

**the feels:
Creating connection @ depth among
single New Yorkers**

A phenomenological study

**Prepared in partnership with
Spirit Mind Body Institute**

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Part I: Background + Summary

This paper seeks to ascertain whether the level of connection created at an event series I created in August 2022, 'the feels', is/was deeper than it would have been at a typical dating event.

The 'connection at depth' is reached, in theory, because of the format design, which integrates:

- Somatic awareness / somatic intelligence;
- Non violent communication tactics;
- Group relations theory;
- Meditation / mindfulness.

As of early March 2023, approximately 150 people have attended the events. This group formed the survey sample. Beginning in February 2023, they were asked (5 times each) to complete the survey. Ultimately a respondent pool of 15% was analyzed.

The survey was phenomenological; it looked at patterns based on word matching and anonymous reports. The quantitative portions of the survey looked at how many people had contact after the event, compared to other events.

Both sets of responses were used to understand the meaning and impact of the experience.

This paper pairs the survey data with research and writing from the fields of somatic awareness, non violent communication, mindfulness, and group relations theory.

Part II: the feels format

The 'feels' event format is most heavily reliant on somatic awareness and mindfulness, while integrating the below practices / tools / elements:

- 10 seconds of silence to ask your body for consent to be in contact w others;
- A guided meditation;
- Prompts designed for depth;
- Positive reflecting;
- Eye gazing;
- Synchronized back to back breathing;
- Hand-on-heart facing + breathing;
- A long-held hug ;
- Moving meditation;
- Closing circle.

More info on the events is [HERE](#).

Part III: Survey results: analysis and evaluation

Beginning in February 2023, I conducted a survey of all past feels participants; this group totaled 142 people. After 5 requests to complete it, the survey ultimately had 21 respondents.

Quantitative

When asked whether they'd made a meaningful connection with someone new, and whether that connection had carried on past the evening of the event, **57% of respondents said, 'yes'**. Of those, 57% are still in contact as of survey participation.

When asked if they'd attended another, 'traditional' dating event, 63% responded 'yes'. Of those, 40% reported having contact with someone after the event.

Based on this data, we can conclude that **feels, and its format, is significantly more likely to create connection at depth as its competitors.**

Qualitative

A word cloud that summarizes responses to the question, 'what 3 words would you use to describe your experience' is provided below. Fun was the most repeated word (3 recurrences), with the others all at 2 recurrences.



Quotes from a survey question that asked for general feedback ('anything else you want us to know?') are included below:

"As someone who struggles with emotional intimacy I truly enjoyed the event. It forced me to push through the walls I put up and engage someone in a way I usually wouldn't until much later in a dating relationship. I knew none of the "important" things (job, where they're from, etc) about the people I paired with but I could tell energy and attraction right away. The exercises were centered on real connection instead of the on paper types of connection that dating apps encourage. Overall I got a lot out of the event, met some cool people and learned a lot about myself through the experience. I do plan to return!"

"Well-organized. Structured without being rigid. Like a personal trainer class – just follow the program and good things will happen."

"These events are curated to a perfect degree. I appreciate the creativity and structure. I also appreciate the unique settings. Have recommended to friends, and brought friends as well."

Other responses included people feeling like the event was too expensive / overpriced (its \$75, on average) and there were multiple reports of people feeling socially awkward / navigating feelings of awkwardness.

Part IV. The feels format + its research foundation

Format approach #1: Somatics, somatic awareness

At each feels event, before 'work' begins within a pair, attendees are invited to connect with their bodies via a 5-7 minute grounding meditation that acts as a body part by part invitation to feel and sense.

This is in recognition that:

"Your body is the seat of a powerful intelligence that helps you navigate your most important experiences and relationships...your body is your social and emotional sense organ. It is the lens through which you perceive your relational world, and the instrument by which you act in it." (Blake, 2019)

The body as emotional sense organ becomes an invitation to attendees to drop into a knowing, an awareness system that feels more grounded than cognition.

Before the grounding meditation, attendees are asked to engage in a moment of consent. This is done verbally: I tell them the points at which their body will make contact with

another body, and ask them to address their own body directly: "Body, am I a full 'yes' to making these points of contact with another body?" I then invite them to step from one part of the room to another, if they are a 'yes'. This inquiry and step into the space introduces the importance of somatic inquiry. As Dr Martha Eddy states:

"In somatic inquiry, attention is initially directed inward to the body and is supported by ideally being in a relaxed state. Enhanced attention involves sharpening sensory awareness and the state of relaxed alertness, also experienced as being present or mindful...attention has many purposes. In somatics, important features include its enhancement of physical safety, perception and cognition." (Eddy, 2017)

By introducing somatic inquiry first, the goal is to establish a sense of safety - within oneself, first and foremost.

