**Somatic Experiencing**

Basic info sheet

**What is Somatic Experiencing?**

Somatic Experiencing was founded and developed by Dr. Peter Levine who wrote the well-known book, Waking The Tiger: Healing Trauma. It is based upon the observation that wild prey animals, though threatened routinely, are rarely traumatised. Instead, they utilise innate mechanisms to regulate and discharge the high levels of energy arousal associated with the defensive survival behaviours of fight, flight or freeze. These mechanisms provide animals with ways to deal with trauma that enables them to return to normal in the aftermath of highly ”charged” life-threatening experiences

Although humans have virtually the same regulatory mechanisms as animals, the function of these instinctive systems is often overridden or inhibited by the ”rational” part of our more highly developed brain, the neo cortex, or by learned behaviours. These restraints prevent the complete discharge of survival energies and do not allow the nervous system to regain its equilibrium. The body stays in a state of alertness even if the ‘danger’ is no longer present. Over time a variety of symptoms can develop.

Whatever the cause of the trauma; be it from adverse pre and peri-natal experiences, disorganized early attachment, episodic or chronic traumatic events or prolonged high stress situations, the safe, gradual negotiation of SE helps individuals to reconnect with their own innate capacity to recover.  They will gradually return to experiencing aliveness, vitality, and health in the here-and-now, with an increased self-confidence and sense of empowerment. As these shifts happen there will be changes in the way they respond both consciously and unconsciously to stressful situations.

While gently pacing the process so that each individual can safely assimilate the changes within their nervous system, SE® helps return a sense of aliveness, relaxation and wholeness to the individual.

**Somatic Experiencing Principles**  
SE does not focus on talking about or re-living trauma. SE works at the physiological level where traumatic activation is held in the body. Often, clients have had therapy to deal with their traumas and still have symptoms, physically, emotionally, and relationally. Or perhaps they have symptoms and don’t know why. Dr. Peter Levine found that by processing the body and guiding the discharge of stored energy in the body then homeostasis of the nervous system occurred and symptoms resolved. This seems to be the missing piece in trauma resolution, no matter how severe.

**Key Concepts**

* SE stabilises the client in a safe, resourced state before working with any traumatic material. An environment of relative safety is necessary for healing to occur.
* SE tracks the bodily “felt sense,” to allow the highly aroused survival energies to be safely experienced and gradually discharged leading to completion and self-regulation of the nervous system.Sensations such as warmth, trembling, expansion and contraction, softening and tightening are experienced. This helps people “renegotiate” and heal rather than relive or re-enact trauma
* SE integrates and expands a person’s tolerance of their bodily sensations and helps them to trust in the innate wisdom of the body, and begins to separate out, the fear and terror experienced during the event. In so doing a person’s capacity for self-regulation is enhanced.
* SE “titrates” experience, working slowly within the client’s range of resiliency to facilitate the most efficient healing recovery rather than causing re-arousal of intense emotional states or painful physical discomfort.
* SE works peripherally with the activation. Work begins away from the area of greatest discomfort, or the traumatic event is approached from what occurred before and after the primary core of that event. This allows a reduction of the bound charge and an increase in stability to tolerate the strong sensations and emotions contained in the apex of the event.
* SE “pendulates” the experience by first helping the client to recognise and expand their internal, external and missing resources. As activation increases the client can switch between working with the aroused and activated state back to their resourced state and not fall into the sensation of overwhelm.
* SE works in the here and now and focuses on the sensations and body memories and resources occurring in the present.

**How Does SE Differ From Other Therapeutic Modalities?**  
The more traditional cognitive and emotional based ‘talk’ therapies can be considered as being “top-down” approaches. They focus on insight and emotions first and only secondarily focus on somatic responses to trauma. Talking about the trauma can have an adverse effect as the person can be re-traumatised with the flooding of reactions and overwhelm that arises during the process if their nervous system is not able to regulate itself.

In contrast Somatic Experiencing is a “bottom-up” approach. It focuses on the brain stem – the reptilian brain and its survival-based functions that are not under conscious or emotional control. Access to these instinctual action and arousal systems is through the mode of physical bodily sensations, imagery and motor patterns. In the process of working with the ‘felt sense’ of the body other elements of the trauma experience may arise such as meaning and emotions. Thus cognitions and emotions are included in SE practice but they are secondary or derivative from physical sensations through the bottom-up processing.

SE uses techniques and interventions that work directly and gently with the neurophysiology of the body. SE avoids some of the issues that catharsis, re-enactment or talking about the story may create such a re-traumatisation or re-arousal of intense emotional states that can be frightening or too confronting to clients and may discourage them from continuing on their healing journey.

Somatic Experiencing® (SE), developed by Dr. Peter A. Levine, teaches clients how to track sensation in the body through sensate focus to elicit the intrinsic healing capacity for self-regulation and healing that all humans share.  Connecting the client to the experience of their innate healing wisdom supports mastery and restores self-confidence and the inner experience of core intactness regardless of previous experiences.**Dianne Poole-Heller MA, LPC, NCC, Ph.D*, SE Practitioner***.

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Sources

This information is taken from Somatic Experiencing Australia, seaustralia.com, and Trauma Healing Institute (SE US) traumahealing.org sites

For videos describing and demonstrating more about this approach please check out these sites or Peter Levine on youtube.