

‘There’s no book I know of that will have such a profound effect on your body’ **Farrah Storr**, Head Of Writer Partnerships, Substack UK and Europe, Former Editor of *Elle* UK and *Cosmopolitan*

‘A chance to go deep into Nahid’s teaching is a blissfully restorative experience, and a true investment in the wellbeing of your nervous system . . . So many of us are living with a frazzled nervous system, which we assume is an inevitability of modern life, but Nahid shows us a different way. *Soothe* is a toolkit to reacquaint your body with your mind, and help you feel calm and restored’

**Rosamund Dean**, Contributing Editor, *Grazia*

‘Having been helped through burnout by Nahid, this book is a calm, non-woo-woo, essential read for anyone who is simply juggling too many of life’s balls’ **Marianne Jones**, Writer and Podcaster, Former Editor of *Telegraph Magazine*, *Stella* & *Grazia*

‘I’m lucky enough to know and work with Nahid personally and her lessons in seemingly small movements and breath work have had a huge positive impact on me; I still use her techniques nightly to lull me to sleep and always look to her in times of heightened anxiety. You really can judge this book by its cover as *Soothe* does exactly what it says it does. It’s the ultimate manual for calming a stressed-out nervous system and bringing renewed awareness to our bodies and minds amidst today’s culture of burnout and disconnection’ **Lucy Williams**, Digital Content Creator

‘Part physiology lesson, part practical workshop, part relatable memoir . . . *Soothe* is a charming, jargon-free guide to understanding your body and finding a calmer way to be. I can literally hear Nahid’s grounding voice as I turn each page’ **Susan Riley, Head of Brand, *Stylist***

‘I would sincerely recommend seeking her out if things have been getting on top of you, [Nahid] is a wizard at unwinding and relaxing’ **Sara Pascoe, Actor and Comedian**

‘Better than a Swiss clinic, faster than fasting. The Soothe Method truly works. It should be on prescription for all of us. A book for our times . . . Feeling fragmented? The Soothe Method blends holistic wisdom with cutting edge longevity science to bring you back to balance’ **Rebecca Newman, Contributing Editor, *HTSI, Financial Times***

‘De Belgeonne isn’t the woo-woo warrior I’d expected – she is grounded and straight-talking, with a deep, authoritative voice’ **Roisin Kelly, *Sunday Times***

‘In a few sessions, she deepened my knowledge and awareness of my body and its movements . . . I always feel blissful after a class with Nahid’ **Gemma Arterton, Actor**

**soothe**

# soothe

The book your  
nervous system  
has been longing for

Nahid de Belgeonne



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PRESS

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For Rudy de Belgeonne,  
the one who soothes my soul

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## Introduction

Knowledge comes from our senses and if we extend our senses then we will consequently extend our knowledge.

Neil Harbisson, 'Extraordinary senses: the cyborg who hears in colour', *Outlook* podcast

Soothe: To gently calm, reduce pain or discomfort, relieve or ease.

I grew up in a house full of stress, unhappiness and worry. No one meant for that to happen, but it did. I learned to suppress my true feelings because they were inconvenient, both to me and to others, who were tightly bound to their own suffering. For as long as I can remember, my feelings were overwhelming because I had no place to put them.

My parents came to the UK in the 1960s from Bangladesh and the experience was, by all accounts, exciting, bold and courageous, but also cold, unknown, isolating and sometimes menacing. They had the pressures of starting a family in a different country and culture, away from their extended community and without the safety net of that support, as well as holding down demanding jobs. I was born and brought up in multicultural London, which meant

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there was easy social mixing between different people; but growing up in a volatile house with strict rules, angry words and a bias towards men meant that my understanding of family life was combative and unhappy. There was always tension hanging in the air. My father left us to work abroad for a while and it was decided it would be best for the children, and probably for my mother, that we stayed at school and went to visit him during the holidays. That abandonment was never really spoken about. As often happens when you have one parent who carries the weight of bringing up the family, you tend not to talk about the things that are bothering you, because you don't want to add to their suffering. When your caregivers haven't learned how to soothe or comfort themselves, they can't pass on to you these valuable skills.

On a purely sensory level, I understood that movement helped to dissipate my feelings. I loved sports at school and I particularly enjoyed solo activities over team ones, to better quieten my mind. When I was physically engaged, I could shift my focus from my noisy head to the sensations of my body. The feelings of my body moving were so fully absorbing that I forgot to worry about all the things that might happen one day. I started running when I wanted to leave home; kickboxing when I wanted to leave my first husband; yoga when I left a highly paid but stressful job, with no plans. I also smoked weed to dampen my anxiety, because the effects of movement didn't last beyond the afterglow of the activity itself. I was looking for anything that would enable me to stop thinking, because my thoughts caused me mental anguish. I held two beliefs that only now, in hindsight, do I recognise: I believed that my feelings made me

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weak, and that resting would thwart my forward momentum. These beliefs formed me in adulthood.

