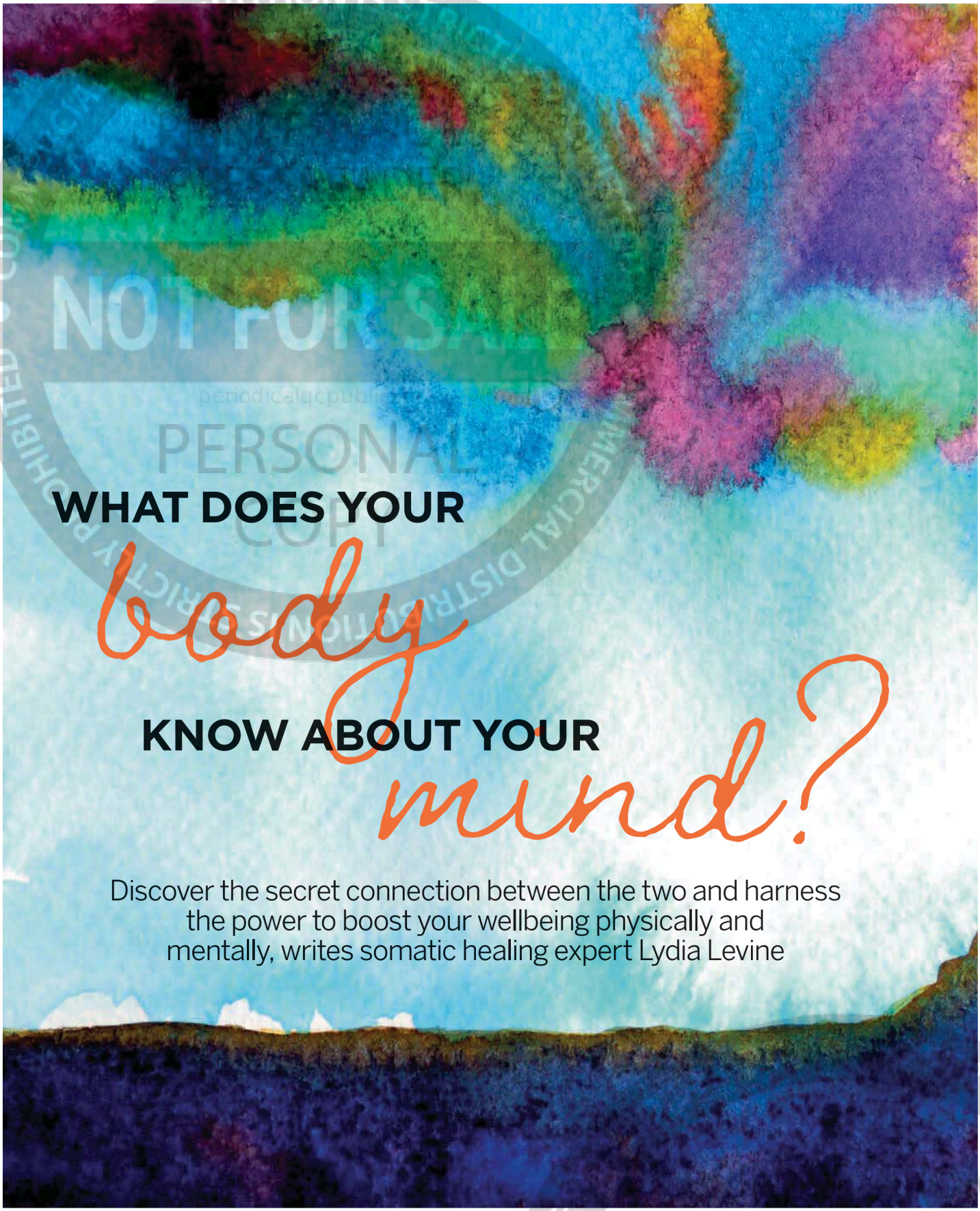
- Mind and body



WHAT DOES YOUR *body* KNOW ABOUT YOUR *mind?*

Discover the secret connection between the two and harness the power to boost your wellbeing physically and mentally, writes somatic healing expert Lydia Levine

