

## SOMATIC INTELLIGENCE

### Body-Brain Based Strategies to Strengthen Resilience and Well-Being

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[this article appeared originally in the [Wise Brain Bulletin](#), September-October, 2018]

Your nervous system is beautifully designed to react super-quickly to any sense of potential danger to your safety or well-being...when another car suddenly swerves into your lane on the freeway...when you shred the wrong client file at work...when you leave your laptop on a plane...

Anytime something suddenly goes haywire, you will most likely experience a sudden startle – aagh! – in your body because the most automatic responses to all of life’s hiccups and hurricanes begin in the body. Your nervous system is *alerting* you, in milliseconds, to “Pay attention! Something important is happening here!” And then *activating* you in another few seconds to “Move! Now!” to deal with the potential danger or catastrophe.

We want to be able to respond to these moments of sudden startle and “uh, oh!” quickly *and* wisely, skillfully, effectively. To be resilient in this way, we need to soothe the startle in our nervous system and move from reactivity (that’s automatic; hard-wired in by evolution) to receptivity and responsiveness, to take action from a mature response flexibility that is the brain’s essential capacity of our resilience. We want to cultivate practices that will quickly reliably return us to our natural baseline physiological equilibrium known as our “range of resilience.” To recover the steady calm “in here” that allows us to deal with whatever is “out there.”

Research findings in modern neuroscience and the behavioral sciences are dovetailing nicely to illuminate which practices will most reliably strengthen our somatic intelligence, using body-based tools of breath, touch, movement, and visualization to return us to our range of resilience, from which we can see clearly and act wisely.

The tools below are from [Resilience: Powerful Practices for Bouncing Back from Disappointment, Difficulty, and Even Disaster](#). They are simple practices with big effects. You can practice them “little and often” which is precisely how the brain learns, unlearns, and relearns anything ever, small incremental experiences repeated many times. These practices of somatic intelligence will help you cope with bumps and bruises inevitable in a human life, from barely a wobble to serious sorrows and struggles to the tragedies of “too much.”

## USING THE BREATH TO RESET THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

To breathe is to be alive. Every inhalation activates the sympathetic branch of your nervous system just a little bit (a lot when you overreact to something and hyperventilate). Every exhalation activates the parasympathetic branch just a little bit (a lot when you feel scared to

death and faint). You can learn to use a *conscious rhythm of gently breathing* in and out to reliably regulate the revving up and shutting down of your nervous system, increasing your response flexibility to cope with anything, anything at all.

### **Deep Sigh**

Let your body sigh. Give yourself permission to breathe in gently, then exhale deeply for several rounds. You can make a soft “ahhhh” sound on the exhale if you wish. A deep sigh is your body-brain’s natural way to release tension and reset your nervous system. 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.

Additional breath practices to restore a sense of calm and safety:

### **Mini-Breath Meditation**

1. Breathe naturally, gently, for five to ten breaths. Pay attention to the sensations of breathing in (notice the cool air in your nostrils or throat and the gentle expansion of your belly and chest) and breathing out (notice warmer air flowing out and the relaxation of your belly and chest). Remember the practical power of “little and often.” Pause and repeat this practice many times a day.
2. If you wish, you can say these phrases from the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh silently to yourself as you breathe: “Breathing in, I am home. Breathing out, I smile.”
3. As you inhale, you can imagine “coming home” to yourself, saying, “I am here. I am home.” As you exhale, imagine connecting safely with the world outside yourself, coming into ease and harmony with others. Imagine breathing in to the word *me*, breathing out to the word *we*. Repeat this rhythm for a full minute.

### **Affectionate Breathing**

[adapted from the mindful self-compassion protocol developed by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer]

Here you use kind awareness of your breathing to strengthen a sense of safety and calm in your body and your mind.

1. Find a comfortable position in which your body is supported and you don’t need to make an effort to remain in that position. Close your eyes if you wish, or allow your eyes to soften their gaze. Come into a sense of presence, relaxing in your body. Take a few slow, easy breaths to release any unnecessary tension.