On the outside, I appeared successful and easy-going. On the inside, everything that I achieved came at a cost to my mental and physical health. I routinely pushed myself through tiredness and illness. Over the years I suffered from chronic anxiety, bouts of panic, neuralgia and urticaria, and I almost died from a gangrenous appendix because I didn't pay attention to the signals from my body.

I knew I had to change the way I approached life. Youth can absorb many things, but as you get older and have more responsibilities, your frenetic lifestyle catches up with you. You feel overwhelmed by the years of overextending in all directions and realise that operating at this level is not only unsustainable, but also not much fun.

I owned and managed my own fitness studios in central London at the time and started to notice that I wasn't the only one feeling like this. I saw clients who – no matter how many yoga, Pilates or other fitness classes they attended – would quickly rebound to feeling stressed and at the edge of burnout.

I began to seek sustainable practices that went more deeply into nervous-system regulation, which influences how you experience life. And I aimed to do so without the tyranny of willpower or enforced positive thinking, which only serve to disconnect you, as they don't allow you to feel the full range of human emotions: love, anger, curiosity, spontaneity, lust, fear and grief. I studied and researched and then trialled my findings on myself and my clients over the years, and I honed and tweaked my approach to arrive at The Human Method: a radical relearning system that

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uses a combination of somatic movement, breathwork and restorative practices to harmonise the mind and body. The method was originally developed to help people with illness or injury-rehab and mobility issues. However, I noticed that there was also a need to help those who were experiencing chronic stress, burnout, anxiety and trauma. So I created The Soothe Programme, which is designed to help people regulate their nervous system and reduce the symptoms of these conditions.

My clients have had powerful results with The Soothe Programme, and I want to share my knowledge so that you can feel the benefits too.

### What is The Soothe Programme?

My practice is rooted in a somatic approach. ‘Somatic’ means relating to the body. Somatic movement uses motion to help people connect with their bodies and their emotions. It can be helpful for those who are dealing with pain, stress or anxiety.

The word ‘somatic’ comes from the Greek *soma*, which means ‘body’. Somatic movement therapy is based on the idea that the body and mind are not separate, but instead are interconnected. When we experience emotions, they can manifest in our bodies in the form of tension, pain or other physical symptoms. Somatic movement can help us to release these physical symptoms and reconnect with our bodies in a more mindful way.

In the years since first developing and practising The Soothe Programme to focus on nervous-system regulation I have been able to self-regulate my emotions in a more

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compassionate way, so that I can deal with stresses as they arise instead of storing habitual patterns in my body, which gave me intense emotions until they became unbearable. I am now more honest in my relationships and able to talk about difficult matters without blowing things apart. I sleep better, I no longer suffer from chronic anxiety and I understand the importance of rest. For the first time in my life, I feel at peace with who I am and where I am. With this knowledge, I smoothly navigated the sale of my fitness studios, which I had been running for thirteen years; hitting the menopause; moving my specialist work to an online clinic; the Covid-19 pandemic and moving out of London to live by the sea.

This isn't to say that I don't worry about things or am not sad or despondent sometimes. While writing this book there have been far too many deaths of dear ones, illness, sadness, war in Ukraine and the Middle East, humanitarian crises around the world, the ever-growing climate crisis, an energy crisis and a cost-of-living crisis. I have learned to stop my rumination in its tracks, so that I am no longer paralysed with anxiety about what might come. In my own life and in those of my clients, I have found that allowing your thoughts to go round and round in your head or pushing down your emotions results in mental anguish. It also means that you don't live in an authentic way, embracing all aspects of what makes you who you are. I believe such inauthentic living stops you having meaningful relationships with yourself and others.

I have now learned to tend to myself when intense feelings occur and to metabolise my emotions out of my body. Once I have soothed myself, I am able to make decisions from a much calmer mind. I have learned to enjoy the

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*process* of living, so that I don't wait for that one day when all the things I want for my life will finally align. I now have easy in-body or embodied solutions, instead of seeking the next external fad in the hope that it will soothe me. I am better able to cultivate a more compassionate relationship with myself and with my life.

### How can The Soothe Programme help you?

Instead of looking after ourselves throughout our lives, we mainly tend to ourselves only when we are broken. We don't stop to ask, 'Why am I feeling anxious, sad or emotionally tired?' We don't stop to ask, 'Why do we all put up with our collective lack of ease?' We push through, with our bodies feeling tense and sore, our brains constantly over-stimulated. We might feel personally grateful for and content with our own circumstances, but at the same time we may feel hugely ill at ease with the bombardment of news about the worst of humanity. It lodges deep within our bodies, and slowly our ability to feel at peace is chipped away.

