolescent education and teacher preparation.

Here are five strategies parents and caregivers can use with children to make them better conversationalists and cultivate curiosity. The suggestions might appear straightforward. But they outline an easy way to avoid being iced out with “yes” or “no” answers.

1. Be creative with your questions

Part of the issue arises from asking questions that can be batted away with a one-word response.

Children want to know whether the adults in their lives are genuinely interested in their day. Asking the same, rote questions each day says otherwise.

Try shaking things up and ask more specific, open-ended questions instead: “What was the most interesting thing you did today?”

“If you could turn back time and change how you handled something at school today, what would it be?”

“If you were in charge of your class tomorrow, what would you teach?”

2. Engage with their curiosity

As important as it is for adults to ask questions that convey genuine interest, it’s just as valuable to engage with questions kids ask.

Young children ask “why” so often that adults can find themselves falling back on a classic retort: “Because I said so!”

When a “why” gets shut down, a child’s curiosity and wonder are also snuffed out. Instead, try acknowledging and engaging with this curiosity: “Good question. Here’s my thinking ...” or “Let’s talk about why this is important ...”

At the same time, you can also model other ways to ask questions: “I’ve wondered that too. Do you think it’s because ...?”

3. Think out loud

When adults verbalize their thinking out loud, they’re showing children how their brains work and how problems get solved.

“Do you ever wonder why cats purr?”

“Do you think I can mix the dry and wet ingredients for the cake at the same time?”

“I noticed the flags were at half-staff today in front of your school. Could you ask someone to find out why?”

Doing so encourages children to listen to their inner voice – and to trust the questions that emerge, no matter how silly they might seem.

4. Be a seeker

Admitting you don’t know the answer to something can be uncomfortable, especially because children often expect their parents to know everything. But simply responding “I don’t know” to a question isn’t enough. It’s important to show children how to find answers, whether it’s through assembly manuals, recipes or a nutrition label.

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If you come across a confusing passage in a book, you can show kids how to use the tools contained within the book: a glossary, table of contents or index.

Then there are the questions that don't have a single, simple answer. You can explain how more than one internet search might be necessary and it's probably not a great idea to simply accept the first answer that pops up.

By showing children that it's OK to not know all the answers, you give them the confidence to ask more questions.

5. What I heard you say was ...

Children can have a hard time articulating what they're curious or confused about.

For this reason, active listening is a critical behavior to model. If you're confused about what you're hearing, rather than saying something like, "I don't get what you're saying," you could repeat what you heard, and then ask, "Is that what you're saying?"

If they give a meandering answer to your question – even if they go off topic – you can highlight what stood out to you to show that you were really listening: "What I really appreciated about your answer to my question was ..."

Avoid the temptation to multitask when children approach you with questions. If you put your phone away, make eye contact and ask follow-up questions, kids will be more willing to keep asking questions in the future.

Children are born with a natural wonder and enthusiasm for learning. As Carl Sagan said, "The complex and subtle problems we face can only have complex and subtle solutions and we need people able to think complex and subtle thoughts. I believe a great many children have that capability if only they are encouraged."

Prodding children to tap into their own curiosity while respecting their needs, limitations and fears can have a powerful impact on their ability to ask and answer questions about the world, big and small – or, at the very least, give them the confidence to try.



Upcoming Trainings

Offered through EAP/OD

November 6, 2025: The Connected Couple: Fostering a Healthy Relationship

Offered through AllOne Health

We're excited to share an offering of a free webinar where attendees can earn **SHRM HR credits!** Our upcoming session, "**Leading Through Change, Stages, and Navigation**," led by Jessi Zielinski, LMSW, SAP, will be held on September 17th.

In today's dynamic organizational landscape, change is not just inevitable—it's essential. Leaders who can effectively guide their teams through transitions are pivotal to sustaining growth and fostering resilience. This training equips leaders with the tools and insights to understand the emotional and practical dimensions of change, ensuring they can lead with confidence and clarity.

Key Takeaways:

- Understand the key stages of organizational and personal change
- Learn strategies to support employees through uncertainty
- Build confidence as a leader navigating transitions
- Strengthen organizational resilience and adaptability

Join AllOne Health's "**Leading Through Change, Stages, and Navigation**"

September 17th, 2025

9:00 – 10:00a.m. EDT

Earn SHRM HR Credits!

This session is pre-approved for **1 SHRM credit**, following the completion of the full webinar.

We encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity to enhance your strategic skills and earn professional development credits. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions.

Looking forward to seeing you there!

[Click here to register for this webinar](#)



In Wisconsin, Help is 3 Numbers Away



211 maintains a comprehensive database of community resources and provides information and referrals for essential needs like:

- Food
- Housing and Shelter
- Utility Assistance
- Healthcare Services
- Government Services

211 also can connect people with information and referrals for:

- Substance Use / Mental Health Resources
- Transportation
- Legal Services
- Counseling and Support Groups
- Disaster Aftercare

988 provides support when a person, or someone they know, is experiencing a crisis:

- Thoughts of Suicide
- Mental Health Crisis
- Substance Use Crisis
- Emotional Distress

Referrals as needed, utilizing 211 WI's Resource Database

911 provides first responder dispatch for:

- Medical Emergency
- Fire
- Reporting a Crime
- Disaster Response
- Life Threatening Situation



*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

**You can reach any of us by calling the
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To learn more about your external EAP services, please contact AllOne Health at 1-800-236-7905 or sign in to **AllOne Health member portal** (for instructions on how to create your account, please visit the **EAP website**).