

CHAPTER 3
SOMATIC EXPERIENCING[®]
TRAUMA THERAPY

*The body houses hidden doors
Revealed to the mind that gently explores*

Hurt ego demands to know:

Why did you do this to me?

Heart asks:

*What lesson am I meant to learn from this?**

*@jennagalbut on Instagram.

There are times in life when there's just too much going on for you to be able to hear the wisdom of your soft-spoken heart. Sometimes, our experiences are just too much: too fast, too soon, too awful.

Terror, anger and shame, for example, all create 'noise' in our system, preventing us from tuning into our inner wisdom. This manifests in all manner of ways:

- Psychologically, as negative repetitive thoughts – 'There's something wrong with me', 'I can't do this'
- Physically, as energy blocks – chronic numbness, pain or stiffness, for example
- Spiritually, as a lack of self-confidence, enthusiasm, and joy, for example.

By my mid-20s, the cacophony from all the abuse and bullying

I'd suffered had generated a near-impossible psycho-biological bind: though I yearned for love and intimacy, I'd keep men at arm's length with cruel words and mixed messages, terrified that letting a man close might 'destroy' me.

While I used my attractiveness to get attention and affection, I lacked the capacity to be consistently kind and loving. I was confused and in knots. Physically, much of me felt awkward and 'wrong', especially my thighs and pelvic area. I found myself out of my depth physically and emotionally, but without the tools to say no, so I'd over-ride my needs and wound myself further. Ouch.

As human animals, we share the same instinctual survival responses as prey animals, but our more complex brains and lives mean that fight/flight can easily be compromised.

Imagine a car crash in which the person gets caught behind the wheel; even before impact their body would be surging with survival energy, yet they'd have no way to defend themselves or escape.

When fight or flight and the triumph of saving our own life are thwarted, the brain's final intelligent survival tactic is to make us freeze; play dead. By shutting down our faculties, we protect ourselves from being overwhelmed by impossible feelings and sensations. And it works: we survive and get through it.

Being removed from the effects of life's pendulum swings towards pain and suffering comes with a price, however. When our capacity to feel difficult emotions is inhibited, so is our capacity to feel their polarities – uplifting and empowering states such as love, compassion and trust.

The freeze response can – if prolonged – lead to dissociation, where we no longer sense our reactions to our environment or our relationships, or we do so at great remove. Dissociation may result in blanks in our memory, or make it increasingly difficult to connect harmoniously with others: it means we no longer feel fully alive, and makes us prone to depression and/or fatigue.

Dissociation had been my way of surviving the numerous traumas I'd been unable to escape as both a child and as an adult. And, despite the cocktail of therapies, workshops and retreats I'd experimented with in my 20s, I continued to suffer many ill effects.

Thankfully, when I was 30, Somatic Experiencing (SE) came along, which stands out as the one therapeutic approach that changed me the most. With remarkable efficiency, SE quietened the anguished cries of my traumas, and from the new silence flowed profound healing.

As the anger I'd been turning against myself was released, compassion, self-respect and a growing ability to say no – to both my own negative behaviours and that of others – took its place. I was growing up and I was so grateful.

SE is a pioneering whole-person approach to resolving physical and emotional trauma, PTSD, anxiety, and stress-related conditions. Its primary focus is on what's happening in your body, because it holds keys to recovery that the (lower) mind doesn't.

Neuroscience now makes it clear that the body and brain react in specific involuntary ways to a perceived or actual threat to

one's life. These discoveries help us understand that not only can we not (alone) talk our way out of trauma, but that talking about it too freely can actually lead to re-traumatisation.

So how does SE work? Based on observations of prey animals, which are routinely threatened with death, but never traumatised, SE helps to safely 'unlock' the primal fear-based fight/flight response in which a person gets stuck when experiencing an overwhelming event. It does this by guiding them back to the here and now through the embodied realisation that they've survived: it's over, and it *feels* over.

SE is the life's work of Peter Levine PhD, stemming from his multidisciplinary study of stress physiology, psychology, ethology, biology, neuroscience, indigenous healing practices, and medical biophysics. Peter argues that trauma and spiritual awakening are two sides of the same coin, with awakening coming on the back of traumatic experiences.

I embarked on the three-year professional SE training in 2007. It involves experiential group work and regular demonstrations led by the teacher. One day during my training, our tutor asked for a show of hands from those who had extreme sound-related symptoms, such as chronic tinnitus or misophonia. Up went my arm.

'I can't *stand* the sound of people eating noisily,' I admitted a little anxiously. 'Even my super-cute nieces when they were little: we'd be at the dinner table and even though they looked angelic, inside I wanted to kill them!' My eyes widened and my hands formed claw shapes as I confessed: I'd never understood why noisy eating had provoked such an extreme reaction.

‘What’s your favourite sound?’ asked Larry, after I’d joined him at the front of the room, the 40+-strong group in a semi-circle to my right. ‘Baby ducks!’ I replied, smiling. ‘What is it about baby duck sounds that you like?’ he asked, smiling back.

Rapport established, he asked me about the sound I didn’t like (others’ eating), so that we could work with the high activation (fight/flight) behind my body’s protective instinct, and work to safely discharge it. I don’t recall* how we got from ducklings to my experiences in Canada, but I do remember his first response to my attempted rape story: ‘That’s a lot of people.’

Those few words directly unlocked my secret inner state. Yes! Six rapists – that was a lot of people! A *big* threat to my life. This was such a simple observation, but it was one that nobody had made before.

Having that very small but very significant part of my overwhelm acknowledged opened up a healing stream of relief. My shoulders dropped and I exhaled deeply as I felt for the very first time that I wasn’t alone in facing those six men in a tower block. There was safety now. Support.