I have discovered that much of that sense of unease comes from our overworked nervous systems. Unprocessed emotions become stuck, causing us to live in a state of constant high alertness, or hyper-vigilance. You might feel extremely sensitive to your surroundings and yet push your feelings down, because you have been taught to ignore unpleasant sensations. Or you feel so confused by the conflicting messages out there that you don't trust your feelings. You can't afford to feel overwhelmed, for there is never enough time to tend to yourself, so you simply say, 'I can't think about that right now', or 'I'll deal with this at the end of the day', and

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you get on with it. You hope that sleep will reboot your tired mind, but there is so much to process at the end of the day that you can't quite settle into peaceful slumber. For some people, alertness turns into apathy and an increasing lack of enthusiasm, with the spark no longer burning bright.

*Soothe* will teach you how to listen to your body's signals so that you will be able to metabolise your emotions and live with more energy, enthusiasm and joy. Our dominant culture teaches us that *the mind rules the body*, and while I understood this conceptually, I now embody this understanding. Everything you think is dictated by what you feel and by your life experiences. I don't believe it is possible to *think* yourself out of a *feeling* state. You can contextualise and rationalise whatever has happened to you, but to change behaviour in the long term you need to engage your mind and body or, as I prefer to call it, your 'whole self'.

Using the somatic principles of The Soothe Programme, I will walk you through how your body and mind work together, provide lessons to help you connect the two and introduce you to micro-practices to incorporate into your day. You will learn to *soothe* with your body, body sensing, the breath, touch, movement, rest, nourishment and connection; the first part of the book will give you the knowledge to fully understand your nervous system and its needs.

Once you know the *what*, the *how* and the *why*, you will have the ability to cultivate new experiences that will soothe your nervous system. You will be able to let go of habits that you no longer need and, using the daily lessons in the second part of the book, be able to move through life processing stresses as they come, to avoid storing them in your body; and you will live with awareness and an integrated

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body and mind. The case studies included in *Soothe* will help to demonstrate how this method has worked for my clients, and will show how it can be applied to anyone. In the interest of preserving privacy, all identities have been anonymised, but I hope you'll be able to see yourself in some of the case studies and know that you can find a way to healing and balance, too.

*Soothe* goes back to the basics of how to be human. You perceive yourself and the world around you through your whole body's responses. Your body is continually negotiating its relationship to gravity, always in motion, as you subconsciously try to find your balance and equilibrium. The whole body is a web of interconnections and rhythms, from the electrical frequency of brainwaves to the flow of blood, the pulsing of cells, the chemical responses of hormones, the release of synovial fluid in the joints and the slow movement of lymph as it carries waste out of the body. Moving the body, and tending to it on a regular basis, will enable you to function in an optimum way. And as you embark on a new chapter of normality where you are more conscious of your health and well-being than ever before, what could be a more exciting prospect than that?

Time and again, I see how teaching people to soothe themselves transforms lives. Now I want to help readers understand why learning to self-soothe will be the most empowering practice you will encounter.

Let us begin.

*Part I*

# Soothe

# 1

## Your Body

We've moved from wisdom to knowledge, and now  
we're moving from knowledge to information,  
and that information is so partial – that we're  
creating incomplete human beings.

Vandana Shiva, Indian activist<sup>1</sup>

Many years ago, before I taught clients, I used to practise hot yoga. Once, in a ninety-minute class, I experienced a transformative moment, but not in the way people usually associate with yoga. We were about halfway through the class, about to start the standing-pose section. I was tired, because being in a hot room for so long *is* tiring: that challenge is precisely why hot yoga appeals to its audience, including me at that time. This form of yoga is a test of endurance, which chimes well with the work-hard city-living culture. At the time I was in a job that was well paid but gave me no purpose. I would turn up for work each day but felt that I produced nothing of value. My marriage had run its course and I had to instigate a difficult conversation about going our separate ways. I didn't like to be still, because it forced me to think about the direction of my life and that caused me too much anxiety. So

here I was, in a hot-yoga class, trying to distract myself from my ongoing mental turmoil.

The instructions were centred on doing more of everything: stretch more, lock out your joints, expand more, actively contract a muscle and breathe more fully. The instructor told us to move into tree. She gave us step-by-step instructions: stand on one leg, pick the other leg up, bend at the knee, and press the foot into the side of the standing leg. Push your bent knee out. It looks as if your standing leg is a tree trunk; this leg supports your weight. Then pull up your quads. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘bend the supporting leg and bring your fingertips to the floor.’ I was unconvinced of this, but my inner dialogue was saying, ‘It’s okay. She is the teacher; she is trained in yoga and anatomy. She knows what I am capable of, because she is certified.’

I came up onto the ball of my foot on my standing leg, as instructed; a small part of my foot supported my entire weight. I bent this knee and started to crouch down. I realised there had been no mention of my other knee – the one bent and externally rotated out from the hip. What did I do with it? Pushing was the last instruction, so I did that. I finally breathed when I almost fell to the ground and my fingers touched down. Somehow I did it; the ordeal was over. But the teacher was standing next to me. ‘Now come up, the same way you went down,’ she said.

