

Somatic Centering Practice

Being activated or triggered is a common experience when we are faced with situations that push us past our limits of skillful response. The situation may be common place like another driver cuts us off or someone says something we don't like. The situation may be much bigger like a partner threatens to end a relationship or something happens in the social / political world that threatens our values.

From a somatic perspective, being triggered is an activation of our safety system preparing for a physical threat. This occurs in two primary ways:

- Sympathetic – fight / flight – hyperactive – fast: our physiology speeds up in preparation for action with increased heartrate and blood pressure and is often accompanied by feeling of anxiety or aggression. Our mind may race with negative thoughts.
- Parasympathetic – freeze – hypoactive – slow: our physiology slows down to avoid danger. We become still. Our thinking may be dull. We may feel lethargic and unable to move. The impulse is to hide, sleep or check out.

The safety system evolved long before human beings and was designed to deal with immediate threats to the physical body. It operates in the immediate present.

However, our thinking mind evolved to extend our consciousness into the past and future. The safety system can't tell the difference between past, present, or future. It's incapable of making this discrimination. Often what we are triggered by is something from the past or future. The situation that triggered us is either a reminder of an event from the past or is a projection of what we think might happen in the future. In this case, the safety system is reacting as if the situation is an immediate threat. So, our practice is to remind the safety system that we are okay right here, right now. This is called regulation.

From a regulated state, we are more able to respond skillfully to the situation with wisdom and compassion.

(If there is an immediate threat to the physical body, let the safety system do its job! We're not trying to override that!)

We can learn to view our activation as a gift, offering a gate into greater wholeness. Our triggers show us the contours of our ego, the ways in which we contract from our experience.

The sensations in our body are the path and the teacher. We recognize we are triggered through the sensations in our body. Our thinking is also a product of the body. Our thinking is not separate. The sensations in our body are our primary experience and show us the way.

Our experience of being triggered is completely trustworthy when met in real time with resources. Our experience of being triggered is workable. We can develop the capacity to be with our experience and the courage to reach out to others when we need help.

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The Practice of Somatic Centering

1. Notice your activation – being triggered.

Focus on the physical sensations in the body. Where is the activation located – lower belly, heart, throat, head, etc.? What are the qualities of the physical sensations – hot/warm/cold, sharp/throbbing/dull, tight/loose, rigid/firm/soft, or any descriptive quality? Become familiar with the qualities of your experience that let you know you are triggered.

2. Orient toward resources in present time.

Begin by orienting toward your physical body. Be aware of your feet on the floor. Notice your seat. Come into an upright and relaxed posture.

Open to the senses – sight, sound, smell, touch, even taste – our senses only operate in present time and are resources to orient us toward right here, right now.

Notice what's going on in the field of this present moment.

3. Contact your body.

Place one hand on your heart, palm over the center of the chest. Place the other hand on the lower belly, palm over the naval. Feel your own touch, the warmth of your hands, and the sensation of touching your clothing. Notice your heartbeat. Relax your shoulders and arms.

Breathe gently into your lower belly. Be aware of the movement in your body generated by the breath.

4. Remind yourself you are okay right here, right now.

Remind yourself you are in present time. "Today is [Date] and I am [where]."

Remind yourself of resources – the ground underneath your feet, your breath, a bird song, a gentle breeze, wind chimes, trees, the wall of a building, a sturdy table or desk – anything in your sensory awareness that is stable.

Say phrases that work for you like, I love you, I'm sorry you are suffering, you are okay, darling, or I'm with you and I'm here.

5. Rest in this space until you feel yourself more grounded.

If the activation picks up again, simply come back to the ways of reminding yourself you are okay right here, right now.

Notice what's happening to the physical sensations in your body you identified as "being triggered."

6. Note any insights, awareness, or information that may arise.

It might be a more skillful response to a situation. Something about yourself might be revealed. Something else might show up. Maybe nothing happens – that's okay, too!