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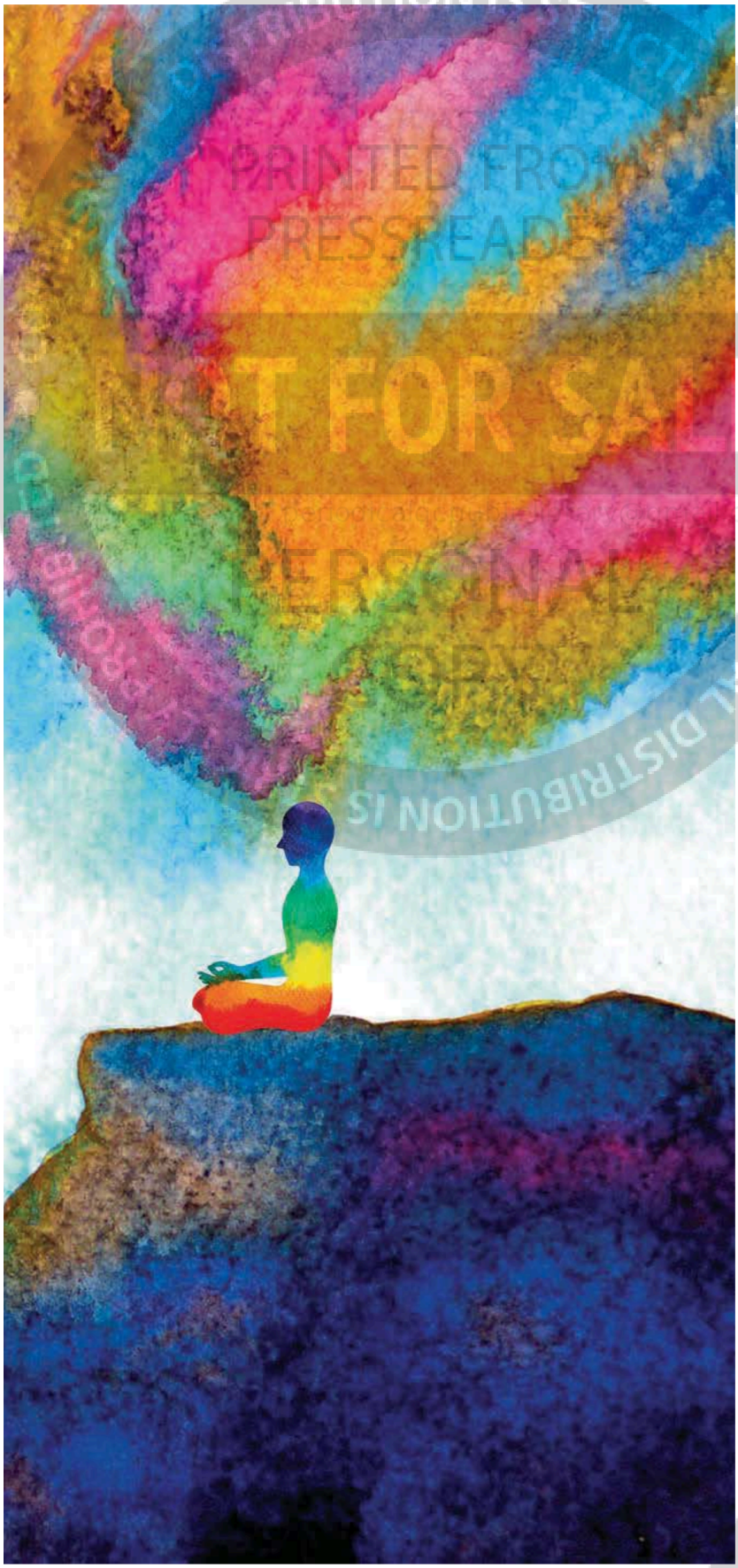

The body and mind may seem like entirely separate entities, but they are more closely connected than you might think. Just as the body can hold on to physical stress and tension, so too can it lock in emotional stress and tension, which can lead to a number of physical responses.

As an example, chronic stress is thought to cause inflammation within the body, which can increase blood pressure and, as a result, the risk of heart disease. Stress can also negatively impact our sleep routines, interrupt exercise motivation and lead to us making unhealthy food choices.