I didn’t know how to do this, but I attempted to, because the teacher had told me to do so. I started to unbend the supporting leg. I came back up on the ball of the foot – every part of me was telling me not to do this; the other knee was pressed out and my pelvis felt like it was splitting apart. Then my knee let out an audible ripping sound, as if I had

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torn something underneath the kneecap. I let out a silent shriek; after all, I didn't want to embarrass myself in class. I put both feet on the ground and looked at my teacher. I was cross at her, and I was cross at myself. She could see that I was angry and started to walk backwards, away from me. I hobbled out of the class, feeling like a yoga failure, but I was also confused as to why I had let a stranger convince me to practise something that I sensed was not going to turn out well. Why did I relinquish my own responsibility for my body to someone else?

This scenario is not particular to yoga; but in this class and in many other fitness activities that I used to take part in, I would check out of my mind and relinquish responsibility for my body to the teacher. In that particular case, I ignored the warning signals that my knee was sending me. I ignored the sensations in my ankle, which was unable to find its balance; the tension in my calf and thigh muscles – signs that my body was telling my brain this felt unsafe, and that they were bracing to mitigate the imminent damage. I was also ignoring the fact that I was holding my breath and feeling anxious, because I had exercised little skill in coming down to the floor. I wasn't going to be able to replicate this movement because I had no sensory-motor understanding of how I got here, so I didn't know how to come back up again. I felt under pressure because of the class's fast pace, and because my imagination convinced me that everyone was watching me. There was no time for me to figure all of this out. I did not practise with attention, but instead forced myself, even though my internal alarm bells were going wild.

Here's the problem with this approach: our thinking is

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based on the experiences that have shaped us. My experiences at that time were that I was a speed-freak: I worked long hours, sitting at a computer for most of the day, eyes glued to the screen, with the back of my neck sore, my shoulders hunched up to my ears and my head positioned forward of my spine. As I've said, I didn't love my job, but I put in extra effort to prove that I was eager and indispensable. I would go out almost every night to unwind from a day job that gave me no purpose. I regularly went to bed past midnight, and I drank a lot of coffee to keep me awake throughout the day. I forgot to eat, then would overeat in one sitting because I was famished. I drank more alcohol than I meant to and took recreational drugs (don't judge me, it was the 1990s) to help me dampen down my noisy head, because I could not bear the sadness of the world, the weight of my own sorrow and the feeling that I was wasting my life, living with no purpose. Most of the time I was stressed or anxious, and my exercise had an element of punishment about it. It was almost as if I wanted to beat the anxiety and sadness out of my body.

Back to the hot-yoga room: in hindsight, thinking 'I can push through this' was not an adequate strategy to stop me injuring myself. Paying attention to the communication between my body and my nervous system would have given me the necessary information to make better choices.

In this one yoga class I came face to face with the many ideas that I had about myself – ideas that I had formed over a lifetime:

- I should not trust the signals coming from my body, because they were primal.

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- My mind should override signals from my body because my mind was more sophisticated than my body.
- My body must be forced to achieve an outcome, at all costs.
- I was wrong for not being agile.
- I was rubbish at everything.
- I should obey my teacher because she had more knowledge than I did.
- I didn't want to look foolish in front of other people.
- I didn't want to have a confrontation in a public class, with a teacher who meant well.
- I still felt stressed and anxious.

A yoga class that I thought would teach me to reduce my stress levels instead tripped me into a vortex of negative thoughts that made me sharply confront many beliefs I held about myself: opinions are formed by my experiences in the world, and these beliefs determine my actions and behaviour – signals from my body, be damned!

So how did being unable to come up from a yoga pose take me down this black hole? Our attitudes to our minds and bodies so often treat them as two entirely separate entities, and we feel we must prioritise one over the other. The harmony between the two is often unknown to us, and this leads to dissociation and feeling ill at ease in the world. We find no refuge in ourselves, either in mind or in body, and therefore we have nowhere to call home. Movement is fundamental to who we are as human beings, because how we move is all about how we move through life. The class didn't help me to address the reasons for my stress and anxiety; it

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just displaced one action for another type of action, all in the service of keeping me busy.

We live in a culture where doing too much is encouraged: too much work, too much socialising, too many different activities, too much food, too much alcohol . . . and no time to process any of it. All in service of seeming to *live* more. Because our senses are so heightened with stimuli, we only seem to have two speeds: full-throttle or exhausted. And both speeds are socially approved states. How many people do you know who push their bodies to the max with work, and then again in their non-work lives, because being productive or busy is seen as the most valid way to spend our time?

Sometimes it seems that our physical practices support this culture, too: there is meditation to make employees more productive, spinning classes with a spiritual happy ending, yoga to sell yoga-wear, and other spiritual knick-knacks, in an attempt to give our lives meaning.

But what if ambition, speed and acquisition were not the only human goals? What if we also valued sensing, exploring, learning, the beauty of the process, resting, creating, pausing, resetting, repairing, calibrating or even compassionately *being*?

