

Somatic Experiencing

The work of Peter Levine: trauma, the body, and finishing what was started

Peter Levine developed Somatic Experiencing (SE) over several decades, introducing it widely in *Waking the Tiger* (1997). He noticed that wild animals face life-threatening danger often, yet seem to recover without lasting trauma. His proposal: trauma is not only **what happened**, but what the body was **unable to complete**, and healing can involve helping the body gently finish what it started.

01 Levine's model of the threat response

WHEN IT COMPLETES

A response that runs its course

- 1 **Threat appears:** the nervous system mobilises energy to survive.
- 2 **Fight, flight or freeze:** the body acts on that mobilised energy.
- 3 **Settling:** shaking, trembling or deep breaths may help activation ease.
- 4 **Return:** the body comes back to a steadier baseline.

WHEN IT IS INTERRUPTED

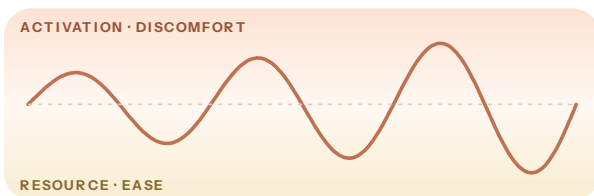
A response that gets stuck

- 1 **Threat appears:** the same mobilisation begins.
- 2 **Response is blocked:** by overwhelm, restraint, freeze or circumstance.
- 3 **No settling:** the activation has no way to resolve.
- 4 **Lingering symptoms:** the body may stay braced or shut down long after.

In this view, trauma symptoms are not a personal flaw, but an unfinished survival response that the body may still be able to complete.

02 Core tools of SE

Slow, gentle and led by the body



small swings first; capacity grows over time

Titration

Touching difficult material in very small doses, so the nervous system isn't overwhelmed.

Pendulation

Moving attention gently between activation and a place of ease, back and forth.

Resourcing

Building felt safety first: places, people, memories or sensations that steady you.

Tracking

Noticing inner sensations moment by moment, with curiosity rather than retelling the story.

03 SIBAM: the layers of an experience

Levine's map of what practitioners attend to

S

Sensation

warmth, tightness, tingling

I

Image

pictures, sounds, smells

B

Behaviour

posture, gesture, movement

A

Affect

emotions and feeling tone

M

Meaning

thoughts, beliefs, story

04 Gentle practices to try

Stop if you feel overwhelmed

01

Orient

Slowly look around the room. Let your eyes rest on something pleasant or neutral.

02

Ground

Feel your feet on the floor and the chair supporting your weight.

03

Find a resource

Recall a person, place or moment of ease. Notice where it lands in your body.

04

Pendulate

Briefly notice a mild tension, then return to your resource. Go back and forth, gently.

⚠ **Go gently.** Working with trauma in the body is best done with a trained practitioner. If a practice brings up strong distress, stop, open your eyes, orient to the room, and bring it to your therapist.

What research suggests

The first randomised trial of SE found **large reductions in PTSD symptoms** and depression compared with a waitlist (Brom et al., 2017). A scoping review found early positive results, but the evidence base is **still small** compared with trauma-focused CBT or EMDR (Kuhfuß et al., 2021). Levine's explanations of how SE works are theoretical and not yet directly tested.

05 Reflection

Where do I notice tension or activation settling in my body?

What helps me feel grounded or safe in my body right now?

What would one small, gentle step toward support look like?

SOURCES

Brom, D., Stokar, Y., Lawi, C., Nuriel-Porat, V., Ziv, Y., Lerner, K., & Ross, G. (2017). Somatic experiencing for posttraumatic stress disorder: A randomized controlled outcome study. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 30(3), 304–312. · Kuhfuß, M., Maldei, T., Hetmanek, A., & Baumann, N. (2021). Somatic experiencing – effectiveness and key factors of a body-oriented trauma therapy: A scoping literature review. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12(1), 1929023. · Levine, P. A. (1997). *Waking the tiger: Healing trauma*. North Atlantic Books. · Levine, P. A. (2010). *In an unspoken voice: How the body releases trauma and restores goodness*. North Atlantic Books.