

What is Somatic Experiencing®?

“Somatic” means “of the body.”

Somatic Experiencing® (SE) is a body-focused approach to understanding and healing the effects of stress and trauma.

SE is different from talk therapy, bodywork or energy healing.



“Trauma is not in the event itself; rather, trauma resides in the nervous system.”

Peter A. Levine, Ph.D.

Dr. Levine developed **Somatic Experiencing®**, in part, based on his observations of animal behaviors in the wild. His fundamental question was, **“Why do wild animals not get traumatized when they face life-threatening situations everyday?”** He uncovered that animals and humans have the same nervous system design that allows us to respond to threatening situations by **fighting, fleeing, freezing** (i.e., “I can’t move,” waiting for the threat to pass) and/or **dissociating** (i.e., “I blanked out,” “My mind left my body.”) After surviving a stressful event, our nervous system is supposed to de-activate and return to a relaxed state.



This **de-activation process** (i.e., **recovery and healing**) involves: 1) releasing the excess energy the body produced for making defensive movements; and 2) completing the defensive movements the body prepared for. This is why we often “feel shaky,” tremble, and/or move restlessly after surviving a stressful event.

Unfortunately, human beings have a tendency to prevent the **de-activation** from naturally taking place. It happens when our complex thinking mind takes over with concerns such as “Just get over it,” “It’s my fault,” and being alarmed by and therefore inhibiting sensations of release (e.g., trembling). **When the de-activation process is interrupted, our nervous system gets stuck in the survival stage of the stress response cycle.**



The Effects of Trauma on 3 Levels

In SE, we understand that all the symptoms of trauma result from a physiologically disorganized state in a body that has not been able to complete the natural cycle of stress response. As far as the body is concerned, the threat is not over yet.



1. Trauma Symptoms

When the nervous system is stuck in **Fight or Flight**, a cluster of symptoms commonly known as **"re-living" symptoms** appear.

They include:

- anxiety, agitation, jittery feelings, irritability, outbursts of anger, impulsivity
- jumpiness, hyper-vigilance
- tension, tightness, pain
- difficulty sleeping or resting, insomnia, nightmares
- flashbacks, recurring thoughts and memories of the event

When the nervous system is stuck in **Freeze or Dissociation**, a cluster of symptoms commonly known as **"avoidant" symptoms** appear.

They include:

- depression, feeling empty, numb and detached
- feeling weak, sluggish and drained
- sleeping too much without feeling refreshed
- feeling spacey, difficulty with concentration, inability to remember, indecisiveness
- wanting to withdraw and avoid social interactions

2. Self-harming and "Other-harming" Behaviors

alcohol and drug abuse, promiscuity, cutting, suicidality, bulimia, anorexia, fighting, stealing, mistreating or abusing others, discrimination, hate crimes, violence

Self-harming and "other-harming" behaviors are an attempt to:

- * control what feels uncontrollable,
- * not feel unbearable sensations, emotions, images, and thoughts,
- * desperately feel and sense something, or
- * feel something other than what we feel and sense.

What feels uncontrollable, unbearable, empty or numb is NOT in the mind but rather imprinted in a nervous system that has not been able to complete its natural stress response cycle from the past.

3. Disconnection between the Body and the Mind



The so-called **"stress eating" is an everyday example of disconnection between the body and the mind.** The mind does not know or ignores that the body is not asking for (more) food.

The disconnection between the mind and the body is both the cause and the symptom of trauma. It happens when the mind's concerns override the nervous system's design and leave the body's nervous system stuck in the middle of the stress response cycle.

Disconnection between the body and the mind cont.

Often, when we are under stress or suffering from the effects of trauma, we feel estranged from our own sense of self and wholeness. Common expressions of this experience include **"I don't know who I am anymore," "I am falling apart,"** and **"I feel like I am not in my body."** This is an indication that the body has separated from the mind.

The sense of disconnection also happens between us and the rest of the world. We may feel deeply alone even when some people show their concerns and want to help. We may lose loving feelings towards our loved ones. We may not want to be around people at all. We may feel profoundly different, separate and alienated from various groups of people or all of humanity; this is the primary basis for conscious/unconscious prejudice and intentional/unintentional discrimination.

Somatic Experiencing® Process

"The capacity for joy, pleasure, love and compassion needs to be developed. This is a necessity for healing."