2. Focus your awareness on your breathing, noticing where you perceive the breath most easily. Let yourself notice the simple sensations of breathing, just feeling your breath for a while.
3. See if you can orient toward yourself and your breathing with openness, curiosity, and care. If you notice any discomfort in your mind or body, see if you can simply be with that discomfort, soften toward it, accepting that this is so in this moment. Bring a sense of kindness toward yourself.
4. Notice how you don't have to remember to breathe. Your body breathes for you. Your body is breathing you.
5. See if you can feel your whole body breathing. Notice how your breathing expands into your entire body and nourishes every cell in your body.
6. Give yourself over to the breath. Let yourself become the breath. Rest in the ease of this moment for a minute or two.
7. Perhaps allow a moment of appreciation or gratitude for the breath that sustains your life in every moment.
8. Finally, release your awareness of your breathing. Allow everything that comes to awareness to be just as it is, for now. When you're ready, open your eyes.

This exercise can help you appreciate your own intentions and wise effort in creating or deepening a genuine sense of ease and equilibrium that supports your resilience. Know that you are learning a tool that will help you reliably regulate the revving up and shutting down of your nervous system, increasing your response flexibility, strengthening your resilience.

## **USING TOUCH TO RESTORE A SENSE OF SAFETY AND TRUST**

Much of the power of our innate somatic intelligence to soothe the nervous system and restore a sense of safety and trust in the moment rests in the power of touch. Warm, safe touch activates the release of oxytocin, the brain's direct and immediate antidote to the stress hormone cortisol. Touch, along with physical proximity and eye contact, activates the body-brain's social engagement system, immediately evoking a viscerally felt sense of reassurance that "Everything is okay; you're fine."

### **Hand on the Heart**

This practice is powerful enough to calm down a panic attack in less than a minute.

1. Place your hand on your heart. Breathe gently, softly, and deeply into the area of your heart. If you wish, breathe in 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 a partner, a child, a friend, a therapist, or a teacher; it could be 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 experience the feelings of that moment. Let the sensations of the feelings wash through your body. Let yourself stay with these feelings for twenty to thirty 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 a difficult emotional reaction before it hijacks you. Then you can repeat hand on the heart any time you need to, any time at all. It's portable equilibrium.

Additional practices of touch to restore a sense of safety and ease.

### **Hugs**

Exchange a twenty-second hug with a person or pet you feel safe with. Twenty seconds (about three breaths) is enough to release the oxytocin in both hug-ees, a self-reinforcing loop of bonding and belonging for each person.

### **Energize Your Heart Center**

Neural cells are part of the structure of your heart. Warm, safe touch activates those neurons; your body feels the implicit comforting energy of your brain's social engagement system.

1. Ask someone you feel safe with to sit beside you.
2. Place your hand on your heart. As you do so, ask the other person to gently place their hand on the middle of your back, on a level with your hand on the front of your body. (You can also experience the energy shift of this exercise by remembering the feeling of connection with another as you lean your back into a cushion while sitting on a firm couch or chair.)
3. Breathe gently in and out. Feel the sense of stable energy in the center of your torso. Relax into the ease and comfort of an active, non-verbal social engagement system.

### **USING MOVEMENT TO SHIFT OUR PHYSIOLOGY...AND OUR MOOD**

Any time you move your body and shift your posture you shift your physiology. Any time you shift your physiology you shift the activity of your autonomic nervous system and its state of excitement-calm-shut down. You can use movement to shift your emotions and your mood.

### **Frowning and Smiling**

You can experience the sequence of this shift when you first place and hold a pencil between your nose and your upper lip (which requires you to somewhat frown) and then place the pencil between your teeth (which requires you to somewhat smile.) You can notice the felt sense of the forced frown; you can notice the felt sense of the forced smile; you can notice the shift between the two, and with practice, you can notice the shift in your inner state from this shift in your physiology.

### **Tensing and Relaxing**

Bring your awareness to your hands, and slowly tense your hands into fists, and then release the tension into your open palms. Do that tensing-releasing a couple of times. Notice any shifting of your inner state.

### **Movement Opposite**

You can apply this practice of shifting your posture to shift any agitation or collapse of your nervous system, any state of fear, anger, sadness, disgust.

1. Identify one specific emotion or physical state you would like to explore and shift through movement of the body.
  1. Stand up in a place where you have space to move. Settle into a posture of feeling comfortable and at ease in your body.
  2. Let your body move into a posture that expresses or embodies that emotional state you want to work with. Let your body assume or inhabit this first “negative” posture for 30-40 seconds. Let yourself feel the felt sense of this physiological state without being too caught in it or overwhelmed by it.
  2. Let your body move on its own, without thinking at all, without going to your head at all, to the opposite posture. You don’t even have to know what this second opposite posture is called, it simply feels “opposite.” Inhabit this second opposite posture for 30-40 seconds.
  3. Let your body return to the original negative posture for 20 seconds, the return to the opposite positive posture for 20 seconds, then let your body feel its way into a posture that feels something in the middle. Remain in this middle integrative posture for 30 seconds.

