

FREE RESOURCE · NOVA COUNSELLING SERVICES

The Beginner's Guide to Somatic Experiencing

How body-based trauma therapy works — and why your nervous system holds the key to real healing.

APPROACH

**Somatic Experiencing
(SE)**

Nova Counselling Services

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WHY THIS GUIDE

Trauma lives in the body — not just *the mind.*

You've talked about it. You understand what happened. You might even know exactly why you feel the way you do. But something still feels stuck — in your chest, your gut, your shoulders, your throat.

That's because trauma isn't just a memory. It's an unfinished physical response stored in your nervous system. Traditional talk therapy is powerful — but for many people, it doesn't reach the part of the body where trauma actually lives.

Somatic Experiencing (SE) was developed by Dr. Peter Levine after studying how animals in the wild naturally discharge stress and return to calm after life-threatening events. His insight: humans have the same capacity — but modern life, shame, and social pressure often stop us from completing that process. The result is trauma that gets frozen in the body.

This guide explains what SE is, how it works, and what to expect if you decide to pursue it. Whether you're trauma-informed already or hearing about this for the first time, this is your clear starting point.

"Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness."

— DR. PETER A. LEVINE, FOUNDER OF SOMATIC EXPERIENCING

THE FOUNDATION

What Is Somatic Experiencing?

Somatic Experiencing is a body-oriented approach to healing trauma and chronic stress. Rather than focusing on the story of what happened, SE focuses on the physical sensations that arise when that story is gently approached — and helps the nervous system complete the responses it never got to finish.

The word *somatic* comes from the Greek "soma," meaning body. SE works on the premise that the body is not just a vessel for the mind — it's an active participant in how we process, store, and release experience.

In an SE session, your therapist won't push you to retell painful events in detail. Instead, they'll guide your attention inward — to sensations, impulses, breath, posture — and help the stuck energy in your nervous system gently unwind at its own pace.



What the research shows: SE has demonstrated significant reductions in PTSD symptoms, anxiety, and physical complaints across multiple clinical studies. A 2017 randomized controlled trial found SE reduced PTSD severity by over 44% after just 15 sessions.

THE SCIENCE

Your Nervous System & *the Trauma Response*

SE is built on a deep understanding of the autonomic nervous system — the part of you that runs on autopilot, managing survival, safety, and connection without conscious thought.

When we encounter threat, the nervous system activates one of three responses. These aren't choices — they're automatic, hardwired survival programs. The problem isn't that they activate. The problem is when they get *stuck*.

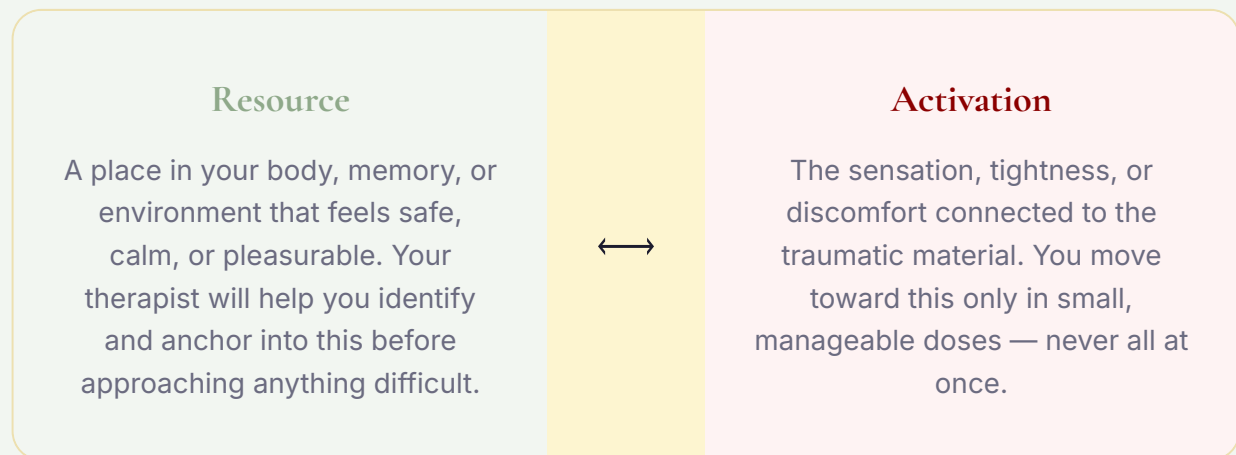
STATE	NERVOUS SYSTEM	WHAT IT FEELS LIKE	STUCK LOOKS LIKE
Fight / Flight	Sympathetic activation	Alert, energized, ready to act	Chronic anxiety, rage, hypervigilance, panic attacks
Freeze	Dorsal vagal shutdown	Still, collapsed, dissociated	Numbness, depression, fatigue, disconnection from body
Fawn / Appease	Mixed activation	Compliant, people-pleasing	Loss of self, difficulty saying no, chronic resentment
Safe & Social	Ventral vagal (regulated)	Calm, connected, present	The goal of SE — returning here reliably