After these initial, individual experiences, attendees are paired 5 times. In each pairing, there is a somatic experience shared between 2 people. These elements - eye gazing, back to back breathing, hand on heart connection and hugging - all fuse touch and somatic awareness:

"What the body experiences, the mind absorbs. It is not surprising that touch can evoke a state that engages 2 people in a healing process..." (Eddy, 2017)

Between the pairings, in order to restore one to a state of awareness of their own somatic experience, attendees are invited

to engage in movement. This portion is walking, in silence, with guidance to notice feet, posture, what needs are coming up for the body, what kind of movement the body wants to engage in.

"Mindful movement allows one to perceive life situations with a new perspective, which, in turn, impacts cognition and can be a baseline for creativity." (Eddy, 2017)

Here 'creativity' can be synonymous with 'openness' - movement as a portal to new openings - either romantic or otherwise. Further, Eddy offers:

"From the perspective of somatics, engaging...consciously is a key component in expanding behavioral choices and the overcoming of non-effectual habits...these activities change one's behavior...how one moves throughout the day, *how one touches someone else*, how one thinks. This type of exploration opens doors to choice - the option to select old or new behaviors." (Eddy, 2017)

Here I posit that in the insertion of somatics-forward interacting, resistant patterning and judgments have a chance to fall away, and be replaced by new choices, and then new decisions - as Blake says, a mini unarmoring can happen - via embodied self-awareness.

The feels format accesses all a body is able to communicate at any given moment. Exteroception gives access to the 5 senses - sight, sound, touch, taste, smell. These are called upon in the guided, walking meditation between pairings. Interoception calls upon an inner communication system - the feel of one's own

heartbeat, the sensation of breath going in and out - and these signals are accessed at multiple points throughout the night. For instance, invitations to take 3 breaths as a group after each somatic experience, and in the grounding meditation, open the portal to this level of experiencing. As Blake states, 'stress dissipates when you take a long breath'. (Blake, 2019). Proprioception, which brings awareness to the position of one's body, gives us access to 'deliberately changing our own internal sense of power - as well as other's perception of us.' (Blake, 2019) This awareness of positioning is accessed through the somatic experiences ("shift your body so that you are finding a bit more ease and comfort") and through the moving meditations ("where is your body in the room, what does your body need?").

feels holds that in our somatic competencies, lies our best indication system for whether we want to connect deeper to another. We automatically know what kind of touch we want; the somatics elements in feels give us a shortcut to the innate intelligence of our bodies, and the intelligence of others in turn.

Format approach #2 - Mindfulness

As outlined in the previous section, in the first phase of the event experience, attendees are asked to lay down, and are guided into a meditation.

These elements are designed to counter the 'stress' of a dating event, the structure of which can induce anxiety.

Research has shown that, 'present-moment awareness as a general disposition is associated with...reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms, lowered perceived stress, increased mood and improved well-being.' (Weinstein, 2009)

Further, 'when an individual is psychologically present, they are more aware of their options as well as their values, and are therefore more likely to respond in autonomously-motivated and values-consistent ways'. (Weinstein, 2009) The mindfulness portions of the event compliment the somatic elements by fusing present-moment awareness with ever deeper levels of awareness of what is happening within the body.

'feels' does not just include 1 meditative, mindful experience at the top of the event. In between pairings, participants are asked to engage in moving meditations.

This presencing serves to regulate the nervous system before the stress of what comes next: self-determined pairings, which can have an anxiety-inducing effect. The desire to be

chosen is practically universal. In order to prepare for this experience, and mitigate against stress, mindfulness is utilized:

"Results from [both] studies suggest that certain qualities of mindfulness may provide individuals with the ability to notice and engage with stress-induced emotions in an adaptive way, resulting in reduced negatively valenced emotions." (Himes, 2021)

Not only does the approach serve to mitigate against stressful emotions, but it aims to center people into a higher level of awareness - that they might determine who, energetically, they are called to pair up with next - and that they might calmly and easefully move into that next pair from this space.

This research supports 'feels's' assumptions that when one is grounded in their body, in somatic awareness, in present moment awareness, that this is an ideal state for connecting with others at depth, and without this centering, that depth is significantly less likely to be available.

