

Peter Levine, PhD and MELD – What the Body Can Do the Mind Cannot

Introduction and Welcome

- **Mike Sagun: (Moderator):** Let's jump in here, shall we? Welcome everyone to our MELD sessions number one. It is with great honor to have our first MELD session with Dr. Peter Levine. Many of you are very familiar with his work and we are so excited to learn from him. Alright, before we actually jump into the meat and juice of all this, let's all take a huge deep breath and as we settle in here, notice what you're sensing in your experience, in your physical experience. If you're familiar with the somatic world, you probably have a depth of understanding of your somatic awareness. But maybe just sense what you're sitting on or perhaps what the air feels like on your skin, and then really gently, with some kindness, sense into your level of safety right now from one to five. One being you are feeling anxious, maybe you feel frightened or terrified; five being I feel completely safe and okay in my body and in my environment. Where are you on that scale?

Introductions Continued

- **Mike Sagun:** And perhaps there might be a part of you that goes, well, I'm at home, I'm in my office, I should be a four or five. See if you can let that "should" step aside and really come into what you're truly and authentically sensing right now. Thank you, that's Francisco. And then I invite you to take another deep breath and notice if that shifts something in your experience. Maybe you felt your shoulders drop a little bit, maybe you felt your belly relaxed. Great. So, it is with great honor and privilege to first introduce Dr. Peter Levine. He is the developer of Somatic Experiencing. He is a naturalistic and neurological. Somatic Experiencing is a naturalistic and neurobiological approach to healing trauma which he has developed over the past 50 years.

Dr. Peter Levine's Background

- **Mike Sagun:** He holds a doctorate in biophysics from UC Berkeley and a doctorate in Psychology from International University. He's the founder and president of Eros Institute for Somatic Education, dedicated to community outreach and post-advanced Somatic Experiencing training and the founder and adviser for Somatic Experiencing International. He has taught at Cal Berkeley, Mills College, Antioch University, the California Institute of Integral Studies, and the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. His work has been taught to over 30,000 therapists in over 42 countries and he is the bestselling author of books on trauma including *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* which has been published in over 29 languages, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*, *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in a*

Search for the Living Past, and his latest book, which you can see right behind him, *An Autobiography of Trauma: A Healing Journey*. Welcome, Dr. Peter Levine.

Dr. Levine's Response and Overview of His Work

- **Peter Levine:** Thank you for being with us. It's good to be with you and to all of you from **Introduction of Owen Marcus**
- **Mike Sagun:** Before we get into the conversation, I just want to quickly introduce Owen Marcus. He is my mentor, a man that I look up to and have been looking up to these last few years. He is the creator of the Sandpoint Men's Group, which has over hundreds of men alumni who have gone through his programs. He also helped found Everyman and today, he is the co-founder of MELD—Men's Emotional Leadership Development. I have a really personal relationship with Owen, and he often talks about starting this work because he wanted to first develop his own emotional intelligence. This first started as an experiment and for him to be more embodied in his life but now he sits as one of the leaders in the men's wellness and men's work spaces. He is the author of "Grow Up: A Man's Guide to Masculine Emotional Intelligence", a TedX alum, and has been featured in the New York Times, Men's Health, and ABC News. Life and again, he is the co-founder here at MELD—Men's Emotional Leadership Development.

Introduction Continued by Owen Marcus

- **Owen Marcus:** Thanks, Mike. I appreciate the introduction.

The Roots of MELD's Work

- **Mike Sagun:** You know, the roots of the work that we're doing here at MELD come from Peter's work. We have studied his work, all the years of his research, we've really taken his somatic approach into the way that we work with men. Owen, can you just quickly start to share your story?

Owen Marcus Shares His Story

- **Owen Marcus:** I first met Peter in 1980, I believe. You did a presentation for the Rolfing Institute. I was sitting in the back of the room and you were explaining your work. Then you explained something I'd never heard before, which was the whole freeze response. It was one of those times in my life that I got a cold chill running through my body because I'd had enough training and experience to know that something was missing, but I didn't know what it was. But when you explained it, I just knew this is what I've been looking for, this is what I've been missing in all my education and training. That was in 1980, or maybe, yeah, that's right. From then on, it became a core of my work in some form or another, be it Rolfing and then 30 years ago with men's work, and it really guided me into using the body to essentially melt that freeze and get, first myself, as Mike said, connected to my own experience and help now other men do the same, and

do it through the path of the body rather than what we've been traditionally trained to do.