"The antidote to trauma is not catharsis or reliving — it's the gentle, supported completion of interrupted survival responses."

— SOMATIC EXPERIENCING CORE PRINCIPLE

The Two Key Tools SE Therapists *Use*

Two concepts are central to how SE keeps the healing process safe and effective. Understanding them will help you feel more at ease walking into a session.



Pendulation is the rhythm of moving between resource and activation — back and forth, gently — like a pendulum. This builds your nervous system's capacity to tolerate difficulty without being overwhelmed. Over time, the activation loses its charge.

Titration is working in tiny increments — a drop at a time. SE never asks you to dive into the deep end. Small exposures allow the nervous system to process and integrate without re-traumatizing.

INSIDE THE ROOM

What Actually Happens *in an SE Session?*

People are often surprised by how different SE feels from traditional therapy. There's less talking about the past, and more noticing the present — specifically, what's happening in your body right now.



Grounding & Orienting

Every session begins by helping you feel present and safe in the room — noticing your feet on the floor, scanning the space, feeling the chair beneath you.

"Before we begin, just notice what it feels like to be sitting here right now. What do you notice in your body?"



Tracking Sensation

Your therapist will gently guide your attention to physical sensations as they arise — tightness, warmth, tingling, heaviness. These are the language of the nervous system.

"You mentioned your chest felt tight just then. Can you stay with that sensation for a moment — what happens to it as you pay attention?"



Discharging & Completing

As the nervous system releases stored activation, you may experience trembling, warmth, a deep exhale, tears, or spontaneous movement. This is healthy — it's the body finishing what it started.

"I notice your hands just started to shake slightly. That's your body starting to release. Let's stay with that — there's no rush."

Resourcing

Your therapist will help you identify internal and external resources — memories, sensations, images, or relationships that feel genuinely safe and calming.

"Think of a place where you've felt completely at ease — even for a moment. What do you notice in your body as you picture it?"



Completing Survival Responses

SE allows the body to finish the physical action it was stopped from completing — running, pushing away, defending. This might be subtle: a tiny hand movement, a shift in posture.

"Notice if there's any impulse in your arms right now — even the smallest one. What does your body want to do?"



Integration

The session closes with a return to calm and a moment of integration — helping your system settle, consolidate what shifted, and prepare to re-enter daily life.

"Take a moment. What feels different from when we started? Just notice — there's no right answer."

HOW THERAPY PROGRESSES

The 3 Phases of *SE Therapy*

SE follows a paced, phase-based structure. Most clients work with their therapist across 10–25 sessions, though complex or developmental trauma may take longer. There's no rushing — your nervous system sets the pace.

01

Safety & Stabilization

EARLY SESSIONS ·
BUILD THE
CONTAINER

Establish safety, identify resources, learn body awareness skills. Build the foundation of trust with your therapist. Reduce day-to-day dysregulation.

02

Processing & Integration

MIDDLE SESSIONS ·
MOVE THROUGH
IT

Gently approach traumatic material through titration and pendulation. Complete interrupted survival responses. The body begins to discharge and reorganize.

