

4 Sets of Somatic Mindfulness Exercises for People Who Have Experienced Trauma

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Last updated: 8 Oct 2018



For many people who have experienced trauma, practicing mindfulness can bring up painful and overwhelming emotions that they don't necessarily have the resources to deal with. The focused attention of mindfulness can send a traumatized person into a state of heightened emotional arousal, which can be disorienting and even trigger dissociation. Whether it's from a single traumatic event, or from physical or emotional needs having been consistently not attuned to or abused, trauma leaves a lasting imprint on our physiology. Essentially, it means we are unable to regulate our nervous systems out of a state of emotional distress.

But mindfulness also has the potential to help build exactly the things that are useful in recovering from trauma: self-compassion, being in the present moment, and being able to self-regulate, and mindfulness definitely does have the [potential to help ease PTSD symptoms](#). As [David Treleaven](#) has argued, we need [trauma-sensitive approaches](#) to mindfulness meditation.

Enter: the body. Paying attention to body sensations is a classic element of mindfulness, but it is particularly vital to strengthen this element in the beginning in the case of trauma. Somatic mindfulness can be a way to increase our capacity for regulating the nervous system, forming an excellent bridge to becoming more present and connected, and allowing us to start discharging the shock states that we've been unconsciously held in. This article guides you through four sets of five-minute exercises in somatic mindfulness.

Trauma, Mind, and Body

Addressing the physical experience of an emotion is a powerful way to work "bottom-up" to change the cognitive associations of an emotional state. The past few decades of [neuroscience research](#) has revealed some of how the brain behaves related to fear and trauma, as well as [how this affects our physiological and emotional states](#), and is in turn influenced by those physiological states. This is a complex feedback system, and it therefore makes sense to try

to [work both “bottom-up” with bodily experience](#), as well as “top-down”, noticing our fixed beliefs about ourselves and others, our self-hatred, self-rejections and judgements.

Traumatized people tend to disconnect from the body by numbing bodily experience or becoming overly cognitive. One way to think about this disconnection is that when we’ve been in a situation where we were threatened or where our core needs were not met, the sympathetic branch of our nervous systems gets activated. This is driven by the fight/flight response, and prompts us to try to change the situation. But if that reaction is blocked or not responded to, the sympathetic arousal cannot be soothed or discharged.

Without the nervous system being able to regulate back down again, we remain in states of high arousal, irritability and [anxiety](#), but if this persists, the nervous system gets overloaded. We instinctively adapt by shutting down, shifting into the parasympathetic system’s freeze response. The undischarged emotion, however, stays bound up in the system, in the form of physical tension, alert and defensive states, or collapsed and frozen states. The high nervous system arousal and systemic dysregulation of trauma make it difficult to hold a state of open awareness such as in mindfulness meditation, and it keep us from being present in our bodies.

Steps towards Somatic Awareness

You could try these exercises in groups of two at first, building up to doing all of them in sequence. Try doing them once a week for a period of two months. **Whichever exercises you do, give yourself some time afterwards before interacting with other people. Take a couple of minutes to be with your experience. Put some words to it for yourself: are there any different feelings that you notice about yourself now? Then open your eyes and look around the room for a minute, just noticing how it is to be there now, and if anything looks any different. It’s important to have this time after the exercises for you to integrate your altered body-affect state before going back to relating to people.**

Begin by standing up, and taking a moment to notice how you feel, how your breathing is, and where your attention and energy are. Notice anything that’s there, and if you can’t notice anything, that’s fine too.

Set 1: Grounding

Heel Drops. Begin by standing, and letting your eyes defocus, so you’re not really looking at anything. Now, raise slowly up onto your toes, and then let yourself drop back down to your heels. Keep doing this at a slow rhythm, imagining that your entire weight drops down all at once through your heels. Let it make a loud thud! Bring your attention to the effect it has on your hips and lower back; maybe it feels as though the jolt loosens them. Try to let them relax. Do this for one minute.

Shaking. After a short pause, set yourself back in your standing position, and use your knees to create a gentle bouncing in your legs. Let your knees slightly bend, and then push backwards again into being straight, creating a soft shaking in your legs. Imagine this shaking can gently rock through your whole body, through your hips, up to your shoulders, and even your neck. Try to relax around your jaw, and your lower back and tail bone, as if the base of your spine is really heavy. Do this for one minute.

Wave Breathing. Stand still again, and let your hands come to rest on the front of your thighs. Start noticing your breath. Now, as you inhale slowly, reach your chin forwards, glide your hips backwards, and lean your upper body forwards, creating an arch through your back. Pause for a moment, and then as you breathe out slowly, let your head relax downwards, bring your tailbone

gently under and forwards, and round your back, coming gradually back into an upright position. Do this for around 8 breaths. This is a lovely way to extend and mobilize your spine. As you move, pay attention to the movement in your spine, and to how you feel your weight through your heels.

Bamboo Swaying. After these three movements, come back to standing, and allow yourself to sway gently back and forth like bamboo in the wind for a minute. This rocking movement helps to discharge built-up tension. You might also notice little tremors or shudders in your body, which might feel a bit unusual at first, but allow them to travel through you. It's a way that the body releases tension.