Similarly, anxiety can lead to the release of the stress hormone cortisol, which can boost blood sugar, weaken the immune system and has been linked to digestive issues such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

Stress and anxiety can certainly serve us up a buffet of health issues, but taking steps to better understand the mind-body connection can guide us to the underlying source of many physical and mental health conditions, allowing us to tackle the root cause.

Somatic healing is designed to effectively address trauma and emotional pain that's been stored in the body for many years. While somatic healing for trauma should always be carried out by a professional with training and experience in this area, many of the more general principles and techniques can be helpful when trying to reduce symptoms of anxiety or stress. Some of these benefits include:

- Enhanced self-awareness
- A deeper connection with the physical body
- The ability to process and release pent-up emotions
- Reduced stress and a calmer nervous system
- Reduced physical tension in the body
- Enhanced mindfulness
- Improved physical health
- A bigger toolbox of coping mechanisms
- A sense of being more grounded and balanced
- Enhanced resilience

Understanding and improving the mind-body connection

The mind-body connection is rarely considered in traditional therapy scenarios, but the symbiotic relationship between the two means that whatever affects the mind can also impact the body, and vice versa. By recognising and enhancing this connection through somatic practices, you can effectively nurture your physical and mental health to find more balance in your life. But first, let's take a closer look at how this works...

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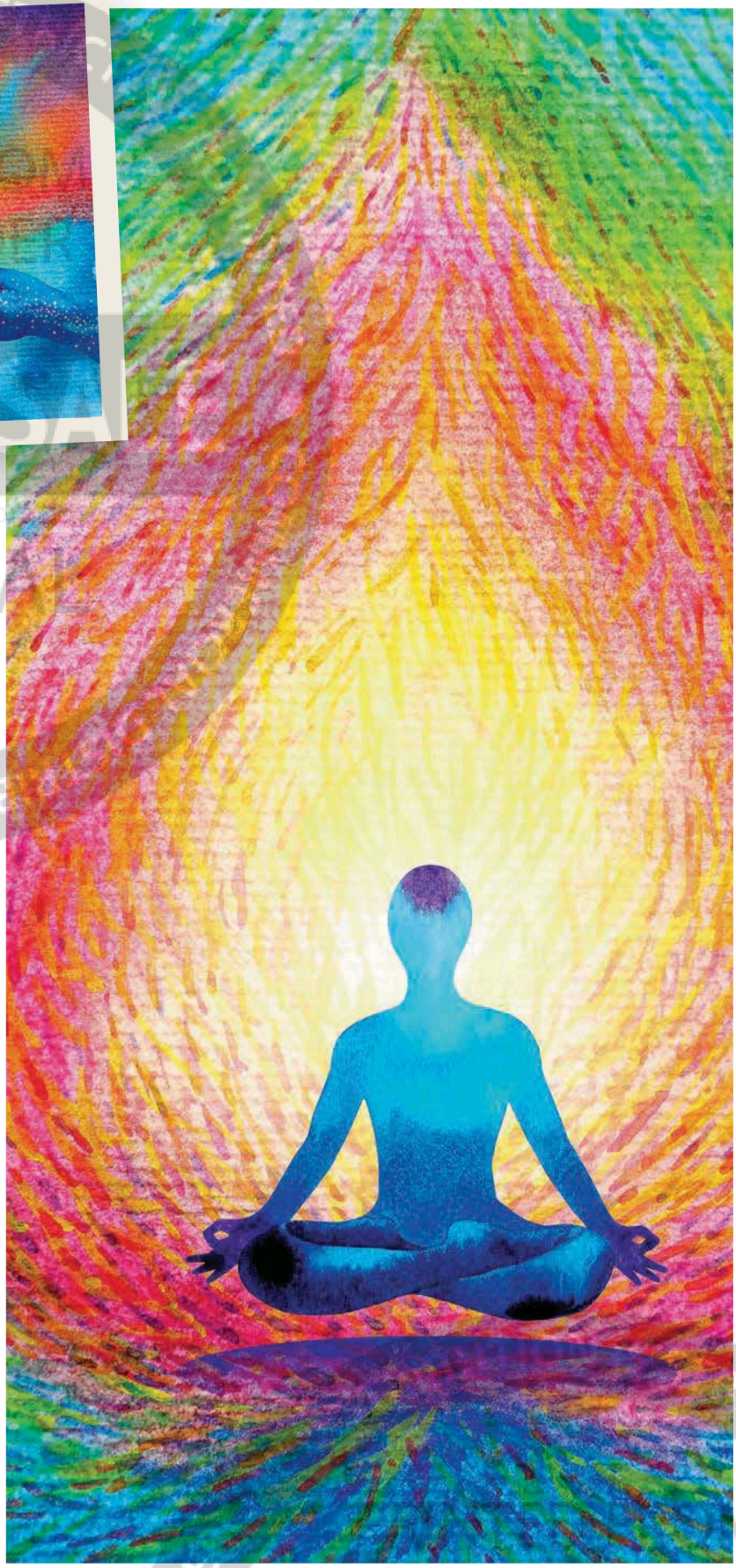

