



Somatic Experiencing: Listening to the Body That Never Stopped Protecting You

Have you ever found yourself saying,

“I know I’m safe now... so why does my body still react like I’m not?”

Perhaps your heart races during conflict.

Maybe your shoulders stay tight all day.

You freeze when someone raises their voice.

Your stomach knots before opening an email.

Or you feel exhausted after a difficult conversation, even though nothing physical happened.

Many people assume these reactions mean something is wrong with them.

Somatic Experiencing offers a different perspective.

What if your body isn’t malfunctioning?

What if it’s still trying to finish a job it never had the chance to complete?

What Is Somatic Experiencing?

Somatic Experiencing (SE), developed by Dr. Peter Levine, is a body-oriented approach to working with stress and trauma.

Rather than focusing primarily on changing thoughts or retelling painful stories, SE pays close attention to the body’s physical experience.

The underlying idea is that overwhelming stress can disrupt the body’s natural process of responding to and recovering from threat.

The goal isn’t to erase difficult memories.

It’s to help the nervous system regain flexibility and allow protective responses to complete safely.

Your Body Was Designed to Protect You

Imagine you step into the street and suddenly hear a car horn.

Before you've had time to think, your body has already reacted.

Your muscles tighten.

Your heart speeds up.

You jump back onto the sidewalk.

Only afterward does your thinking brain catch up.

That rapid response is exactly what your nervous system is designed to do.

Most of the time, once the danger has passed, your body gradually settles again.

But overwhelming or repeated stress can make that return more difficult.

Sometimes your body continues behaving as though the threat is still nearby—even when your conscious mind knows it isn't.

Trauma Is Not Just the Event

Two people can experience the same event and have very different responses.

Why?

Because trauma isn't determined only by what happened.

It's also influenced by how the nervous system experienced it and whether it had the opportunity to recover.

Somatic Experiencing encourages us to ask:

What is my body still carrying?

Instead of:

What's wrong with me?

The Body Speaks a Different Language

Our minds often communicate through words.

Our bodies communicate through sensation.

You might notice:

- tightness
- warmth
- trembling

- numbness
- heaviness
- butterflies
- shallow breathing
- pressure in your chest
- a lump in your throat
- tingling
- an urge to run
- an urge to curl up
- restlessness

These sensations are not necessarily problems to eliminate.

They may be information.

Why We Often Miss the Body's Signals

Many of us learned very early to ignore what our bodies were telling us.

Perhaps we heard:

“Stop crying.”

“You’re fine.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Just get over it.”

Over time we became skilled at disconnecting from our own internal experience.

The body didn’t stop communicating.

We simply stopped listening.

Somatic Practices to Reconnect

These practices are not about forcing relaxation.

They are about becoming curious.

1. Notice Before You Change

Pause.

Ask:

What do I notice in my body right now?

Not what you think.

Not why it's there.

Simply notice.

2. Pendulation

Somatic Experiencing often invites us to move gently between comfort and discomfort rather than staying immersed in distress.

For example:

Notice tension in your shoulders.

Then notice the support of the chair beneath you.

Return to the tension.

Then back to the support.

Your nervous system learns that discomfort and safety can exist together.

3. Orienting

Slowly look around the room.

Allow your eyes to land on things that feel neutral or pleasant.

Your body receives new information:

I am here.

This is now.

4. Track Sensations

Instead of saying,

"I'm anxious,"

try asking,

"Where do I notice that?"

Chest?

Throat?

Hands?

Stomach?

Often, simply noticing changes the experience.

5. Allow Small Movements

Sometimes your body wants to stretch.

Shake.

Yawn.

Take a deeper breath.

Roll your shoulders.

Shift your weight.

These aren't random.

They may be part of your nervous system moving toward regulation.

6. Resource Yourself

Think of someone, somewhere, or something that helps you feel grounded.

A favorite hiking trail.

A trusted friend.

A beloved pet.

A childhood memory.

Notice what changes in your body as you hold that image.

Regulation Doesn't Mean Feeling Good All the Time

One of the greatest misunderstandings about nervous system work is the idea that success means never feeling anxious, angry, or sad.

Healthy regulation means:

Feeling emotions...

Without becoming trapped inside them.

It means moving through experience instead of getting stuck.

How This Connects to Piecing Together Peace

One of the things I love most about Somatic Experiencing is that it reminds us the body is not separate from the rest of us.

Imagine someone says:

"You're imagining things."

We might explore that in several different ways.

Manipulation Psychology

Was this gaslighting?

What pattern is happening?

Nonviolent Communication

What am I feeling?

What need feels threatened?

Internal Family Systems

Which part of me immediately believed those words?

Somatic Experiencing

What happened inside my body the moment I heard them?

Did my chest tighten?

Did I stop breathing?

Did my stomach drop?

Did I feel the urge to leave?

Each perspective reveals something different.

Together they offer a fuller picture of healing.

What This Has to Do With Health

The body does not separate emotional experiences from physical ones as neatly as we sometimes imagine.

Chronic activation can influence:

- sleep
- digestion
- pain sensitivity
- muscle tension
- fatigue
- attention
- breathing patterns
- stress hormone regulation

This does not mean every physical symptom is caused by unresolved trauma.

Nor does it mean that body-based practices replace medical care.

It means the nervous system is one important part of whole-person health.

Nutrition matters.

Movement matters.

Medical care matters.

Relationships matter.

And the way our bodies carry stress matters too.

A Simple Five-Minute Somatic Check-In

When you notice yourself feeling overwhelmed:

Pause.

Notice your feet touching the floor.

Look around the room.

Take in your surroundings.

Ask:

What sensations do I notice?

Choose one sensation that feels neutral or pleasant.

Stay with it for a few breaths.

Then gently return your attention to whatever feels uncomfortable.

Notice whether anything has shifted.

You don't need to force change.

You only need to become curious.

Healing Is Learning to Trust Your Body Again

Many people come to believe their body is the enemy.

It startles too easily.

It hurts.

It won't sleep.

It reacts when they don't want it to.

Somatic Experiencing offers a different invitation.

Instead of asking,

“How do I stop my body from doing this?”

it asks,

“What has my body been trying to protect all along?”

That question changes everything.

Because when we stop fighting our body and begin listening to it with curiosity, we often discover that it has been trying to help us survive all along.

And perhaps the deepest form of healing is not teaching the body to become someone else.

It is helping it finally realize that it no longer has to carry yesterday's danger into today's life.