Back then, no matter what activity I did or how much I practised it, I was still stressed and anxious. Yoga, running and boxing made me feel exhilarated for a while, but soon I was back to the habits I had formed over the years, in order to enable me to function in my surrounding environment. This was why I was feeling stressed and anxious. I had conditioned myself to expect a physical class several times a week to transform my mind and body, but what I really

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needed to do was examine my approach to life – and what influenced that approach.

The experience in the hot-yoga class awakened in me a desire to find out how I could transform myself without having to adopt yet another ‘self-improvement’ regime. I had tried so many different regimes, and while I would typically manage to stick with one for a month or even a year, I kept reverting to my stressed and anxious habits because I was familiar with them. Each new regime would demand more effort, because my mind had to push my body. Then my body would rebel, and the cycle would repeat.

My seeking led me to learn more about the nervous system and how it works. I immersed myself in *embodied* or *somatic* movement and *interoception*. The latter is the sensory system that provides information about the internal condition of the body.

I found that modern living tends to overlook interoception – I certainly had done, until that fateful day in the yoga class. We are more likely to be aware of *exteroception*, which provides information about the external body, such as your environment and temperature; and of *proprioception* (the best known of the three terms), which provides information about the body’s force, pressure and location in space. This allows you balance, coordination and agility, so that you can move your limbs without looking at them.

Interoception, which is focused on internal feeling, is the missing ingredient that can enable you to feel wholly engaged and curious about how you do what you do. Without tapping into your interoceptive sense, you end up using your mind to force your body to push through, regardless of the fallout it causes. I often see clients who have a tendency to separate

their physical sensations from their internal experiences. This is a familiar way of being, in our fast-paced world, but it can also be a barrier to feeling truly connected to ourselves and our bodies.

### **The idea of the separate body and mind**

Where does this separation of the mind and body come from? There are many possible factors. We live in a culture that values the mind over the body. This can lead us to believe that our thoughts and emotions are more important than our physical sensations. If we have experienced trauma, we may have learned to dissociate from our bodies as a way of coping with the painful memories. If we experience chronic pain, we may learn to ignore our physical sensations as a way of handling the discomfort.

The philosophical concept of the split between body and mind originated with the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), who argued that the mind and body are two separate substances, with the mind being immaterial and the body being material.<sup>2</sup> This separation of the mind and body can have a profound impact on our lives. It can lead to us feeling disconnected from ourselves, from our bodies and from the world around us. It can also make it difficult to manage pain, stress and anxiety.

When I refer to the ‘mind’, I am using the modern definition by neuroscientist Dr Susan Greenfield, who describes it as ‘the personalisation of the brain through its unique dynamic configuration of your neural connections that are, in turn, driven by your unique experiences’.<sup>3</sup> In simple terms, the neural pathways of your brain are uniquely shaped by

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the life you have lived. Your idea of reality is based on your life experiences.

An example of this might be that you were brought up to be fearful of dogs. To you, dogs represent fear. You might have read or heard stories to reinforce your fear – for instance, a news story about a dog biting a child – or had a particularly savage neighbourhood dog that barked through the fence every time you walked past. Perhaps the culture you were brought up in deemed dogs to be dirty and feral, and believed that their savage nature had to be strictly controlled. Now, when you see a dog, you conjure up all this information that you have about them. Your body also reacts to this information: you will *feel* this fear of dogs in your body, even before you have had time to *think* about your response. Your heart races, your hands feel sweaty and you want to run away every time you see a dog, because your brain draws in response on the ideas that you have about all dogs. Your hands clench into fists, your throat gets tight and your breathing becomes shallow. These bodily signals inform your brain that you are in danger. This is an integrated view of the mind and body, which draws on all your experiences to allow a fast body response to get you out of danger.

In the above scenario I am describing myself. I was terrified of dogs, but over the years my friends acquired dogs, and I became better acquainted with them around the home and saw how loving, trusting and vulnerable they are. I encountered the cutest Boston terrier puppy, which was soft and friendly. I was totally smitten – so much so that this adorable encounter sowed the seeds for me now owning three Boston terriers, who enjoy an elevated status in my household. I

replaced my fearful experiences of dogs with new, more pleasurable experiences of being around them. This enabled me to change my ideas *about* dogs. Now, instead of being fearful, I am thrilled to be around them.

What this means is that your responses are based on your bodily sensations and your past experiences. Rather than your *mind* thinking about what to do and then informing your body, your body sends signals upwards. Assuming that you are not in danger, what I encourage you to do is pause and consider what your bodily signals actually mean. Going back to the dog scenario, I saw a small and vulnerable puppy with its big eyes and needy vulnerability, and my body softened and I smiled. This signalled that there was no danger from this instance of ‘dog’. When you can attune to your bodily responses and become curious about them, you can change your emotions and your thoughts and meet life in the moment.