WHAT IS THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION?

It can be difficult to understand the mind-body connection if you have never felt it — or even thought about it — before. Essentially, it's a yin-and-yang relationship between the thoughts and emotions that arise from the mind and the physical symptoms that are experienced in the body. Importantly, the mind and body can influence each other in a continuous cycle, meaning that when the mind experiences stress, anxiety or another emotional disturbance, this can manifest in the body as a physical symptom, such as tension in the muscles or digestive discomfort. The reverse is also true, with our physical health impacting our mental well-being. An example of this is when chronic pain leads to feelings of depression over time.

There are a number of factors at play when it comes to the mind-body connection, such as stress hormones and energy levels, but these can also provide some positive outcomes. For example, just as negative thoughts can influence negative physical symptoms, feelings of relaxation and happiness are thought to promote healing and strengthen our resilience.

THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION IN ACTION

The mind-body connection can be experienced in many areas of everyday life, so the chances are you have felt it before but perhaps didn't realise. For example:

- You stretch in the morning and notice your muscles feel tighter than usual, which could be a sign of tension.
- You anxiously prepare for a presentation at work and experience a sudden, unexplained stomach upset that doesn't pass until after your presentation.
- You meet someone you really like and feel the

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sensation of butterflies in your stomach. While we often notice our body's physical reaction to our thoughts and emotions, we can also influence our thoughts and emotions using physical actions. A great somatic-healing example of this is deciding to do some form of exercise when you're feeling down, to move your body and boost your endorphins (the feel-good hormones), leaving you feeling better, both physically and mentally.

WHY STRENGTHEN THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION?

Somatic healing is built around the idea that we can address mental-health issues with the support of our bodies and certain physical exercises. Understanding and strengthening the mind-body connection we already have is a great place to start, to lay the foundations needed for successful somatic healing.

A strong mind-body connection can help you to recognise any physical symptoms and address them before they escalate. For example, the mind-body connection can help you notice the early signs of tension in your shoulders, allowing you to take the necessary actions (such as resting more, or trying out some relaxation techniques) to prevent more serious stress-related health issues developing further down the line. A strong and healthy mind-body connection can help you to manage stress, improve your emotional regulation and enhance your ability to cope with life's challenges, so it's certainly worth nurturing, in order to achieve better mental clarity and emotional balance.

IMPROVE YOUR LANGUAGE, IMPROVE YOUR CONNECTION

For some people, the main struggle with the mind-body connection isn't a lack of feeling the connection, but rather a lack of emotional range and description. Professor Brené Brown suggests that there are in fact 87 emotions, but many of us can only name a handful of these.

Working on recognising which emotions we are feeling, and giving them a descriptive name, can help to strengthen the mind-body connection. When we use bland, two-dimensional language such as 'I am stressed', this leaves us with only a few emotions to choose from. However, by using creative, descriptive language and tapping into a more extensive vocabulary of feeling words, we will begin to identify these more effectively in daily life.

Below, you'll find a glossary with some common words that describe certain everyday feelings. The first one is done for you; now have a go at expanding the others, coming up with a few more precise, expressive words that convey the emotion.

