Somatic Symptoms and Somatization in Children and Youth

What is it?

'Soma' means body. Somatic symptoms are symptoms experienced in the body - physical sensations, movements or experiences. Some examples include pain, nausea, dizziness, and fainting. Somatization is a normal human experience, but sometimes these body symptoms cause problems in everyday life.

Your brain and body are amazing. They are partners that are always "talking" to each other and "cooperating". They connect through very complicated back-and forth signals or 'messages' that involve your nervous system, hormones, and brain chemicals. Most of the time, when things are running smoothly, the system of signals between your brain and body is automatic. The brain-body message system allows you to do what you need to do in your daily life. It also works as a warning system by producing symptoms that you need to pay attention to.

When the messages between your brain and body are working well together:

- **Your body sends warning messages to your brain.** For example, when you touch something sharp or hot, your body sends a signal. Your brain interprets the signal as "Pain!". Then your brain sends a message back to your body to remove your hand.
- **Your brain sends messages to your body to help you stay healthy.** If you have a condition that needs to be taken care of, your brain and body send messages to each other. For example, if you need to eat then your body and brain communicate to each other and you experience hunger. If you need to rest, your brain and body signals make you experience fatigue.
- **Your brain and body communicate when you experience emotions.** You often experience emotions not only as feelings in your mind, but also as sensations in your body. For example, when you are embarrassed or nervous, you may "blush". Or when you are stressed, your brain sends signals to increase your heart rate, to breathe more quickly, to tense your muscles, and to empty your intestines. This "fight-flight-or-freeze" response helps you to survive a perceived danger. For more information about the fight-flight-freeze response, visit www.anxietybc.com.

When the messages between your brain and body are not working well together:

- **Your brain-body message system does not shut off, or sends a 'false alarm'.** For example, the alarm signal may have been initially triggered by a condition that causes tissue damage, such as an injury or infection. After the tissue has healed, you continue to have sensations in your body that are stronger or last longer than necessary to keep you healthy.

- **Your brain-body message system sends the wrong message.** You may have such a strong emotion (anxiety, stress, sadness, anger) that your brain is overwhelmed. Your brain sends signals so that you experience the emotion in your body, rather than as a feeling in your mind. For example, you may have seizures that are not caused by epilepsy but instead are caused by overwhelming emotion.

This can be very confusing. Your body symptoms are real but the reason for the message does not match what is happening in your body.

Your brain-body messages can depend on a lot of things. Life experiences, medical conditions, family, stress and coping, school, and peers can all influence the brain body signals.

If the brain-body messenger system isn't working properly, it can be hard to take part in daily living activities and to recover from an illness or injury. This is called a somatization disorder. There are two main types: Somatic Symptom Disorder and Conversion Disorder.

SOMATIC SYMPTOM DISORDER

Children and youth with this disorder may have symptoms like:

- Abdominal pain
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Chronic pain

CONVERSION DISORDER (Functional Neurological Symptom Disorder)

Children and youth with this disorder may have symptoms like:

- Weakness or paralysis
- Abnormal movements (that may look like epileptic seizures)
- Difficulty with speech
- Sensations like tingling or numbness

Someone with a somatization disorder may also have another medical illness. For example, a child or youth may have both Conversion Disorder and Epilepsy.

It can be difficult for parents and families to hear that their child or youth has a somatization disorder. They may feel lonely, frustrated and misunderstood and may worry that the health care providers think "it's all in your child's head", that "your child is faking it", or that "there's nothing that we can do".

What parents and families should know is that their child's symptoms are a result of the brain-body connection. Their symptoms are real, and they experience them when the brain body signals are not working in a healthy and integrated way.

How do I know?

One step is to have the child or youth evaluated to make sure there isn't a condition such as tissue damage, injury, infection, or inflammation that is causing the symptoms. It is also important to avoid unnecessary tests and treatments. They can cause complications that could make symptoms worse and delay the correct diagnosis.

At the same time, it is important to look for any issues that can affect your brain-body signals. These issues include things like life experiences, stress, emotions, the environment, and coping styles.

Health care providers, patients, and their families need to be aware of the brain-body connection, and begin treatment if somatization is suspected. Treatment can start at the same time that the child or youth is being evaluated. Treatment should not be delayed until after the medical investigation is complete.

What can be done?

There are very good and effective treatments for somatization. The treatments are not the same for everyone. The best treatment involves a team that understands the emotional and physical impact of the person's symptoms.

Team members can include:

- Family doctors, pediatricians or other medical specialists
- Psychologists, therapists, or counsellors
- Dietitians
- Nurses
- Physiotherapists
- Occupational therapists
- Psychiatrists
- Social workers
- Complementary and Integrative Medicine Providers (e.g. massage therapists)

Each team member provides a different part of the treatment. The amount of time each member spends with the child or youth will depend on the stage and focus of the treatment. The team works together with the child and family to decide what treatment to provide by what team member at the right time.

Treatment has many goals and may include:

- Physiotherapy and rehabilitation
- Mind body strategies
- Medication
- Therapy and counselling

Treatment helps the child or youth learn to manage their physical symptoms and regain functioning and wellness. They learn to recognize what causes them stress, how their body reacts, and how to manage it. Therapy for the child and family can help prevent further somatization. The team also works with the child and family to help with things like getting back to school and activities, and connecting with friends as much as possible.

Do children with these disorders get better?

Many symptoms that are caused by somatization go away on their own or with simple strategies. If the symptoms last more than a few weeks or months, they need more active treatment. The longer the symptoms last, the harder they are to treat. With treatment, some children are symptom free. Others may continue to have symptoms but will be able to function better in daily life.

Where to from here?

Start by talking to your family doctor, pediatrician, or mental health professional.

Here are some additional resources you may find helpful:

- Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre: Stress Management Resources
  www.keltymentalhealth.ca/healthy-living/stress
- Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre: Mindfulness Resources and Audio Recordings
  www. keltymentalhealth.ca/healthy-living/mindfulness
- UBC Neuropsychiatry and Vancouver Coastal Health: Somatoform Disorders Brochure
  psychiatry.vch.ca/docs/pdf/somatoform_disorders.pdf
- Understanding Pain: What to do about it in less than 5 minutes
  www. youtube.com/watch?v=4b8oB757DKc
- PainBC
  www. painbc.ca/support-and-education

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