Checking in. Finally, stand still for a minute, and pay attention to any internal sensations that you might be able to notice in your body now. Is there any difference in how tense or relaxed you are? Does you notice any difference in your legs and feet? Perhaps you can feel them as a bit more alive or with a kind of energy flow, or perhaps you feel connected to the ground differently than before.

Set 2: Quieting and Flow

Grab and Let Go. Begin by standing and letting your eyes defocus. Now, slowly step one leg forward, and plant first your heel and then your whole foot on the ground. Let your weight move forwards onto that front foot, even though your back foot doesn't actually leave the ground. At the same time as you step forward, reach forwards with the arm on that same side, fingers outstretched. As your foot lands, close your hand into a fist, as though you're grabbing something. As you're doing this forwards, active motion, you breathe in. Then pause for a moment, and step back again, bringing your foot back next to the other one, and release and open your hand, bringing your arm back to your side. As you do this releasing, backwards motion, breathe out.

Do this movement with just one side for one or two minutes, and then switch to the other side for one or two minutes. Try to keep your attention in the three parts of this movement: your breath, your hand/arm, and your foot/leg.

Checking in. Stand still for a minute. You might notice the swaying from the last set begins all on its own. If it does, follow this for a little bit, and then start checking in with your internal sensations. Pay attention to your body now, and notice if there are any different sensations to before. Focus especially on where there is a sense of flow, aliveness, or tingling. Maybe the flow feels like going down your body, like slowly moving water. Pay attention to that, as if you want these sensations of aliveness to have more space, to be allowed to be there.

Set 3: Breath of Life

Active Breathing. Begin by standing, and starting to focus on your breath. Take a deep breath in, and as you exhale, use your mouth to make the sound *shhhh*, as if you're telling people to be quiet. Make a loud sound! Pay attention to how it feels in the area between your chest and your stomach. Do it until your breath runs out, and then do it again, for around 8 breaths. The sound *shhhh* is useful for opening the diaphragm, which is often stuck or tight in states of internalized fear, limiting our breathing. Opening it helps us shift from a frozen state into becoming more activated.

Calming Breathing. Now take another deep breath in, and make the sound *mmm* as you breathe out. Press your lips together quite gently, and try to find the level of pressure between them that creates the most vibration through your whole head from the sound. Make the sound as long as you can, and then breathe in again. Do this for around 8 breaths, paying attention to the vibration feeling in your head. A humming sound is particularly effective in stimulating the

vagus nerve, the main branch of the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps an over-aroused nervous system to reset, allowing us to relax.

Checking in. As before, stand for a minute to check in with any body sensations that you might be able to feel now. If there are any tremors, or swaying, or the need to stretch, just let that happen. Can you notice any difference in your breathing now, or any difference in the sense of space inside? Can you give any images or words to the sensation or experience now?

Set 4: Taking Control

Progressive Relaxation. In a standing position, you're going to tense up various area of your body as you breathe in and count slowly to 8, holding the tension quite strongly. Then let go of the tension as you exhale slowly, counting to 8. To make sure the relaxation part has enough time, inhale again for 8, imagining that this body area is expanding or taking up more space, as if all of the cells are glowing. Then exhale for 8, imagining that the area is relaxing, melting like butter. Do this tensing and relaxing **twice** for each area. It can be helpful to close your eyes while doing this, but if you're more comfortable with them open, that's fine as well.

Our bodies can tend to get stuck in certain patterns of areas that are overly tense (hypertonic muscles) or areas that seem absent (hypotonic). In order to shift these states, we must first become aware of them, and an excellent way to do that is to intentionally create and release tension. This exercise brings some attention to what your nerves are usually doing unconsciously, and lets those patterns start to shift.

Start by tensing your **neck and throat**. Many of us hold a lot of control in our necks, keeping rigid there as if it keeps us in control of situations. It is a great place to gain back some flexibility, in many senses. After doing this twice, rest a moment. Second, tense your **shoulders, arms and hands**, a bit like being ready to fight. Notice your muscles, and any sensations of strength in your own body now. Feeling your arms can give us a sense of how much space you can take up.

Third, tense your **belly**. Many people feel a tense knot in their upper bellies connected to anxiety, while others feel an emptiness or lack there. Connecting to sensing your belly can start restoring a sense of depth of experience, and quietness at just being. Finally, tense your **legs and feet**. Lots of us feel quite separated from our legs, which can be a source of feeling our strength, standing our ground, or feeling the power to run away if we need to.

Swinging. After all of this tensing and relaxing, do an extra movement to make sure you discharge any excess tension. Stand and turn your upper body side to side, as if you're looking over first your right shoulder and then your left, gently rotating your whole upper body along the way. Let your arms be floppy, and follow the movement, so that they swing out in front of you and then knock gently at your sides at each end of the twist. You can relax your knees a little, and let your hips join the turning movement a bit. Feel the gentle twist of your spine as you move. Do this for around a minute.

Checking in. As before, stand still and check in with any body sensations that you might be able to feel now. How light or heavy do you feel? How are your arms hanging beside you now? What kind of energy do you feel now?