

Couples Therapy: Healing Relationships Through Somatic Work

Two people sit on the couch. One partner is leaning forward, voice sharp, words coming fast. The other has gone quiet, eyes lowered, shoulders pulled back as if bracing for impact. The content of the conflict may sound familiar: money, sex, parenting, trust. But the deeper story is unfolding in breath, gaze, muscle tension, pacing, and distance. Many therapists have been in this moment, sensing that the body is speaking as loudly as the words, yet not always knowing how to work with it skillfully.

This article is educational and not a substitute for therapy or medical care.

In couples work, moments like this are often a turning point. If we stay only with the narrative, the session can circle around familiar positions. If we begin to track the nervous systems in the room, something different becomes possible. Hakomi and other somatic approaches offer a way to slow the pattern down enough that both partners can begin to notice what is happening inside and between them, right now, in the living field of the relationship.^[1]

The room is full of nervous systems

Couples therapy can be intense because we are not working with one regulated or dysregulated person at a time. We are sitting with two nervous systems affecting each other moment by moment. A glance, a sigh, a slight turn away, these can all register as threat, longing, protest, or collapse in an instant.

This is one reason that talk alone often reaches its limit. A couple may understand their cycle intellectually and still be unable to interrupt it in real time. The Hakomi Institute describes mindfulness in couples therapy as a way to help partners move from adversarial interactions to more vulnerable, collaborative contact, while therapists track subtle messages and use present-moment experience to shift entrenched patterns.^[1]

Psychobiological approaches to couples therapy make a similar point. PACT, for example, is organized around the idea that partners need to understand and respond to each other's

nervous systems, not only each other's words. In this frame, co-regulation is not a side note. It is central to how safety, repair, and secure functioning are built in a relationship.^{[2][3]}

What the body adds to the couple's work

Somatic couples therapy focuses on what is happening in the present moment: in the body, in contact, and in the therapeutic relationship. It asks questions like: “What happens in your chest when your partner looks away?” “What do you notice in your jaw right before you interrupt?” “Can you feel your feet while you say that difficult thing?”

This matters because conflict is often not driven by content alone. It is driven by the state. When one partner goes into a fight, another may move toward freeze or flight. Someone who appears avoidant may actually be overwhelmed. Someone who seems demanding may be desperately trying to maintain a connection. The body helps us see the pattern underneath the strategy or story.^{[3][1]}

Hakomi is particularly useful here because it is mindfulness-centered and experiential. The method emphasizes body awareness, compassionate presence, and the exploration of unconscious patterns through present-moment experience. That orientation can support couples in noticing not only what they believe about each other, but also how those beliefs live in posture, breath, voice, and action tendencies.^[1]

If you feel called to bring this depth of somatic awareness into your couple's work, [LINK: ISITTA Trauma Training page] and [LINK: Hakomi-Informed Somatic Coaching / Professional Learning Path page] offer pathways for building the clinical presence, tracking skills, and trauma-informed grounding this work asks of us.

Attachment lives in posture and pace

Attachment dynamics are not just cognitive templates in the mind. They are embodied patterns. In the therapy room, anxious attachment may show up as leaning in, speaking quickly, scanning the partner's face for signs of rupture, or feeling panic in the belly when contact feels uncertain. Avoidant adaptations may look like a flattened tone, a tightened chest,

a slight turn away, delayed responses, or an impulse to move away from emotional intensity by becoming abstract or overly reasonable.

Disorganized patterns can feel even more confusing because they often carry simultaneous impulses: reach and recoil, longing and fear, activation and collapse. One partner may want closeness and then tense the body the moment it arrives. Another may protest disconnection and then lose the capacity to stay present once the other person truly turns toward them.

A somatic lens helps the therapist track these patterns without pathologizing them as character flaws. We begin to see intelligent survival responses rather than bad behavior. The central question shifts from “What is wrong with this person?” to “What happens in this person’s system when connection feels uncertain, too much, or not enough?” That shift alone can soften blame and open curiosity.

A small pause can change everything

Consider a composite couple like this: one partner says, “You never really show up for me.” The other crosses their arms, looks toward the floor, and says, “Nothing I do is ever enough.” Within seconds, the first partner gets louder, the second goes more distant, and both are certain they are being abandoned.

In a talk-only frame, we might spend much of the hour analyzing the argument. In a somatic frame, the work is to slow the sequence down. I might ask the accusing partner to pause and notice what is happening in the body right before the words get louder. Perhaps there is heat in the face, tightness in the throat, and a young terror of not mattering. I might ask the withdrawn partner to notice what happens right before the eyes drop. Perhaps there is pressure in the chest and a familiar collapse that says, “I will fail here, so I should disappear.”

Once those states are named and tracked, the interaction is no longer only content. It becomes workable. One partner may place a hand on the heart and feel the urgency without escalating. The other may orient to the room, feel their feet, lift their gaze for three seconds longer than usual, and discover that staying is possible. The argument does not vanish, yet the nervous systems begin to do something new.