Peter Levine's Influence and Owen's Gratitude

- **Owen Marcus:** You know, I want to honor Peter for someone that I've known for all these years and certainly followed as a courageous man who, when we started off, or when you started off, what you were suggesting was very fringe, very radical. People just put it down, and they put you down, and that would upset me. But your courage, tenacity, and your brilliance, you just stuck with it. And now, your work is the cornerstone of psychological work. It's the work that everyone wants to study; it's the work that other programs are based on, and really, our program in many ways is based on. So, we owe a lot to you, Peter, for your courage and tenacity to stick with this, and all the work that you've done directly and indirectly to help people. And there are men in our program and in our group in Sandpoint that have credited this work to saving their lives. They said if they weren't in our program, they would have killed themselves. Wow.

Peter Levine's Acknowledgment

- **Peter Levine:** Oh, thank you. That's very touching, and I really appreciate it.

Peter Levine Reflects on Personal Journey and Book

- **Peter Levine:** You know, in the book that you mentioned, which just came out last week, *An Autobiography of Trauma: A Healing Journey*, I really talk about the backstory, about what happened to me in my life, my traumas, and other experiences, both horrific and often beautiful. I delve into the truth of how I developed this from healing my own wounds. The word "trauma" from Greek actually means "wound," and the thing about that is that wounds can heal. We just have to have the right tools. I have a saying, "Without tools, trauma rules." But with the right tools, we can not only meet trauma, but we can transform trauma, and very often open into very deep feelings of awe, which might be more seen as spiritual.

Discussion on Somatic Work's Beginnings and Validation

- **Peter Levine:** At the time, I didn't dare talk about things like spirituality and trauma. That's what the autobiography allowed me to do, to talk about the things that I had not been able to talk about for the past 50 years. So, Owen, was just saying, like in the '80s, that somatic work was very fringe. It was something people weren't talking about; they were actually rejecting it. How did I figure out the body was the way to healing? Well, when I really started to develop somatic experiencing in the late '60s, early '70s, I was fortunate to not know because the definition of trauma as PTSD was still, you know, like 12, 13 years in the future. And so, I didn't know that trauma was supposedly a brain

disorder, maybe even a brain disease that could at best be managed by helping people change their negative thoughts and using different medications. So, I was really on a very different path.

Peter Levine's Insights on Body Awareness and Trauma Response

- **Peter Levine:** I'm not saying that that's all wrong, that that is in some cases important, but I realized that when we experience threat or danger, our body responds in very clear, specific ways. For example, if we were hit as a child, punished or hit, even emotionally, our shoulders might be bracing against being hit. So, the shoulders would be coming up like this, and often, people present not with flashbacks but with chronic pain. A typical area of chronic pain—there are several—is in the shoulders. So, what I might have people do, and you're welcome, everybody in the group to practice this, just a little bit, is if you feel some pain in your shoulders or some tension, what do you think that tension might want to do if it actually increased? So, most people will report the shoulders got to go up. So I said, okay, so now do that very slowly, very, very slowly, just lifting your shoulders, contracting just the smallest amount, and then let it go, and then just notice what happens in your body—sensations, feelings, thoughts, images, pictures, memories that come up even from a simple exercise like this.

Continuing the Exploration of Somatic Experience

- **Peter Levine:** So again, another example of this would be, say, you just go out of your door in the morning, and you see somebody's been hit by a car, and they're laying on the ground, and your guts go "ugh." And if you walk out and see they're really badly hurt, you that twisting becomes even more. Why? Because our brains are set to register threat, danger, or especially injury.

Peter Levine Discusses Trauma Impact on the Body

- **Peter Levine:** In working with military people over the years, I found that much more trauma happened when they saw somebody being injured or killed rather than when they were injured themselves. It's how we're programmed. The brain stem, the primitive brain, recognizes that and sends the signal to the body, whether it's shoulders like this or twisted guts, and then, when that becomes habitual, becomes chronic, it's now sending messages to the brain that says the threat is still there, the injury is still there. And in a way, that's how we work with trauma—not so much with the content, although often content comes up, but really with how our bodies have responded to threat, particularly to overwhelming threat.