We have the legacy of a mechanistic view of our *bodies* as separate entities from our *minds*. This separation of mind and body also has its roots in the study of human anatomy by dissection, originating in the eighteenth century. The scientific mapping of the body – such as identifying specific muscles connected to either end of a specific bone, or examining the gut purely for its function as an organ of digestion – is useful to visualise the different parts of the body. But this process has inadvertently encouraged us to view our bodies purely as machines of flesh and bone, ignoring the complete human condition. Many of us are confused or unaware of how our bodies *feel*, because the mind is given top billing and is always thought to have more awareness and insight than the body. This mechanistic outlook ignores

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interoception – the process by which our brain interprets signals from the body’s internal organs, muscles and tissues. These signals are then used to create a representation of the body’s state, which can be used to inform our thoughts, feelings and actions.

The mechanistic view of the ‘body’ doesn’t shed light on how the mind, nervous system, organs and muscles interact, and on the ongoing communication between all the bodily systems that make up the self, which includes body and mind. That we are a brain with a body is still the prevalent paradigm, although we now understand that we are more a body with a brain. Moving away from the mechanistic view of your body is an important step in understanding how to care deeply for yourself.

### Breath practice with mechanistic cueing

Try this breath practice as a step-by-step physical exercise:

- 1 Before you start, check in with how you are feeling now.
- 2 Come to sit or lie down. Let your eyes close.
- 3 Inhale through your nose for four counts and push your belly out.
- 4 Exhale through your nose for four counts by pulling your belly in.
- 5 Do this three times.
- 6 Now slowly open your eyes. How do you feel? A bit out of breath? Can you feel the effort you made through your belly muscles? Do you feel peaceful? Probably not.

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### Somatic breath practice

Now try this practice by paying attention to your bodily or interoceptive sensations:

- 1 Either lie on the floor or come up to sit, letting your eyes close. Bring your attention to your breathing as the air passes in and out through your nostrils.
- 2 Inhale gradually through the nose for a slow count of four – as you do so, let your belly rise.
- 3 Exhale gradually through the nose for a slow count of four and let your belly fall.
- 4 Continue with this pace of breathing but, as you practise, think about the pulsating movement of a jellyfish; make each breath softer, and imagine that your lungs are expanding into the ribs on the inhale and retracting back from the ribs on the exhale.
- 5 Do this a few times until you are ready to open your eyes. How do you feel now?

The first practice feels like you are performing it with your external body, with the habits that you have accumulated over the years. This version takes considerable effort and doesn't feel particularly pleasant. The result is that you probably still feel the same – there was no shift in your mental state.

The second practice feels softer and cultivates awareness of your internal body, with less muscular or external body effort. The chances are that you feel calmer and more connected afterwards.

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### Embracing interoception

As we have seen, interoception is the perception of the state of our internal body and it significantly influences many areas of our lives, such as self-regulation, mental health and social connection.

Our self-image – or the idea we have of ourselves – is made up of awareness of our physical body, feeling, senses, movement and thought.<sup>4</sup> When we listen to our internal signals, we have a better chance of achieving a nuanced awareness that enables us to discern, to differentiate, to be in a state of curiosity, explore creativity and embrace novelty. We can better interpret our feelings and make well-informed decisions in any situation. When we ignore these signals and push through regardless, there is no expansion of our ideas; we stay stuck in our beliefs about ourselves, which continue to have a limiting effect on our experience.

The traditional idea of a brain controlling a body to do its bidding is incorrect. In my experience, a more useful idea is to think about your body in a continual conversation with your brain, which is more accurate. The brain's job is to keep us alive by budgeting our resources.<sup>5</sup> It does this by receiving data-streams from the body, giving real-time information about how we are at any given time. This continual two-way dialogue allows the brain to adjust your levels of resources, such as glucose and water, to keep you functioning optimally in an ever-changing environment.

Your brain is constantly predicting what will happen to you next; it does this to maintain the stability of your body's internal environment, even when the external environment changes. Interoception – or your brain's representation of the sensations arising from your body – is the sensory result

of the brain's attempts to regulate your body's internal systems. It is central to everything, from thought to emotions to decision-making and our sense of self.

### **You feel what your brain believes<sup>6</sup>**

The neuroscientist David Marr first proposed in the 1970s the idea that our brains predict. Marr argued that the brain constantly tries to make sense of the world by predicting what will happen next. This idea was popularised by the neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett,<sup>7</sup> and her research is hugely important to my approach and will give you an understanding of how and why *Soothe* is so effective in changing your habits.

Your brain doesn't simply react to the world around you. It is constantly trying to anticipate what is going to happen, so that it can keep your budget of resources in balance. Your body sends signals to your brain that you do not consciously notice. These signals tell your brain about your internal state, such as your heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature.

In the nineteenth century scientists believed that the brain was a passive organ responding to environmental stimuli. This view of the brain as reactive to situations was supported by the observation that the brain's neurons fire in response to sensory input. However, in the early twentieth century scientists realised that the brain is not simply a passive organ. They discovered that the brain is constantly active, even when we are not experiencing any external stimuli. This activity is the brain's way of generating predictions about the world.

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As your brain sits in your skull with no access to the outside world, it creates maps of your body from the sense data coming in, and from your prior experiences. It predicts what is happening and uses your sense data to confirm or refine it. This model helps your brain predict what will happen next so that it can take steps to keep you safe and healthy.