Of its own accord, my torso leaned forward and collapsed onto cushions I’d been handed. It felt a life-saving balm to body and soul, this surrender. Until that moment, my spinal muscles and viscera had been frozen in a likely constant state of terror for over a decade.

In time, Larry deftly led me to the realisation that sound of mastication was “overcoupled” – intertwined with – a repressed animal instinct to eat the rapists alive! To protect me, my biological self had wanted to tear them apart!

In that tiny room so far away from those I loved, I'd faced an impossible trap: being raped by a gang, or being subject to the sexual violence of my "friend" alone. So powerful was the warrior instinct to protect my life and my dignity that my nervous system protected me from even being conscious of it. Even when Larry again asked, 'Do you know what your mouth wants to do? They do,' (nodding at the group), I said no. I genuinely didn't.

But, in the privacy of my dreams that night, the truth was revealed in vivid scenes of a black panther, bright red blood dripping from its jaws. It had so much vitality! I realised with gladness that my murderous rage was not just a "no", it was also a "yes"! I wanted to tear at life, eat it, feel it, run with it! From that day, I began to stop grinding my teeth and holding my bladder at night. I was really healing.

As my understanding of, and compassion for, my blocks grew, so did my compassion for my parents in having to deal with their daughter being bullied and abused, and especially for my father's helplessness in being unable to protect me. Dealing with my anger freed me to be more loving and receptive to the love I needed.

Like ancient wisdom teachings, SE focuses on empowering the individual to transform fixation to flow, helpless to helpful, dark to light. It teaches us how to use our higher mind – associated with the pre-frontal and medial cortex areas of the brain that govern awareness, logic, and reason – to harmonise body, mind and spirit. In SE we learn to:

- a) *detach* by stilling the mind and neutrally observing and reporting our own experience as it unfolds – without judgement

- b) *attune* to the innate, non-verbal wisdom of our physiology – the same divine forces that, for example, heal a bruise and make hair grow
- c) *face our fears* with support, clarity, and compassion. And move *through* them to a greater sense of inner strength and wholeness.

Meditation, mindfulness, The Spiritual Path and SE all use awareness as the primary navigation tool. All train the mind not to run away from the present experience, however painful or unpleasant, but to stop and simply *observe* it. This mysterious ability to be the witness of our own experience – in it, but not of it – responds excellently to being cultivated.

In 2012, his 70th year, Peter Levine PhD acknowledged in an email to Somatic Experiencing practitioners how, having started in his original 1972 class of about 15 people meeting bi-weekly in his Berkley, California ‘tree house’, SE had now been taught to more than 8,000 souls worldwide, and was destined to spread far beyond his personal involvement and continue to expand and change lives.

He went on to describe a dream he’d had 20 years ago, when SE had just begun to extend its reach. In it, he was approached by a Tibetan monk holding a treasure chest. Without speaking, the monk handed the chest to Peter, who took it to the adjacent room, which had a safe embedded in the rear wall. It was then revealed that it was Peter’s role to place the box in the safe, which he respectfully did.

Peter had channelled a thread of ancient wisdom. The dream symbolised that his task was to keep this shamanic knowledge safe by translating it into a relatively logical system that was

relevant applicable to our modern, scientific and trauma-filled life. When I described SE to a fellow aspirant, she responded: ‘It’s preparing people for The Spiritual Path!’

CASE STUDIES

Flight terror

Tony was determined to get his life back. Ever since an incident on a business trip, he’d become terrified of flying and had now become very fearful of even being outside.

In fewer than 10 SE sessions, Tony learned tools to help him change the signals his body was sending to his brain about being under threat. Using them daily, he quickly developed his capacity to be with his own fear, and with his own longings – to be safe, and to belong to people of warm heart.

Tony learned that when he used his whole body to hold the fear or other emotion, it didn’t cramp his chest, or buzz around anxiously in his mind. He also learned to care for himself, noticing when he was becoming afraid or sad, stopping what he was doing, and for a few moments helping himself realise that in the present he was safe, and that any rush of emotion belonged largely in the past.

Soon he felt happier and more alive. He even began helping colleagues to notice when they were stressed, and offering them tools for calming themselves.

Chronic insomnia

Note: Ben had done other therapeutic work prior to embarking on Somatic Experiencing sessions.

For 26 years, Ben had suffered insomnia, and for the last four years a recurring shoulder pain that woke him up to three

times a night. Through SE he soon learned to trust his body as a safe and relaxing ‘place’ to be.

Around the time of his fifth session, Ben started a new job, and within a week realised he’d made the wrong decision, which left him feeling very stressed. The job wasn’t for him. ‘I don’t want to do it. That’s enough.’ Asked whether there was a time in his life when also he felt ‘That’s enough,’ memories of his childhood began playing in his mind’s eye.

The youngest of four, it was Ben’s daily chore to lay the breakfast table for the family. It felt like far too much responsibility, yet he never felt able to speak up for himself. All the years of resentment and verbal impotence, we discovered, had been stored in his right shoulder as hidden defence movements.

Yet in slowly exploring, over a few sessions, the defence movement his arms had instinctively made (marking his personal energetic boundary with his outstretched arms, and making a calm, confident verbal declaration, ‘That’s enough! I’m not doing this any more’) the burning pain in his shoulder began to dissipate.

In a new space of presence, he finally felt compassion for himself. Compassion flowed into deep, restorative sighs as accumulated layers of exhaustion from not sleeping deeply for half his life now surfaced. Today, Ben sleeps well and enjoys more peace, groundedness and natural energy.