Emotional glossary

Use the activity below to come up with some more descriptive words for these common emotions and feelings you might experience in your mind and body. If you're struggling, try using a thesaurus to help.

Stressed ... *Anxious, Overwhelmed, Pressured, Worried, Tense*

Sad ...

Happy ...

Scared ...

Angry ...

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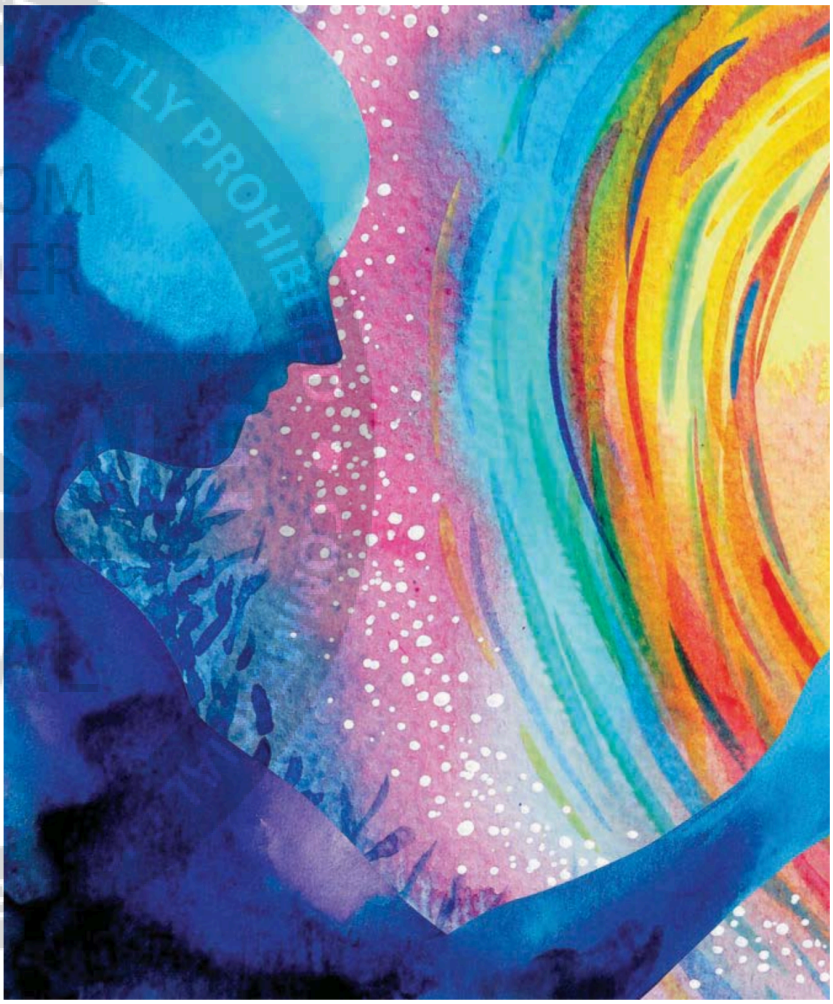

EXERCISE: Imaginary feelings

Think back to your childhood. Did you have an imaginary friend? You couldn't see them, but you could probably describe what they were like.

Try to use this creativity to give your feelings some personality. Choose a feeling you want to work on, such as guilt. Close your eyes and imagine this as a physical thing living inside your body, taking up space. If you're struggling to picture it, these question prompts might help:

- What colour is it?
- What shape is it?
- Does it have texture or is it 2D?
- Is it an object you recognise or something totally new to you?
- Does it have features like a person?
- Is it talking? What does it say?
- Is it moving? How does it move?
- How does it feel inside your body? Has it been there for a long time?
- Is it trying to get out or is it making itself at home?

EXERCISE: Imaginary feelings

Now you have a clearer picture of this feeling, try to draw it. This can help to solidify in your mind what the feeling may look like inside your body, how much space it takes up, how it reacts to things around it and more. Just as improving your language can help you to label feelings, imagining them as something tangible in your body can help to create more distance between your emotions and your identity, therefore enabling you to manage them more effectively in day-to-day life. Doodle what you imagine this feeling might look like. Remember, don't worry about anyone seeing this — it's just for you.

