

# Somatic therapies may build awareness of the mind–body connection to treat trauma. Could they could help you?

August 21 2024, by Christopher Patterson and Lorna Moxham

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As you read this, draw your attention to your jaw. Are you aware of any sensations? Are there areas of tension? Does your jaw feel tight or

relaxed?

Now imagine releasing any tension. What would that feel like?

Next, bring your awareness back to your breathing and back to this article.

This may seem familiar. You might have scanned areas of your body before, checked where you may be carrying tension and been prompted to see if you can release it.

This is just one example of approaches to build awareness of mind and body—and the connection between the two. Exercises like this involve recognizing physical sensations, how your body is feeling, what it is experiencing, and even exploring the physiological connection to the psychological.

As you scan your body, you may notice emotions—perhaps anxiety, stress or sadness—arising in connection to bodily tension.

The idea of this connection is behind what are known as "somatic therapies."

## **A focus on the mind–body connection**

Somatic therapies (from the Greek word for body—soma) focus on the connection [between the mind and body](#), which makes it different to other psychotherapies.

More traditional mental health approaches, such as cognitive behavior therapy, raise awareness of the mind and its connection to behaviors. They often use talking to explore the mind, its emotions and thoughts, and prompt people to recognize and address negative thought and

behavior patterns.

Somatic therapies, in contrast, privilege the body. They are therapeutic approaches based on the understanding that physical and psychological connections exist, and that emotions and psychological experiences can manifest and be expressed as bodily sensations.

But somatic therapies go further than understanding that emotions like stress can affect physical health. Instead, people are guided to bring awareness to their body and how emotions are experienced as physical sensations in the body—then explore how this may be released through physical means.

## What it looks like

Consider the tension in someone's jaw identified in an awareness exercise like the one at the start of this article. Somatic therapies can help people safely explore the sensations' connection to emotion, or a [traumatic experience](#). Then, through exercises like breathwork or [body movement activities](#) such as stretching, posture adjustment or even jumping, [people release tension](#).

Somatic or [mind–body therapies](#) are used by a variety of health-care and mental-health professionals, most commonly in the treatment of anxiety and trauma experiences and conditions, such as [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD).

However, these are still [alternative therapies](#) with [limited research evidence](#) to demonstrate clinical effectiveness. Most evidence in this emerging field is linked to a particular type of somatic therapy known as "[somatic experiencing](#)."

## A defined approach

Somatic experiencing was developed by [American psychotherapist Peter Levine](#) over several decades. It is [described](#) as "bottom-up processing" that directs the client's attention "to internal sensations, both visceral (interoception) and musculo-skeletal (proprioception and kinesthesia), rather than primarily cognitive or emotional experiences."

These bodily sensations are seen as the manifestation of post-traumatic stress experiences, which have accumulated in the body at a neurological level as a "[body memory](#)". Levine theorizes that this incomplete acute stress response (when someone is stuck in fight, flight or freeze mode) can lead to ongoing dysregulation in the body's stress and relaxation systems.

But people can learn to recognize and release this stored trauma. According to [practitioners](#) the technique can help people release, recover and become more resilient.

Traumatic memories are targeted by gradually [developing more and more tolerance](#) for unpleasant sensations and their connection to emotions.

Over a series of sessions, clients are taken through a stepped model to build awareness of body sensations associated with a traumatic event or cumulative stress, learn to tolerate the difficult [sensation](#), and then [release it](#).

A 2020 [literature review](#) of somatic experiencing studies indicated early but promising indications it may be effective in reducing traumatic [stress](#) and as a treatment for PTSD. The authors concluded more randomized and controlled studies were needed.

## But could it work for you?

The effectiveness of psychotherapies are often in part driven by a participant's connection to and engagement with the theory and practice. What works for some may not work for others. Somatic therapies with their unique focus on mind–body connection may be an alternative therapy people wish to explore.

Early evidence and [personal stories](#) show some positive outcomes. However, somatic therapy does not yet have conclusive research evidence to back its effectiveness.

As always, consult your health professional and seek trusted information and health advice.

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