

How Tuning In to Your Body Can Make You More Resilient

By balancing our physiology and nervous systems, body-based practices can help us through hard times.

POSTED ON [GREATER GOOD SCIENCE CENTER NEWSLETTER](#) | OCTOBER 3, 2018

Stuff happens. Another car suddenly swerves into your lane on the freeway. You misplace your keys and wallet two minutes before you need to catch your bus to work. You shred the wrong client file at the office.



These mini-disasters create quite a startle in your nervous system—a rush of adrenaline that helps ready your body for “fight or flight,” our natural defense against perceived danger. But if your body is hit with adrenaline for every little thing that goes wrong in life, it can tax your capacity to cope, making recovery from future setbacks like these even more difficult.

Luckily, it’s possible to strengthen your own body-based somatic intelligence to quickly respond to and recover from any sense of threat to your safety or well-being. What is somatic intelligence? It’s understanding how your body responds to danger and using that knowledge to support your body as you go through life—which, if you’re human, is bound to be filled with at least some adversity.

In my new book, *Resilience: Powerful Practices for Bouncing Back from Disappointment, Difficulty, and Even Disaster*, I explain many of the resources we have within us to build up our resilience. While the book outlines several resilience tools—including those aimed at improving emotional, relational, and reflective intelligence—building somatic intelligence is key to all of these. Without it, it's difficult to engage in any of the other practices available to you.

To better support our natural somatic intelligence, we need to soothe our nervous system through body-based practices that steady our brain's perceptions of and responses to danger and help us retain a sense of safety. Once we master some of these techniques, we are prepared for more resilient coping, learning, and growth.

Here are some simple practices I recommend in my book, each of them grounded in neurophysiology.

1. Breathing

To breathe is to be alive. Every inhalation you take activates the sympathetic branch of your nervous system a little bit (a lot when you overreact to something and hyperventilate), while every exhalation activates the parasympathetic branch a little bit (a lot when you feel scared to death and faint). That means that your breath goes through natural cycles of [energizing you and relaxing you](#).

We can intentionally use this rhythm of gently breathing in and out to reliably regulate the revving up and shutting down of our nervous system. Simply pause for a moment and focus your attention on your breathing. Notice where it's easiest to sense the sensations of your breath flowing in and out—your nostrils, your throat, in the rise and fall of your chest or belly. Take a moment to experience some gratitude for the breath that sustains your life, every moment of your life.

2. Deep sigh

A deep sigh is your body-brain's natural way to release tension and reset your nervous system. Simply breathe in fully, then breathe out fully, longer on the exhale. [Studies](#) have shown that a deep sigh

returns the autonomic nervous system from an over-activated sympathetic state to a more balanced parasympathetic state. Even as what you're coping with becomes more challenging, you can deliberately pair any moment of tension or frustration with a sigh to shift your physiology into a relieved and more relaxed state, thereby enhancing your chances of seeing clearly and choosing to respond wisely to what's happening.

3. Touch

To soothe the nervous system and restore a sense of safety and trust in the moment, it helps to use the power of touch. Warm, safe touch activates the release of oxytocin—the “tend and befriend” hormone that creates pleasant feelings in the body and is the brain’s direct and immediate antidote to the stress hormone cortisol. Oxytocin is one of a cascade of neurochemicals that are part of the brain-body social engagement system. Because being in the presence of other people is so critical to our well-being and safety, nature has provided this system to encourage us to reach out to others and connect. That’s why touch, along with physical proximity and eye contact, evokes a viscerally felt sense of reassurance that “everything is okay; you’re fine.”

4. Hand on the heart

Research has shown that placing your hand over your heart and gently breathing can soothe your mind and your body. And experiencing the sensations of touch with another safe human being, even recalling memories of those moments, can activate the release of oxytocin, which evokes a feeling of safety and trust.

This is a practice that takes advantage of breath and touch, but also memories of feeling safe with another person. Here is how it's done:

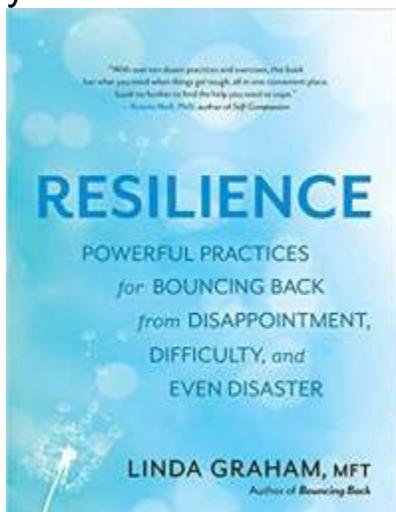
1. Place your hand on your heart. Breathe gently, softly, and deeply into the area of your heart. If you wish, breathe a sense of ease or safety or goodness into your heart center.

2. Remember one moment, just one moment when you felt safe, loved, and cherished by another human being. Don't try to recall the entire relationship, just one moment. This could be with a partner, a child, a friend, a therapist, or a teacher; it could be with a spiritual figure. Remembering a loving moment with a pet can work very well, too.
3. As you remember this moment of feeling safe, loved, and cherished, let yourself savor the feelings of that moment. Let yourself stay with these feelings for 20 to 30 seconds. Notice any deepening in a visceral sense of ease and safety.

Repeat this practice many times a day at first, to strengthen the neural circuitry that remembers this pattern. Then practice this exercise whenever you experience the first signal of a startle or an upset. With practice, it will enable you to back out of a difficult emotional reaction before it hijacks you.

5. Movement

Any time you move your body and shift your posture, you shift your physiology, which, in turn, shifts the activity of your autonomic nervous system. Therefore, you can use movement to shift your emotions and your mood.



This essay is adapted from *Resilience: Powerful Practices for Bouncing Back from Disappointment, Difficulty, and Even Disaster* (New World Library, 2018, 304 pages)

For example, if you are feeling scared or nervous, [research](#) has shown that taking a pose that expresses the opposite of that—putting your hands on your hips, your chest out, and your head held high—will make you feel more confident. Yoga poses [can increase](#) your confidence, too—perhaps even more so than poses associated with social dominance.

So, if you are experiencing any state of fear, anger, sadness, or disgust, try shifting your posture. Let your body move into a posture that expresses the emotional state you want to develop in yourself to counteract what you're feeling. I've found that working with my clients on this technique can sometimes really shift something for them, as they discover that they actually have the means inside of themselves to deal with these difficult emotions.

There are many more practices outlined in my book that you can use to cultivate more calm in the body, restore your natural physiological equilibrium, and access a deeper sense of safety and well-being that primes your brain for more resilient learning and coping. By practicing these tools, you will not only cope better with any upset or catastrophe and bounce back better from any adversity, you will also learn to see yourself as someone who can cope.

And that sense of being able to soothe yourself after setbacks is the beginning of developing true resilience.