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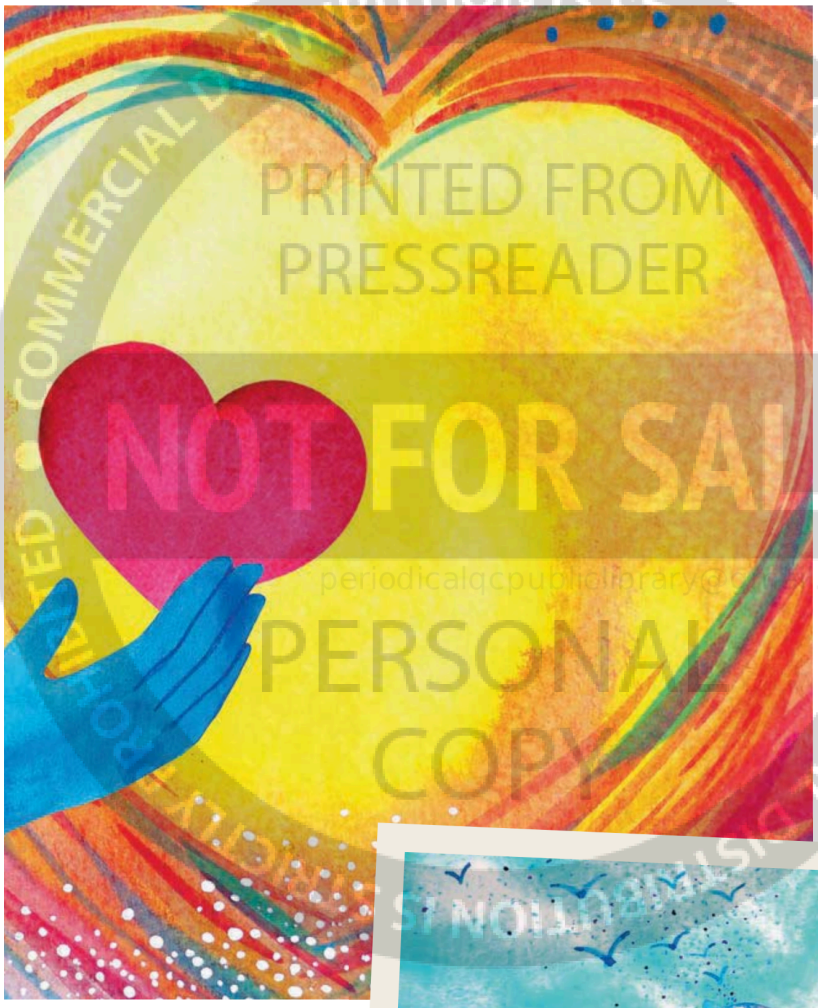

EXERCISE: Mind–body reminders

When it comes to strengthening your mind-body connection and turning this practice into a habit, consistency is key. Find some actions that always occur in your typical day that can act as prompts to provide regular mind–body connection reminders.

For example, every time you walk through a doorway, use this as a trigger to ask yourself, 'What emotion am I feeling right now?'

Or whenever you finish a task or chore, grab the chance to do a quick body scan, to connect to your physical self and discover any areas that need your attention.

Or if you get stuck in traffic, focus on your emotional regulation by repeating the mantra, 'I am safe, I am calm, I am in control.'

In short, utilise any chance you get to switch off the autopilot and engage with your mind and body. Where might you make space in your day for some mind-body connection and how might you remind yourself?



Extracted from **The Little Book of Somatic Healing: A Beginner's Guide to the Art of Body Psychology** *by Lydia Levine (Vie Books, £7.99), out July 10*



EXERCISE: What does your body need right now?

Regularly pausing and asking yourself what your body needs in this moment can help you discover any parts of your body that feel uncomfortable, strained, tense, sore or even just a little strange. It can also help you recognise if your body needs something in particular, such as rest, hydration or movement.

Try it now: stop and think about what your body needs in this exact moment. Is it a need you can easily fulfil, such as getting yourself a glass of water or taking a five-minute walk?

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