

What Is Somatic Therapy?

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May 27, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Your body can stay stuck in a stress response long after a threat is gone, which explains why you can feel tension, anxiety, or unease even when your mind knows you're safe
- › Somatic therapy works by focusing on physical sensations like tightness or shallow breathing, helping you retrain your nervous system instead of just analyzing your thoughts
- › Simple techniques like shaking, somatic grounding, and controlled breathing help release stored stress and allow your body to complete reactions that were never finished
- › Research shows body-based therapies improve trauma symptoms, mood, and sleep, especially when practiced consistently over structured sessions
- › Building awareness of your body signals gives you more control over emotional reactions, helping you stay calm, recover faster from stress, and feel more stable day to day

You can sit in a quiet room, feel completely safe, and still notice your chest tighten or your breath turn shallow. You know nothing is wrong. Your body disagrees. That disconnect, between what your mind understands and what your nervous system keeps doing, is what somatic therapy targets. It's a body-centered approach that uses movement, breath work, and physical awareness to resolve stress and trauma that remain active in your nervous system long after the original event has passed.

Unlike conventional talk therapy, which works primarily through conversation and cognitive understanding, somatic therapy starts with what your body is doing right now – the tension, the shallow breathing, the tightness you carry without realizing it. Interest in this approach has surged in recent years, and for good reason.

Talk therapy helps you understand your experiences, but understanding alone doesn't always quiet a nervous system that remains locked in a stress response. Your body can keep reacting long after the threat is gone, and no amount of insight changes that on its own. Here's what that looks like biologically. When your brain detects a threat, your autonomic nervous system activates. Your muscles tense to prepare for action. Stress hormones flood your system.

If you actually run or fight, those responses complete their cycle and your body returns to baseline. But if the response gets interrupted – you freeze, you suppress the reaction, you push through – your nervous system doesn't get the signal that the threat is over. The activation stays. Your muscles hold their brace. Your stress hormones keep cycling. That's what practitioners mean when they say stress is "stored" in your body.

That raises a direct question: if stress lives in your body, not just your thoughts, does it make sense to address it physically rather than verbally? The research and real-world accounts below show how people are already putting that idea to the test, and what the results look like so far.

Movement-Based Therapy Shows Real World Emotional Release

A New York Times article highlighted how people actively use movement inside therapy sessions to deal with stress and trauma.¹ Instead of only talking through problems, individuals incorporate physical actions like shaking, breath work, and posture changes. The foundation of this method comes from psychologist Peter A. Levine, who developed somatic experiencing in the 1970s.

His core idea is that during stressful events, your body mobilizes a cascade of neurochemical and muscular responses – adrenaline surges, muscles brace, your heart rate spikes – all designed to help you fight or flee. If you can't do either, because you're a child with no escape or an adult frozen in a high-pressure situation, that mobilized energy doesn't discharge.

It stays locked in your muscles and nervous system. Over time, it drives ongoing tension and emotional distress, even when the original threat is long gone.

Movement and awareness provide a way to discharge that stored energy so your system can return to a calmer state. In one example, a woman described practicing "somatic shaking," where she moves her body for several minutes to release tension. She said it's "like a moving meditation," explaining that it looks unusual but delivers real emotional relief.

- **Real people report emotional breakthroughs that talk therapy alone didn't provide** – The article describes individuals who spent years in conventional therapy but still felt stuck, especially when dealing with deep-rooted trauma. After adding movement, they experienced something different.

One participant noted that after five to 10 minutes of shaking, she often sits quietly and allows deeper emotions to surface, sometimes leading to crying. That emotional release signals something important. Your body holds onto unprocessed experiences, and when you give it a way to express them physically, those emotions finally come out.

- **Simple techniques form the core of this approach** – The methods described are straightforward and accessible. They include:
 - **Shaking or movement to release tension** – Short bursts of movement help discharge built-up stress energy in your body.

- **Somatic grounding exercises to reconnect with the present** – This means focusing on physical contact, like your feet on the floor, to stabilize your nervous system.
- **Breath work and posture adjustments** – Changing how you breathe or sit directly affects how your body responds to stress.
- **Therapists guide you to notice where emotions live in your body** – A key technique involves slowing everything down. Instead of jumping straight into problem-solving, therapists ask questions like, "Where do you feel that in your body?"

That question shifts your attention inward. It trains you to recognize physical signals tied to emotions. For example, **anger** might show up as tight shoulders, while anxiety could feel like a knot in your stomach. Once you identify those signals, you gain a new level of awareness that makes your reactions easier to manage.