Owen Marcus Reflects on Somatic Learning

- **Owen Marcus:** You have anything to add there, Owen?

- **Owen Marcus:** As you probably know, with so often with men, we've been so disconnected that we have to go slow and connected to their bodies. And one of the things I know that you really advocate, and we certainly do, is creating a safe space so they can have these subtle experiences. Could you just sort of elaborate on how important safety is?

Peter Levine on the Importance of Safety

- **Peter Levine:** Oh my God, it's so important. I can give you a little bit of my personal story of how I began to find the sense of safety when, about 30 years ago, I had been developing somatic experiencing and being teaching it, it's been taught in many different places, so in a way, that burden was off my shoulders. But I started to have some symptoms, some troubling sensations, troubling symptoms, and some images that would flash there momentarily. And I realized it was time for me to take a dose of my own medicine.

Peter Levine Shares a Personal Healing Story

- **Peter Levine:** I asked one of my students to guide me to see what was underneath these sensations, these symptoms. And one of the things in somatic experiences, we really slow things down so they can be felt. If they come too fast, we can't really feel them; we just react. So we want to be able to really slow it down, and the other thing is we don't go right into the trauma, to the core of the trauma. And there are approaches, and there are many really good approaches to healing of course, but one of the approaches that I really don't like is where they have the person relive their traumas over and over again, something called prolonged exposure. I think that can really just zap the energy out of people.

Peter Levine's Healing Continues with a Memory

- **Peter Levine:** But anyhow, we have to slow it down, and we don't go right into the center of the trauma. So clearly, some trauma was emerging in my body, and then my guide definitely kind of led me in the direction of these other sensations that I felt again somewhere in my body, which were sensations of goodness, something was right. Anyhow, the memory that came up was when I was four or five, my parents snuck into my bedroom, must have been at night, or in the morning early in the morning, and they laid tracks, model train tracks, underneath my bed out into the room, and then back again underneath the bed. So when I awoke, I woke to these trains going around the track.

Working Through Trauma with Somatic Experiencing

- **Peter Levine:** Working with this and working with those other memories and working with the sensations and letting them move through where they were stuck, I was really able to let that go, to let it be in the past where it belonged.

Reflection on Writing an Autobiography

- **Peter Levine:** So again, that's something I take from my own experience. But I believe there's some funny noises happening here, yeah. When I wrote the autobiography, I had actually at the beginning no intention of publishing it. It was really for my own excavation, for the memories like what I was just talking about, and how I reacted to them, and how I inhibited my life, and how I reclaimed my life and came back into a live sense in my body.

Connecting Trauma and Spirituality

- **Peter Levine:** One of the reviewers of the book said it's a one man's soul journey from searing pain to joy, from self-hatred to self-love. In a way, that is my journey, and I really believe that we all have that capacity as we are willing to embody ourselves. It doesn't mean you have some kind of a really violent trauma like I'm describing, but we all have wounds. We've all gotten messages, especially men, so I want to kind of get back to that issue.

Importance of Men's Groups and Emotional Expression

- **Peter Levine:** I'm really glad that you're doing that. Actually, I was in a men's group in 1972 or something like that, 1974, and it was an important experience. When I moved, I couldn't continue it, but men really need to be able to feel and to share that with others so they can communicate it. It's not just having the feeling, but then being able to articulate the feeling in words. That's kind of the nutshell about my work and about developing Somatic Experiencing as I said.

Peter Levine's Insights on the Development of Somatic Experiencing

- **Peter Levine:** This is the backstory of how I developed that from my own healing and my own knowing and my own insights, and my own honoring my teachers. One chapter is called "The Four Most Important Women of My Life," and they were teachers. And also "The Four Most Important Men in My Life," with the ones that I learned more from. My teachers, the women, were more about sensing and feeling, and the four men, except for one, it was more about intellect. Again, holding those gifts together, I think, supported my development as a person and as a professional and in developing Somatic Experiencing.

Integrating Intellectual and Somatic Learning

- **Peter Levine:** I think you touched on a key point, Owen. For many of us, especially men, we've learned to rely heavily on our intellects, processing things cognitively. However, integrating somatic and emotional awareness is crucial. We haven't had a model that allows for this until your work and the adaptations we've made for working with men.