4. Take a moment to reflect on the entire experience, noticing any shifts or insights from doing the exercise.

The first time I used this technique with a client, he was exploring depression. He had assumed the posture opposite to depression would be one of happiness. To his surprise and to his learning, he realized the opposite of depression for him in that moment was reverence. He had shifted his experience; he had learned from the intuitive wisdom of his own experience.

## **USING VISUALIZATION TO CREATE LASTING RESOURCES**

Fully 25 percent of your brain's real estate is devoted to visual processing in the occipital lobe. Researchers now know that when we imagine seeing a banana, the same neurons light up in the visual cortex as when we see a banana in real life. This means that imagined scenarios can be as real to the brain as actual observations. You can use this power of visualization and imagination to create the inner resource of a safe place – a safe base to come home to - or a resource of a soothing or inspiring landscape, even inner relational resources such as a wiser self or wise guide that support your inner resilience.

### **1. Meeting Your Compassionate Friend**

[adapted from the mindful self-compassion protocol developed by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer]

This guided visualization creates a feeling of being listened to, heard, and cared about, which can become a body-based resource for the mind and heart. Whatever upset or distress we are experiencing, we can also experience the tenderness of care.

1. Allow yourself to sit or lie down comfortably, coming into a sense of presence — being aware of being in your own body, in this moment, focusing your awareness on the gentle rhythm of your breathing, coming into a sense of relaxation and peacefulness. Then, when you're ready, imagine that you are in your own safe place, a comfortable place where you can feel protected, at ease, and content. This may be a room in your own home, a favorite bench in a park or on a hill overlooking the beach, or in a café with a friend. Let yourself settle into the security and comfort of being in your safe place.

2. Then, let yourself know that you are going to receive a visitor, someone older, wiser, and stronger, someone who knows you well and cares about you a great deal. This figure may be someone you already know; it may be someone completely imaginary. It could be simply a sense of warm, loving presence. However this works for you, this figure wants you to be happy, and they want to visit with you for a little while.

3. As you imagine this compassionate friend coming to visit you in your safe place, imagine in detail what they look like, how they're dressed, and how they move. Imagine what it feels like for you to be in their presence, in their energy field.
4. Imagine how you meet and greet this figure: do you stand up and shake hands, do you hug, do you bow?
5. Then imagine how you will have a conversation with this compassionate friend: sitting face to face, sitting side by side, going for a walk.
6. Begin to share with this compassionate friend some current worry, some upset, or some distress. Imagine what it feels like to share this concern with your compassionate friend. Does your energy shift or change in any way as you begin to share it?
7. Imagine your friend listening receptively, openly, understandingly. Imagine how you feel being listened to and understood and accepted by this compassionate friend.
8. Imagine any words of acceptance or encouragement or support your compassionate friend might have to offer. If you could hear whatever you need to hear right now, what would those words be? As you imagine listening, sense what you feel as you hear these words.
9. When the conversation is complete and it's time for your friend to depart, imagine how you say good-bye, knowing that you can visit with this compassionate friend again any time you wish to.
10. When you are in your safe place by yourself again, take a moment to pause, notice, and reflect on your experience. Reflect on any shifts in your experience of yourself or the upset you were working with, knowing that you have tapped into your own deep, intuitive wisdom.

As you evoke your compassionate friend, you are activating your own oxytocin-based caregiving system, which calms your nervous system and restores your physiological and emotional equilibrium. As evoking your compassionate friend becomes a reliable habit in your brain, you can deepen your sense that you are not alone in your struggles, which can be very nurturing to your resilience.

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All of these practices will help you cultivate more calm in the body, restore the natural physiological equilibrium - the "range of resilience" - of the body-brain, and access a deeper sense of safety and well-being that primes your brain for more resilient learning and coping.

Additional practices to strengthen your emotional, relational, and reflective intelligence as well as somatic intelligence are available in [Resilience](#). Simple tools with big effects. Not only will you learn practices that will help you cope with any upset or catastrophe and bounce back from

any adversity that would derail your well-being. You will learn to see yourself as someone who *can* learn, who *can* cope.

*I am no longer afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.*

*- Louisa May Alcott*