

# The Sense of Bodily Symptoms

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## Abstract

This paper explores the psychology of physical symptoms; how they present in the psychotherapy room and their underlying dynamics. From the beginning of psychoanalysis there has been an interest in those physical symptoms that do not seem to have a biological origin and, in particular, those physical illnesses that appear to be related to the patient's psychopathology. In order to explore such symptoms and illnesses further, this paper reviews the concepts of conversion and somatisation. The two concepts are compared and contrasted with specific attention paid to their genesis, to the meaning in the particular form that the symptoms take and to the therapeutic task associated with treating patients who present with these two types of pathology. Illustrative case material is introduced and the paper concludes that the distinction between the two pathologies can be understood in terms of relative mentalizing capacity. This understanding, it is argued, is clinically useful as it helps the therapist to make sense of the presenting problem as well as any shifts and changes occurring in the presentation