



## Soothing a Stressed-out Body

Unlike the threat of an oncoming vehicle, a racing tiger, or a natural disaster, COVID-19 presents a danger that we cannot see. But the stress that we feel from this invisible virus, along with all the accompanying difficulties, is no different from our response to a tangible, physical threat. Our nervous system responds to both visible and invisible threats in one of three ways—fight, flight, or freeze. Our instinct is to rid ourselves of the physical and emotional discomfort by stressing out, numbing out, or shutting down.

An ongoing threat from something like COVID-19, doesn't give us many options to fight or flee—so mostly we freeze. We tighten our throats and bellies, hunch our shoulders, and clench our jaws until our energy and emotions are constricted and frayed. Our bodies—and our emotions—feel the effects of the threat. All the pent-up tension and energy makes us anxious, depressed, irritable, and angry. These are scary sensations. We may take it out on others, or we may isolate and cut ourselves off.



In our culture we already live with high levels of stress and tension—and now, with COVID-19 these physical and emotional responses are even greater.

Peter Levine, PhD, the founder of Somatic Experiencing® (SE) therapy, studied what animals do after a traumatic or frightening experience. They shake it off, as the expression says. They run, buck, jump, tremble, or shake. They physically expend the pent-up energy from the intense experience. And then they're done. Humans, on the other hand, tend to hold onto the experience and pile more on top of it until the body manifests the stress in backaches, headaches, depression, panic attacks, or other health issues. The longer COVID-19 is with us and the restrictions continue, we're likely to keep piling on the stress until it becomes harmful.

According to Dr. Levine, we can learn to shake off the stress—just like animals do. We have that capability within us, but it requires some physical movement and reflection. We can't accomplish this kind of release with our thinking selves. You can't reason it away, and beating yourself up definitely doesn't work. What we need is a physical release, achieved through the body.

Dr. Levine recommends two simple exercises that help settle anxious energy in the body.

**1) Hum.** Stand or sit with your feet solidly on the floor. Take an easy full breath and exhale on a hum in a deep low range—like a foghorn. Then slowly inhale, starting in the belly and moving to the chest. Repeat this three times. Notice the sensations in your body—without judgment. Pay attention to images and feelings that arise.

**2) Self-Hug.** Take your right hand and gently place it on your left ribs under your arm. Take the left hand and lay it on your upper right arm. Hold yourself for a few minutes. You might even feel like rocking or humming or using the deep “voo” sound again.



Resmaa Menakem, LICSW, therapist, teacher, and author of the book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, was trained by Dr. Levine. Menakem suggests many wonderful exercises that help us release pent-up energy and trauma. While his book is about racial trauma and how it affects our bodies, whether Black, brown or white, Menakem's tools are useful for COVID-19 stress and other life traumas as well.

In his book, Menakem writes about the importance of settling your body during or after a stressful or threatening situation. He teaches the following **Five Anchors**:

**Anchor 1:** Soothe yourself to quiet your mind, calm your heart, and settle your body.

**Anchor 2:** Simply notice the sensations, vibrations, and emotions in your body, instead of reacting to them.

**Anchor 3:** Accept the discomfort—and notice when it changes—instead of trying to flee from it.

**Anchor 4:** Stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience with all its ambiguity and uncertainty. Respond from the best parts of yourself.

**Anchor 5:** Safely discharge any energy that remains.

He suggests activities like running, dancing, or playing a sport to release that remaining energy. Once the energy has settled, you can meditate or do yoga.

### Somatic Experiencing can also help us understand the trapped energy and the stories behind it.

- Is the constriction in the jaw, belly, feet, hips, or ankles? We can hold that tightness anywhere in the body, even in our eyes.
- Give the constriction a word as you notice it. Tight. Stabbing. Holding. Hard. Clenching. Dark. Crushing.
- Don't judge the experience or try to change it. Just notice and keep breathing.
- Next note and name the feelings that comes up. Sadness. Anger. Weariness. Frustration. Loss. Grief.
- If you stay with it, the story behind the tightness begins to come clear. Clarity may unfold—just a hint at first, and then with gentleness and tears.
- It might be helpful to share what you are feeling with a close friend or a therapist.
- Remember—don't judge the feeling or try to change it. Avoid fleeing, fighting, or freezing.
- Watch as the knot in your belly or lump in your throat starts to soften and release.

These are great tools for whatever you might be wrestling with on top of the COVID-19 experience. Remember the body holds great wisdom including the power to heal itself.

Both Levine and Menakem are groundbreaking thinkers, teachers, and healers. For more on COVID-19 stress support from Peter Levine and his colleagues, go to [YouTube](#) – start at minute 4:33 if you want to skip a lengthy introduction. For more on SE, go to [somaticexperiencing.com](http://somaticexperiencing.com). For more tools on healing racial, relational, personal and traumatic stress read [My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies](#), by Resmaa Menakem at Amazon, bookshop.org, or your independent bookstore.



“The body has been designed to renew itself through continuous self-correction. These same principles also apply to the healing of psyche, spirit, and soul.”

- Peter A. Levine, PhD

“If you want to have a full and happy life, in good times and in bad, you have to get used to the idea that facing misfortune squarely is better than trying to escape from it.”

- Norman Fischer