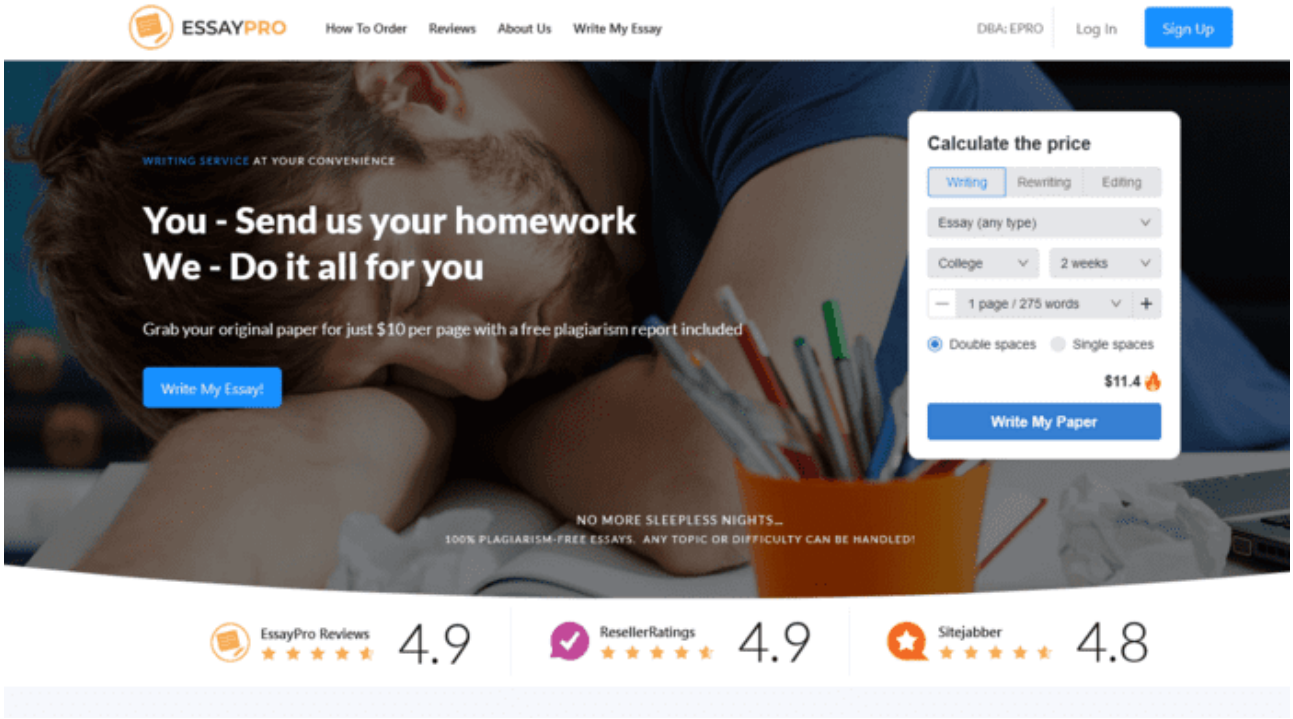
Proprioception Loss: Blinding the Mind From the Body



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Proprioception can be described as the mind's awareness of the body. Proprioception provides the central nervous system unconscious information about the body (Bluestone, 1992). The "awareness" of our body may be difficult to understand until we have lost our proprioceptive sense. Researchers concerned with proprioception have usually directed their studies toward identifying in what processes proprioception plays a major role, and what processes may be hindered if proprioception loss is severe. Unfortunately, not much is known about proprioception, or how much proprioception contributes to functional accuracy (Gordon, Ghilhardi, & Ghez, 1995).

Sherrington (1961) declares that the proprioceptive receptors, the nerves associated with proprioception, are effective at determining changes inside the organism; which is where the term "proprioception" originates. He explains that proprioceptive receptors are used especially in muscles and their accessory organs. Proprioceptive receptors and some receptors in the labyrinth (equilibrium detector located in the inner ear) work together to form our receptive systems. Finally, Sherrington shares that proprioception is responsible for continuous reflexes in skeletal muscles. In other words, proprioceptive receptors are

responsible for detecting when an area of the body is out of its natural state and prompts the muscles to return the area to a resting state. Proprioception may be best understood by looking at cases of proprioceptive loss.

To illustrate the profound effects of proprioceptive loss, Oliver Sacks documented a clinical case of a woman who lost all proprioception (1985). Sacks declared that the sense of our bodies relies on three things: vision, the vestibular stystem, and proprioception. His client lost all proprioception and could not walk without watching her own legs, or talk without listening to her own voice. She could not truly determine if she had a body. The patient could not perform any motor movements most people would deem natural without relying on environmental feedback to achieve the simplest maneuver. Oliver Sacks' clinical story reflects how much the mind depends on proprioception for even the most rudimentary actions not thought consciously considered. The following research demonstrates the importance of proprioception.

A group of researchers conducted a study to determine the deficits caused by the lack of neck and body proprioception (Blouin et. al., 1995). Their experiment consisted of normal individuals as well as a patient who had permanent and selective loss of neck and whole body proprioception. They determined through clinical tests that the patient could not "maintain upright posture without losing balance [or] perceive passive body rotations with the head stationary" (p.