The Need for Witnessing and Expressing Emotions

- **Peter Levine:** We not only need to feel somatically and emotionally, but we also need to articulate these feelings and have them witnessed. This process is the antithesis of the isolation many feel during traumatic experiences. For growth and healing, being able to share and be acknowledged is essential.

Trauma, Spirituality, and the Body's Role

- **Peter Levine:** Trauma is not just about what happens to us; it's about what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness who can reflect our experiences back to us. The integration of trauma and spirituality is profound. As we transform our trauma, we often find ourselves opening to deep feelings that might be seen as spiritual.

Discussion on Men's Challenges in Emotional Development

- **Peter Levine:** Men, traditionally, have been left behind in terms of emotional awareness and development. Women have been pioneers in exploring their emotions and forming supportive groups. We, as men, are now catching up, and this is a positive development. All individuals, regardless of gender, benefit immensely from having access to their body sensations and emotions, as these are the basis of genuine connection and understanding.

On Somatic Experiencing and Personal Experiences

- **Peter Levine:** The approach of Somatic Experiencing is about noticing the sensations that arise from the body and integrating them with our emotions, behaviors, and thoughts. This comprehensive awareness is what allows us to process and eventually heal from our traumas.

Closing Remarks and Future Directions

- **Peter Levine:** It's crucial for everyone, especially those working through trauma, to be able to not only connect with their bodies but also to articulate and share their experiences. This capability transforms personal healing into a collective journey, enhancing the sense of community and support.

Thank You and Acknowledgments

- **Mike Sagun:** Thank you, Dr. Levine, for sharing your invaluable insights and profound knowledge with us today. Your work continues to inspire and heal many around the world.
- **Owen Marcus:** And thank you from all of us here at MELD. Your teachings and mentorship have profoundly impacted the way we approach men's emotional health and wellness.

Session Conclusion

- **Peter Levine:** Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure to discuss these important topics with you all. Remember, healing is possible, and it starts with being connected to both our bodies and our emotions.

Reflecting on the Value of Community and Learning

- **Peter Levine:** It's essential to understand that community and shared experiences play a crucial role in healing. When we open up in a safe environment and share our deepest fears and traumas, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, which is the first step towards real healing. This vulnerability, paired with the support and understanding from others, transforms our experiences from isolating to communal, which is fundamental in the healing process.

Discussion on Future Workshops and Learning Opportunities

- **Mike Sagun:** As we continue to explore these themes, we invite everyone to participate in upcoming workshops and training sessions designed to deepen your understanding and application of somatic experiences. These sessions are not just for professionals but for anyone interested in learning more about how to integrate these practices into their personal and professional lives.

Peter Levine on the Importance of Continuous Learning

- **Peter Levine:** The journey of learning about our bodies and trauma is continuous. Each experience teaches us something new about ourselves, and each interaction gives us a chance to practice being present and connected. I encourage everyone to keep learning, keep exploring, and keep connecting with others.

Q&A Session with Participants

- **Participant:** How can we start to apply these principles in our daily lives, especially if we are new to somatic experiencing?
- **Peter Levine:** Start small. Pay attention to your body's reactions throughout the day. Notice when you feel tense, relaxed, or neutral. These observations are the first steps in

becoming more connected to your body. Try to respond to your body's needs—maybe stretching, breathing deeply, or even just acknowledging your feelings.

Closing Thoughts on Resilience and Growth

- **Peter Levine:** Resilience is not something we are born with; it's something we build by facing our challenges and learning from them. Each step you take in understanding and connecting with your body is a step towards resilience. By fostering this connection, we not only heal from past traumas but also prepare ourselves to face future challenges with strength and confidence.

Final Words and Appreciation

- **Mike Sagun:** Thank you, Dr. Levine, for your profound insights and for leading this enlightening discussion. Your dedication to healing and growth is truly inspiring.
- **Owen Marcus:** And thank you to everyone who participated today. Your engagement and willingness to learn are what make these sessions so valuable. We look forward to seeing you at future events.

Session Wrap-Up

Mike Sagun: Please stay tuned for information about our next sessions. We have a range of topics and speakers lined up that promise to enrich our understanding and skills in working with trauma and healing. Thank you all for joining us today, and remember to take care of yourselves and each other.