Raja Selvam, Ph.D., SE senior faculty

"I have never seen anyone truly become more aware of his or her body without also becoming more compassionate."

Matthew Sanford, yoga teacher, author, paraplegic

SE is unique because it has a dual goal of relieving the symptoms of trauma AND increasing people's resiliency and capacity for experiencing life in its full depth and scope. We are born with the potential to cultivate the ability to suffer, rejoice, love and be loved fully without becoming overwhelmed or developing trauma symptoms. However, stress and trauma during childhood and adolescence often prevents us from thoroughly developing this resiliency. SE works to relieve trauma symptoms AND increase resiliency.

The first step is re-connecting the body and the mind by directing the mind's attention to the body's state and sensations, as they are the gateway to the workings of the nervous system. Depending on your trauma history, it may take some practice and time for you to become aware of and follow your body's state and sensations. **The second step** is using this awareness to regulate your body's physiology back to the relaxed state.

SE is a process of (re-)learning life skills for self-regulation.

One of the principles that guide SE sessions is "a little bit at a time." Often, when we think about a traumatic experience we have had, it feels "so big," "overwhelming," and we "don't know where to begin." The key is to start with a small piece of the trauma that feels manageable. When we are learning to lift weights, we do not start with 250 pounds. We train our muscles and gradually increase their resiliency. The same can be said about the process of healing traumas. We begin with a piece that feels manageable and slowly but surely increase our body's and mind's resiliency for working through challenging sensations, images and emotions.

Another important principle in SE sessions is "moving back and forth" between the relaxed state and the distress. Going right to the heart of the distress and staying there interferes with the process of releasing and completing the stress response cycle. It also re-traumatizes our body and mind. In SE sessions, we learn ways to relax, open and calm our body-mind and use this state as a counter-point to the stressed state. By moving back and forth between the two states, we begin to loosen the grip of the trauma in the nervous system.

A Statement about Collective, Historical, and Social Traumas

As an immigrant woman of color who grew up as a member of the oppressed minority group in her country of origin, my understanding of traumas extends beyond personal traumas.

We are impacted not only by the events and conditions that happen to us as individuals within our life time. In communities that have experienced **collective and historical traumas** (e.g., Native American genocide and displacement, slavery, Japanese American internment, colonialism, wars, "ethnic cleansing," etc.), unfinished stress response cycles are passed down through the generations. We inherit those traumas through our relationships as well as identification with the members of our families and the history of our communities.

Similarly, we are all deeply impacted by the unjust and unequal conditions that still exist in our society (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia and heterosexism, poverty, religious discrimination, discrimination based on disabilities, etc.). **Our nervous system responds to those conditions and instances of prejudice and discrimination as a threat to our survival.** This is how lack of equality in our society can cause **chronic stress** and **social traumas** in its citizens.

It is my belief that all personal traumas occur in the context of collective, historical, and social traumas. Healing of collective, historical, and social traumas must occur on both individual and community levels. As we begin to mend our traumas by allowing the unfinished stress response cycle to complete itself, we feel more whole, empowered, grounded and centered in our body, feel reunited with our sense of self, and feel the inherent connection between all beings.

About Thea M. Lee, M.A., LMFT (California), SEP, Certified Moksha Yoga Instructor

If some things I described in this document intrigued you or resonated with you, I hope you will contact me or another SE practitioner soon. I look forward to the opportunity to share SE with you.

I have a private practice in the Twin Cities specializing in somatic healing of traumas, provider self-care, and yoga for mind-body awareness. I am also the coordinator for professional SE training in St. Paul. Prior to moving to Minnesota 2.5 years ago, I have worked in settings including a non-profit rape crisis center, a county juvenile hall, and a state prison for women.

I describe my SE work as a process of learning life skills in collaboration. The collaboration happens between the client and the practitioner, as well as between the client's body, mind and heart/soul. I believe that our healing heals our ancestors.

I welcome your inquiries about individual sessions, group classes, Circle of Friends/Family format, information sessions, and gentle yoga for trauma symptom regulation. My individual SE sessions are 90 minutes in length. Because of my concerns about the accessibility of healing resources, I set my fee well below the market rate for therapy sessions. I am unable to accept insurance payments and do not waive my fee. However, currently, I have a policy of not turning anyone away for lack of funds.



Resources:

Book: "Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma" by Peter A. Levine with Anne Frederick

SE's official website: www.traumahealing.com