Imagine this scenario: you are in your garden and want to move a big, heavy dark-grey pot to the other side of the path. This pot is similar in colour, size and shape to all the other pots in your garden. You have moved them around before and understand how heavy they are. You bend down and physically prepare to pick up the heavy pot. Still, as soon as your fingers connect to the pot, before you even attempt to pick it up, you become aware that it is made of plastic, which means it is much lighter than the ceramic pots with a similar appearance. Your senses and your brain's prediction are not in alignment; you have already started to move; you lift this pot with more force than you need and have to steady yourself. If you were moving more slowly and allowing all inputs to process, you might be able to adjust the effort that you use as you pick up the pot.

Your brain issues predictions of the weight of the pot, based on your prior experience of the different pots in your garden. Your sensory input informs your brain that this pot is much lighter and requires less effort to lift it off the floor. Now your brain must update its understanding of this lighter pot, and remap it in your brain's model of your body in the world. The next time you go to pick up a pot, you might tap it with your foot to see what it is made of, or visually recognise the lighter material it is created from.

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Brain predictions and sensory input are in a dance of influencing and refining each other. Our brains are constantly making predictions about the world around us. These predictions include our own body's movements. If our brains were merely reactive, they would have to wait for sensory input from our bodies before issuing motor commands to muscles. This would be slow and inefficient. By giving motor predictions, our brains can anticipate the need to move and issue motor commands more quickly.

This ability to issue motor predictions is essential for our survival. For example, if we see a snake, our brain can give motor predictions to move out of the way before we can consciously think about it. This fast action enables us to react to threats quickly and effectively.

The interoceptive networks in your brain, when explained very simply, are a coming-together of body-budget regions and the primary interoceptive cortex, which deals with sensory inputs, working to keep you alive. You use some of your energy resources every time you move externally or even internally. You don't have to physically move to use your resources. If, for example, someone you know is judgemental of your choices, the next time they walk towards you, your brain predicts that you need energy and releases cortisol that floods your bloodstream with glucose, so that your muscles lengthen and contract to allow you to run away from the perceived unpleasantness. Even the thought of someone saying something judgemental can potentially use up your body's budget of resources.

The people around you can also regulate your body's budget in a positive way. When you spend time with your partner, you start to synchronise your breathing and

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heartbeat with them, reducing the activation of your body-budget regions. Everything you do, think about, imagine, see, hear, touch and smell, and every person you interact with, has budgetary consequences for your body. These external and internal elements inform your brain about the world and help to shape it.

You replenish your budget by eating well, drinking enough liquid to hydrate, and sleeping. You also reduce your body-budget ‘spend’ by passing time with loved ones and doing something enjoyable. Understanding this integrated brain-and-body state is invaluable.

What is the consequence of living with the prevalent view of a separation between body and mind? Since I began teaching, my clients have shown me – through the tension in their muscles, jaw and shoulders, the knots in their stomachs and their inability to breathe to their total capacity – that the physical body marks the events and habits that make up our lives. Our bodies are shaped by how we feel, what we eat, how we rest, our behaviours, our habits and our environment. A cultivated interoceptive sense has wide-ranging repercussions for our well-being. Recent studies suggest that listening to signals from our internal organs allows us to self-regulate our emotions and keep depression and anxiety at bay.<sup>8</sup>

Interoception is a complex process; it is the bridge between the mind and the body and is essential for survival. Willpower or rationalisation using your cognitive mind alone cannot change your physical or mental state in the long term; you must involve all of you – and that includes listening to your bodily signals.

## **Your brain maps your body**

Your brain maps your body through a process called ‘somatotopy’. This is the organisation of the body’s sensory and motor information in the brain.

The somatosensory cortex is the part of the brain that receives sensory information from the body. It is located just behind the forehead in the parietal lobe. The somatosensory cortex is divided into a map of the body, with each part of the body being represented by a specific area of the cortex.

The motor cortex is the part of the brain that controls movement. It is located in the frontal lobe, just in front of the somatosensory cortex. It is also divided into a map of the body, with each part of the body being represented by a specific area of the cortex.

The somatotopy of the brain is elastic. It can change over time, based on our experiences. For example, if we lose a limb, the brain can reorganise the somatosensory cortex to map the remaining parts of the body onto the area that was previously dedicated to the missing limb.

The somatotopy of the brain is also influenced by our emotions. For example, when we experience pain, the somatosensory cortex becomes more active. This is because the brain is paying more attention to the painful area of the body. Interestingly your body cannot feel exactly where it ends. The area around your body that you can feel is called the ‘peripersonal space’. It is a bubble of space that surrounds your body and is defined by your senses.

Your senses – such as touch, proprioception and vision – work together to create your peripersonal space. Touch tells you about the contact between your body and the outside world. Proprioception tells you about the position and

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movement of your body parts. Vision tells you about the objects in your environment.