Format approach #3 - Non violent communication

Non Violent Communication, created by Marshall Rosenberg PhD, is based on a fundamental principle: underlying all human actions are needs that people are seeking to meet, and

understanding and acknowledging these needs can create a shared basis for connection and cooperation. (Rosenberg, 2015)

'the feels' expands on this, by giving attendees an opportunity to fulfill a need to be seen and heard and accepted unconditionally. It asks them to respond to prompts that're open, and thematic.

It then asks them to positively reflect each other: using 'a compliment I'm excited to give you is...' as the prompt, for 45 seconds, they take turns reflecting what they heard + how it made them feel.

This is designed to create an experience of aliveness and depth; both people are paying attention only to each other:

"Conventional compliments often take the form of judgements, however positive, and are sometimes intended to manipulate. NVC encourages the expression of appreciation solely for celebration...when we receive appreciation expressed this way, we can do so without any feeling of superiority or false humility - instead we can celebrate along with the person who is offering the appreciation." (Rosenberg, 2015)

Format approach #4 - Group Relations Theory

Group relations theory invites us to consider BART - the role of Boundary, Authority, Role + Task - and its (positive) impact on a group, and the group's ability to optimally function to achieve the task. In the case of feels, the task is to 'create new levels of depth in connection'.

At each event, boundaries are established via 'enthusiastic consent'. Consent is obtained on 4 occasions: pre-event, in an email communication, at arrival when I confirm the email was read, before the facilitation starts, and before bodies make contact. While in traditional use of group relations theory boundary is defined in the context of, 'time, task, territory' - feels adapts slightly such that boundary applies to territory (body), task (speak, share, listen) and time (strict time is kept).

Leadership aka Authority is established at the top, and held until the facilitated portion is complete. Authority is both personal and formal, and not dropped until a closing circle, at which point I verbally indicated that our time is closed.

Clarity around Role is also established; when roles are switching, its made clear ('female speaks first, male listens, then switch' is a familiar command).

Tasks are also clear, and include: 'respond to the prompt I'm going to share, listen attentively, be present w your partner.'

BART analysis "assists in preventing loss of valuable resources, off task behavior...not to mention stress, frustration and potential interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. The consequences of any of these problem areas are likely to impede

or slow down the primary task and may ultimately be destructive for the good of the organization.” (Mollenkamp, 2005)

feels utilizes the BART framework to mitigate against stress and negatively valenced emotions, with a goal to create as much ease, softness and present-moment awareness as possible. It is from this place of ease, that connection at depth is most likely to occur.

Part V. Conclusion

This paper set out to understand if the 'feels' format - with its foundation in somatic awareness / somatic intelligence plus mindfulness plus non violent communication plus group relations theory - would create a level of connection that was more profound and enduring than at typical dating events, where these elements / tactics / approaches are not present.

The survey results concluded that not only is feels more effective in creating connections that have depth, but that the vision to create connections that have longevity as well as depth, has been realized.

In the course of a 3-hour event, a way of being is experienced that leaves people feeling joyful and appreciative. A WhatsApp thread that has 50% of all past participants, who converse with each other daily, stands as 'evidence' that the format screens for values-aligned people, and from this place of

curiosity and openness, an experience is had that creates a somatic and emotional response that people know to trust as 'healthy' and that they want to be part of into perpetuity.

Put more simply - as a result of feels, not only do participants feel connected to themselves but they feel connected to each other - at the pair and group level - and ultimate vision is realized.

References

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Appendix A - Survey Questions

WHAT HAPPENED @ THE EVENT

- If you can recall, how would you describe how you felt entering / arriving / coming into the event?

WHAT HAPPENED DURING

- Were there any elements of the experience that particularly stood out for you? If so - please describe.
- What 3 words would you use, to describe your feels experience?
- If you can recall, how would you describe how you felt at the end?

WHAT HAPPENED BECAUSE OF

- Did you meet anyone (new, that you didn't know before), that you had contact with after the event? Y/N
- If yes - what level of contact / engagement did you have? (please describe multiple, if there were)
- Are you STILL in contact of any kind RIGHT NOW with someone you met at a feels event? Y/N
- If yes - how many people?

UNDERSTANDING IMPACT COMPARED TO 'TYPICAL' EVENTS

- Have you attended other dating events before?

- If yes - how would you describe your experience?
- From what you can recall, did you have contact after with anyone (new, that you didnt know before) after those events
 - ?
- If yes - what level of contact / engagement did you have?

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