03

Consolidation

LATER SESSIONS ·
BUILD FORWARD

Integrate changes into daily life. Strengthen regulated relationships. Develop resilience and a new, embodied sense of self — post-trauma identity.

BETWEEN SESSIONS

4 SE-Inspired Exercises *You Can Try Today*

These are gentle introductions to somatic awareness — not substitutes for

therapy, but a safe way to begin noticing your body's language.

01

3-5 MINUTES

Orienting Scan

1. Sit comfortably and let your eyes slowly scan the room
2. Let your gaze land on something that feels neutral or pleasant
3. Notice what happens in your body when you look at it
4. Breathe naturally — don't control it
5. Do this whenever you feel anxious or dissociated

02

5 MINUTES

Grounding Through Feet

1. Sit or stand with both feet flat on the floor
2. Press gently into the ground and notice the contact
3. Notice the weight of your body in the chair or your legs
4. Say quietly: "I am here. I am safe right now."
5. Repeat until you feel more present

03

2-3 MINUTES

Find Your Resource

1. Think of a person, place, pet, or memory that feels genuinely warm
2. Hold that image in your mind for 30 seconds

04

5-10 MINUTES

Shake It Out

1. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart
2. Begin to gently bounce your knees — let your whole body vibrate

3. Notice where in your body you feel something shift — warmth, softening, ease
4. Anchor that sensation — you can return here anytime
5. This is your resource. Use it before and after difficult moments

3. Let the shaking spread naturally — don't force it, don't stop it
4. After 3–5 minutes, go still and notice the sensation
5. This mimics the natural discharge animals use after threat

 *If any exercise brings up intense emotion or overwhelm, stop and return to the Orienting Scan or Grounding exercise. These practices are most effective when done with the support of a trained SE therapist.*

IS THIS RIGHT FOR YOU?

SE May Be the Right Fit

If You Recognize Any of This

SE is effective across a wide range of presentations — from single-incident trauma to complex, developmental, or early childhood experiences.

- ☐ You've been in talk therapy before but still feel something unresolved — like you understand it but can't feel the change
- ☐ Your body often holds tension, pain, or discomfort that has no clear physical cause
- ☐ You experience anxiety, panic, or numbness that seems to arrive without warning
- ☐ You feel cut off from your body, emotions, or sense of pleasure — even in safe situations
- ☐ You startle easily, feel chronically on edge, or struggle to wind down
- ☐ You've experienced physical or sexual assault, accidents, medical trauma, or loss
- ☐ Childhood experiences left you with deep-rooted shame, fear, or hypervigilance
- ☐ You want a therapy that honours your body — not just your thoughts

SE is well-suited for PTSD, complex trauma (C-PTSD), developmental trauma, grief, anxiety,

chronic pain with a trauma component, and burnout. Not sure if it's right for you? Book a free consultation and we'll talk it through honestly.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

SE vs. Traditional *Talk Therapy*

SE isn't a replacement for talk therapy — it's a different entry point. Many people use both. Here's how they compare:

DIMENSION	TALK THERAPY (CBT / PSYCHODYNAMIC)	SOMATIC EXPERIENCING
Primary Focus	Thoughts, beliefs, narrative, insight	Body sensations, nervous system states
How Trauma is Approached	Through the story and meaning	Through physical sensation and impulse
Sessions Feel Like	Conversation, reflection, reframing	Guided inner attention, gentle movement
Best For	Understanding patterns, cognitive shifts, building coping	Stuck trauma responses, body symptoms, dissociation
Re-traumatization Risk	Moderate if story is retold intensely	Low — designed to stay within the window of tolerance

Your body has been waiting to be heard.

If this resonated, the next step is a free 15-minute
consultation — no pressure, just a conversation to see if SE
is the right fit for where you are right now.

BOOK YOUR FREE CONSULTATION

Or reach out directly — Nadia@novacounsellingservices.com

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This guide is for educational purposes and does not constitute therapy or clinical
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