- **Movement becomes a tool to express what was never expressed** – Another powerful technique involves acting out responses your body never completed. The article explains that clients might simulate running away by jogging in place or practice saying "Stop!" with their hand extended.

These actions help complete stress responses that were interrupted during past experiences. This matters because your body remembers unfinished reactions. When you physically act them out, you give your nervous system a sense of closure.

- **Not everyone responds the same way, and evidence remains limited** – Experts quoted in the article stress that somatic therapy shows promise but still lacks strong, large-scale research support. Some techniques, like **breathing exercises** and muscle relaxation, already appear in established therapies. However, when grouped together as a standalone approach, the results are still under investigation.

Your Nervous System Drives Long-Term Stress Patterns

Personal accounts and clinical observations point in a promising direction, but they don't tell us how reliably these outcomes occur or why they work at a physiological level. For that, structured research offers a clearer picture, and the findings so far reinforce what practitioners have been seeing in their sessions.

A report published by Meridian University pulls together several peer-reviewed findings on somatic trauma therapy, showing how the approach focuses on physical sensations as the starting point for healing.² Instead of asking you to analyze what happened, this approach tracks what your body is doing in real time. That shift matters because many people already understand their past experiences mentally, yet still feel stuck physically.

The research highlights that this method works in the "space between what the mind has processed and what the body continues to hold," which gives you a direct path to address symptoms that talking alone hasn't resolved.

- **People with trauma often live with a body that stays on high alert** — The population described includes individuals with chronic stress and trauma histories, especially those who experienced repeated or early-life stress. The findings show that the nervous system can stay activated long after the original event ends. In everyday terms, your body acts like danger is still present. That leads to constant tension, emotional strain, and difficulty calming down.
- **Research shows measurable improvements across multiple areas** — A 2023 meta-analysis cited in the source reviewed 29 studies involving body-based therapies for trauma and found moderate improvements in key symptoms.³ These included reductions in trauma-related distress, better mood, and improved sleep.

That combination matters because these issues often occur together. When sleep improves, your energy and focus improve. When emotional distress drops, daily interactions feel easier. The results show that addressing your body changes multiple systems at once, not just how you think.

- **Specific therapies show strong results in controlled trials** – One randomized controlled trial described in the research involved 63 participants who completed 15 weekly sessions of somatic experiencing.⁴ The results showed large reductions in trauma severity and depression compared to those who received no treatment. Another study involving women with childhood trauma found improvements in body awareness, anxiety levels, and the ability to self-soothe after 20 sessions.⁵
- **Attention to body signals improves emotional control** – A 2024 review of 43 studies found that awareness of internal body sensations strongly links to emotional regulation.⁶ When you get better at noticing what's happening inside your body, you handle stress more effectively. You recover faster after being triggered. That creates a practical skill you can build over time. Think of it like training a muscle. The more you practice noticing and responding calmly, the stronger that ability becomes.
- **The therapy uses structured techniques to retrain your system** – Sessions follow a guided process that includes several core steps. These techniques create a sense of control, step by step:
 - **Noticing sensations as they arise** – You learn to identify physical signals like tightness or warmth without reacting immediately.
 - **Alternating between comfort and discomfort** – This keeps your system from becoming overwhelmed and builds tolerance gradually.
 - **Revisiting past-linked sensations in small, controlled doses** – Practitioners call this titration; think of it like adjusting a dimmer switch gradually instead of flipping a floodlight on full blast. You approach the difficult sensation just enough to process a small piece, then pull back to safety before your system gets overwhelmed.
- **Progress depends on pacing and safety, not intensity** – The research emphasizes that sessions move slowly, based on what your nervous system can handle at any moment. This pacing prevents overwhelm and builds trust in your own body. When

you feel safe during the process, you stay engaged. Over time, that consistent engagement leads to stronger regulation, better emotional balance, and improved daily function.

How to Retrain Your Body to Release Stress

Your body holds onto patterns that your mind already understands. That's the root issue. You think you have moved on, yet your nervous system still reacts like the past is happening now. Focus on changing that pattern directly. You're not trying to think your way out of stress. You're teaching your body a new response through repetition, awareness, and controlled movement.

If you feel stuck, tense for no clear reason, or emotionally reactive in situations that don't match the intensity, this approach gives you something practical to work with. You build control step by step. You train your system the same way you would train strength or endurance.