The peripersonal space is not fixed. It can change depending on your attention, your emotions and your environment. If you are wearing a hat, you somehow know how much to duck under a door in order not to knock it off – your peripersonal space has expanded to include that object. If you are in a dangerous situation, your peripersonal space may shrink to protect you.

Your body likes to have feedback from the floor and walls to soothe the nervous system, because it provides a sense of security and grounding. When you are feeling stressed or anxious, your body goes into a state of hyper-arousal. This means that your heart rate and breathing increase, your muscles tense up and your senses become heightened. This is a normal reaction to danger, but it can feel unpleasant and make it difficult to think clearly. Feedback from the floor and walls can help to calm the nervous system by providing a sense of stability and support. When we feel our bodies pressed against a solid surface, it sends a message to our brains that we are safe and secure. This can help to slow down our heart rate and breathing, relax our muscles and reduce our anxiety.

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### Case study: Savannah

I first met Savannah when she came to my studios in central London for one-to-one sessions. She worked in banking and had reached the point of burnout, a condition that involves increased anxiety levels, erratic sleep patterns and tiredness. She had started

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a new job with significantly more responsibilities. She was working across global time zones, switching on her laptop early in the morning and still checking in to work twelve hours later. Her sleep was squeezed, and work was always on her mind.

Savannah recognised that feeling on the edge of burnout wasn't healthy or sustainable. She often felt overwhelmed, anxious and even a little lost; this manifested in her moving physically into a protected state, where her shoulders were rounded and she collapsed into her front body. This, in turn, affected her breathing, which became shallower. Like many of my clients, to 'fix' herself and sleep better Savannah would throw herself into extreme fitness, spinning and HIIT classes, which left her aching and exhausted the next day. She hoped that intensely physical classes would exhaust her into sleep, but when her head hit the pillow she was thinking about the financial markets, the dollar against the pound and what she had to do first thing in the morning.

Her job was to find solutions, so she approached her life similarly by being the strong one who could organise things for everyone else. Her wish was to adopt a healthier attitude, but every time she tried, work would intrude, and she had no energy to continue her good habits. She would feel bad about herself, which further increased her desire to excel on all fronts, to *work* herself into a better person.

Savannah was so accustomed to using her clever mind to solve problems and organise others that she had forgotten how to tend to herself. We embarked on a series of private sessions, so that I could look at her breathing patterns and she would be able to gently notice how she moved and where she held tension. When you send your focused attention to your physical body, you are perceiving what is being sensed, which in turn changes your sensations. In this instance it was to accommodate her breath. I

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showed Savannah how she could incorporate simple strategies into her day to soothe her mind and body from the intensity of her working life. The more she could let go of the effects of the stressors throughout the day, the more she could let go of her working day in the evening and regain her ability to sleep. Savannah and I were working together as the pandemic hit, and we kept going through the ensuing lockdowns, as I was able to teach her online.

Her commitment to consistent deep care meant that when she lost both of her parents just as we were coming out of the pandemic – and remember that we were discouraged from gatherings and care-home visits – her practice with me enabled her to navigate the trauma and loss, with compassion for herself. She became someone who could look after herself, perform well in her demanding job and create healthy boundaries around her work and personal life. She cultivated resilience and was better able to metabolise her emotions through her body, rather than shutting them down.

Savannah now feels content, light of body, spirit and mind. She continues to attend my online classes and she books into every retreat because she understands that tending to yourself isn't a short-term hack; deep care is a lifelong process that will help you live to your full potential. Most of us choose to emphasise a particular aspect of ourselves. It is usually the shiny front end, which shows that we are in control and leading a life full of external experiences: travel, shopping and going out to fancy restaurants. We try to push down anything that doesn't fit the idea of the person we want to project to the world. However, when you embrace all aspects of who you are – including the less shiny parts of yourself – and become more curious about these parts, you can stop this internal war between the different parts of you and are better able to cultivate a more compassionate relationship with yourself.

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Being in a compassionate relationship with yourself enables you to be in a compassionate and authentic relationship with others, and with your environment. This means that you are not in a battle to be an idealised version of yourself, but are accepting of the more real, human version. Doesn't this sound a more peaceful way to live?

When you are rested, you can use your resources to direct your attention in a focused manner. But when you are exhausted, you tend to default to the habitual strategies that have kept you functioning in your environment. Learning how to do things differently takes effort, and when you are wired and tired you have no energy to query or change.

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### Your nervous system

We'll look at 'rest' in Chapter 6 of this book, but for now let's learn how to 'listen in' by looking at the human body through an embodied or integrated focus.

While learning the Latin names for muscles is useful, we must go underneath the layer of terminology to get a sense of the interwoven relationship of your body and gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic, complex, multi-dimensional, interconnected and deeply profound organism you are.

How will understanding your body as an organism help, when you simply want to learn about how to soothe your nervous system and live better right now? Well, without understanding the interconnectedness of all your body's systems from the moment of your conception, you will forever be in a push-pull relationship with your mind and