The Hakomi training materials on couples' work emphasize present-moment mindfulness, tracking somatic signals, identifying resources, and designing clinical experiments that go to the heart of the issue. That is exactly what can transform a repetitive conflict into an experience of contact and discovery.^[1]

Practices you can use in session

Here are a few simple interventions that can support body-based couples counseling:

- **Track before interpretation.** Before asking partners what they think, ask what they notice in their bodies. Sensation, posture, temperature, breath, impulse, and eye contact often reveal the state beneath the story.
- **Use a mindful pause.** When activation rises, invite 10 to 20 seconds of silence. Ask each partner to notice one thing happening inside and one thing they see in the room. This can widen the window of tolerance enough for reflection to return.
- **Orient to safety.** Have each partner look around, feel the support of the chair, or sense their feet on the ground before continuing a charged exchange. Orientation can help reduce threat activation and bring more of the social engagement system online.
- **Experiment with distance and contact.** Ask a partner to lean back two inches, soften the jaw, turn slightly toward the other, or speak more slowly. Small shifts in posture and pacing can reveal a great deal about relational expectations and protective habits.
- **Name co-regulation directly.** Help partners notice how one regulated breath, a softened gaze, or a slower tone changes the field between them. Many couples have never been taught to track regulation as a shared process.

A useful micro-practice for practitioners is this: before bringing attention back to the couple, take one breath and sense your own seat, spine, jaw, and belly. Then ask yourself, "Am I pacing this session from urgency, or from contact?" That brief check can meaningfully change your next intervention.

Your body is part of the method

Couples' work can be deeply humbling. Therapists often feel pulled to rescue, align, explain, interpret, or speed things up when the room gets hot and fast. This is exactly why embodied presence matters so much. The therapist's nervous system is part of the relational field, and partners are often reading it with great sensitivity.

Embodysense's Hakomi-Informed Somatic Coaching training highlights loving presence, psychological safety, mindfulness, somatic tracking, contacting the present moment, applied mindfulness, and trauma-informed support for nervous system regulation as core learning outcomes. Those capacities are just as relevant for therapists and healing professionals working with relational dynamics, because the quality of the practitioner's presence shapes what the couple can tolerate and integrate.^[4]

In practice, this means pacing carefully, tracking both people without abandoning either, and staying close to resources as deeper material emerges. Sometimes the most skillful intervention is not a brilliant insight. It is a slower voice, a more grounded body, and a willingness to stay with the moment long enough for something implicit to become known.

Relational trauma needs gentleness

Relationships often activate much older wounds. A partner's criticism may touch a shame that began in childhood. A delayed text may stir panic shaped by earlier inconsistency or loss. Sexual distance may awaken layers of grief, helplessness, or developmental trauma that neither partner fully understands yet.

Somatic work may support couples in tending to these places with greater care because it does not require immediate explanation or catharsis from either partner. It often helps practitioners titrate experience, notice early signs of overwhelm, and work within a tolerable range of activation. That can reduce the risk of reenacting trauma in the session while still allowing meaningful contact with what hurts.^{[5][4]}

This is where I find professional honesty essential. Couples' work is hard. It can move quickly from tenderness to defense, from longing to accusation, from repair to shut down. Somatic skills do not remove that difficulty or make a couple's work simple. They do make it more

possible to stay oriented, to recognize what is happening sooner, and to support partners in building new experiences of safety over time.

Hakomi describes its method as mindfulness-centered and body-based, with an emphasis on compassionate presence and experiential self-discovery. Embodwise's trauma learning path also points toward ISITTA as an approach for working with trauma through key tools and an experiential, body-based framework. For practitioners supporting couples with attachment injuries, developmental trauma, or chronic dysregulation, the integration of mindfulness, somatic awareness, and trauma-informed pacing can be deeply valuable.^{[6][4][1]}

What becomes possible between two people

When couples begin to listen through the body, they often start to hear something different. Under the criticism, there may be fear. Under the withdrawal, there may be shame. Under the freeze, there may be a very old expectation that connection is dangerous or unreliable. Once these states are brought into awareness with enough support, partners may respond to each other with more precision and less blame in the moment.

This work is not about making every conversation calm. It is about helping two people recognize the dance they are in, sense what happens inside it, and find moments of choice where there used to be only reaction. Many therapists find that once the body is included, couples can access a more honest, vulnerable, and embodied form of repair.^{[2][1]}

For practitioners, that is part of the quiet beauty of somatic couples' therapy. We are not trying to force a better script onto the relationship. We are helping to create conditions in which new relational experience can actually be felt, practiced, and remembered in the nervous system.

Continue learning with Embodwise

If this way of working resonates, these are good next steps:

- [\[LINK: ISITTA Trauma Training page\]](#)
- [\[LINK: Hakomi-Informed Somatic Coaching / Professional Learning Path page\]](#)

- [LINK: Somatic Therapy overview / category page]
- [LINK: Workshops and Trainings calendar]
- [LINK: Related blog — Somatic Therapy: How It Works]
- [LINK: Related blog — Best Practices for Trauma Transformation]

Sources

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4. <https://hakomiinstitute.com/hakomievent/mindfulness-centered-couples-therapy-how-to-use-mindfulness-and-the-body-with-couples/>
5. <https://www.usabp.org/hakomi-institute.html>
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