



## ABOUT SOMATIC EXPERIENCING

### WHAT IS SOMATIC EXPERIENCING?

Somatic Experiencing Therapy was first developed in the 1970s by Peter Levine, who went on to found the Somatic Experiencing Trauma Institute. Levine's approach grew out of his observations of the way animals responded to stressful or life-threatening situations in the wild. He noted that animals - who can face daily threats to their survival - appeared to possess innate coping mechanisms that enabled them to recover from these events relatively quickly and return to normal functioning.

When a threat to an animal's safety presents itself, its nervous system goes on high alert, ready to respond in whatever way necessary. There is a mobilisation of energy in the body and a surge of power to the muscles to enable the animal to either face or avoid the threat - fight or flight. Once the danger has passed, the animal's body and nervous system are able to return to a state of relaxation. As part of this process, animals often discharge the stress energy in their bodies through trembling, panting, shaking - sometimes finding ways to complete moments of fight or flight that they were not able to enact at the time.

Levine noticed that human beings, however, have a tendency to override these natural behaviours. This means that in the wake of traumatic experiences our nervous system can become stuck on alert. At some level, we continue to be oriented to danger, even when the danger has passed. Our nervous system is stuck in a chronic state of activation, draining our energy and creating habitual patterns of tension in the body. Over time, we construct our lives on a foundation of complex defences designed to protect us and keep us safe from danger. We may start to avoid people and situations that represent a potential threat. People can find themselves caught in loop of self-perpetuating stress with no idea how to break the cycle.

Somatic Experiencing contends that it is not the original events themselves that cause traumatic symptoms to appear but, rather, an inability on our part to complete and discharge the fight/flight/freeze responses that were generated in order to cope with the crisis. This leaves our bodies in a state of suppressed high-activation, which causes chronic tension to appear, together with many of the physical and psychological symptoms of ill-health we experience. Another way to describe this would be to say that it leaves the body in a state akin to a car with both the accelerator pedal and brake fully pressed down: literally 'all revved up with nowhere to go.'

## HOW DOES SOMATIC EXPERIENCING WORK?

The aim of Somatic Experiencing is to enable the nervous system to bring itself back into regulation. We do this in a variety of ways.

One approach is through helping clients to focus on the *felt sense*: a deepening awareness of emotions and physical sensations as they arise in the body that enables us to navigate our way more skilfully through states of stress and high activation.

SE also uses a technique known as *titration*, which is commonly used in other trauma treatments. Rather than dive straight into the heart of a trauma during a session, the client is encouraged initially to work at a level and pace that feels manageable to them. As sessions progress, he or she will gradually increase their capacity to bear the feelings and sensations that arise, building confidence and safety as they go. This helps with integration.

In an SE session we might also work with *pendulation*, which involves helping a client to experience the movement between a state of activation or dysregulation, and then back to a place of safety and self-regulation again. As part of this process, clients are encouraged to develop *resources*, which are any sources of strength and comfort that help the nervous system to be able to tolerate traumatic material. The aim of working with these techniques is to help the client increasingly learn how to regulate their nervous system independently.

## WHAT CAN SOMATIC EXPERIENCING HELP WITH?

Amongst other things...

- Wanting to feel more grounded and connected to our bodies and the world around us.
- Anxiety; depression; irritability; mood swings.
- Feeling stuck or lethargic; chronic fatigue.
- Unexplained physical symptoms, such as aching joints, digestive problems and disturbed sleep.
- Addictions; phobias; obsessive thinking; PTSD.
- Recovery from short-term traumas, such as falls or car accidents.



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