- 1. Start by tracking where stress lives in your body** – Sit or lie down in a quiet space and spend two to three minutes scanning slowly from the top of your head to the soles of your feet. Don't try to fix anything, just notice. Where do you feel tightness? Pressure? Warmth? Numbness? Do this at the same time each day, ideally in the morning before your routine starts or at night before sleep.

Within a week or two of consistent practice, you'll start catching stress signals you previously missed entirely. You're building awareness of internal signals, which research links to better emotional control. If you ignore these signals, your body keeps reacting automatically. When you notice them consistently, you interrupt that pattern and begin to take control.

- 2. Use short bursts of movement to discharge tension** – Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, and begin shaking your hands and arms. Let the movement spread into your shoulders, torso, and legs until your whole body

is involved. Keep going for five to 10 minutes. You can put on music if it helps you stay with it. Afterward, stand or sit still for at least two minutes with your eyes closed. Notice what you feel.

Some people experience warmth, tingling, a wave of emotion, or a sudden sense of calm. Whatever comes up, don't judge it or try to analyze it. Just observe. The goal is to release built-up stress energy stored in your system, similar to the "somatic shaking" described in practice. Afterward, sit quietly and observe what comes up. If emotions surface, let them. That release is your body completing a response that stayed unfinished.

- 3. Alternate between comfort and mild discomfort** — Shift your focus between a neutral or pleasant sensation and a tense area. Start with something mild, like a slightly stiff neck, not your most painful spot. Hold your attention on the discomfort for three to five seconds, then return to your anchor (your breath, the feeling of your hands resting on your legs) for 10 to 15 seconds.

Repeat for two to three minutes. If at any point the discomfort intensifies sharply or you feel panicky, return to your anchor and stay there. The goal is gradual exposure, not endurance. This method keeps you from becoming overwhelmed while building tolerance and trains your system to stay regulated under stress.

- 4. Practice somatic grounding to reset your nervous system** — Place your feet firmly on the floor. Press your hands against a wall or chair. Focus on physical contact. Grounding helps your body recognize that you're safe in the present moment. If your mind starts racing, bring your attention back to that physical connection.

This is a simple way to stop stress from escalating. Somatic grounding is different from "[earthing](#)," the practice of walking barefoot outdoors to absorb the Earth's electrons. While earthing is a biophysical practice, somatic grounding is a nervous system reset.

5. Rehearse actions your body hasn't completed – If you felt frozen in a past situation, act out the response now. Push your hand forward and say "Stop." Step back as if you're leaving. These movements help your body finish stress responses that were interrupted. Over time, this reduces the intensity of automatic reactions because your system no longer carries that unfinished energy.

If your trauma history involves abuse, violence, or events that feel overwhelming to recall, practice this step with a trained somatic therapist rather than on your own. The technique is powerful precisely because it accesses deep nervous system patterns, and a practitioner can help you pace the process safely. For everyday stress responses, such as a confrontation you didn't stand up to or a moment you froze during a presentation, self-practice is generally safe and effective.

Each step builds on the last. You're not forcing change. You're creating it through repetition. The more you practice, the more your body shifts from constant tension to a state that feels stable, controlled, and calm.

FAQs About Somatic Therapy

Q: What is somatic therapy in simple terms?

A: Somatic therapy is a body-focused approach that helps you process stress and trauma by working with physical sensations instead of only thoughts. It uses movement, breath work, and awareness to address tension and reactions stored in your nervous system, which often remain even after you understand your experiences mentally.

Q: Why does my body still feel stressed even when I feel safe?

A: Your nervous system learns patterns during stressful or traumatic events and keeps repeating them. This means your body stays on alert, creating symptoms like tight muscles, shallow breathing, and emotional reactivity, even when no danger exists. These patterns persist because your body never completed its original stress response.

Q: How is somatic therapy different from talk therapy?

A: Talk therapy focuses on understanding your experiences through conversation. Somatic therapy focuses on what your body is doing in the moment. Instead of analyzing events, you learn to notice physical sensations and change how your body responds, which helps resolve stress patterns that talking alone doesn't fix.

Q: What techniques are used in somatic therapy?

A: Common techniques include shaking to release tension, grounding exercises to feel stable, breath work to calm your system, and acting out physical responses that were never completed. These methods help your body discharge stored stress and retrain how it reacts to triggers.

Q: Does somatic therapy actually work?

A: Research shows moderate improvements in trauma symptoms, mood, and sleep, with stronger results in structured programs lasting several weeks. Studies also show that increasing awareness of body sensations improves emotional control and recovery from stress. While evidence continues to develop, many people report meaningful relief when they address the physical side of stress.

Sources and References

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