

How to Give Yourself the Maximum Benefit of Somatic Exercises®

The most important thing for you to remember is that Somatic Exercises change your muscular system by changing your central nervous system. If you do not remember this important fact, their effectiveness will be diminished for you.

You will receive the maximum benefit from the Somatic Exercise movement patterns if you do the following:

1. Learn the nature of sensory-motor amnesia, how it occurs in your brain, and where it occurs in your body, by reading SOMATICS, published by Lifelong Books (Perseus Books).

If unavailable at your bookstore, you can order *SOMATICS* by writing to: *Somatics Educational Resources*, 1516 Grant Avenue #212, Novato, CA 94945. If you use Visa or Master Card, please include card number and "valid to" date. (415) 892-0617.

2. While doing the Somatic Exercises, your primary task is to focus your attention on the internal sensations of movement.

These movement patterns highlight those areas of the body most commonly affected by sensory-motor amnesia. As you perform the exercises, concentrate on developing a careful sensory awareness of the movements in these body areas as a direct way to maintain control over them.

3. Ideally, you should do your Somatic Exercises while lying on a rug or mat, wearing loose clothing, and being away from all distractions.

A rug or mat allows comfort while providing a firm support for your body. This allows you to be more precise in performing the movement and more precise in perceiving it. People whose movement or strength is extremely limited may do their Somatic Exercises in bed. The firmer their mattresses, the more effective the exercises will be, and they should move to a rug or mat as soon as possible.

The object of Somatic Exercises is to loosen your body from constricted muscles, so it makes no sense to wear constricting clothing while you do them. On the other hand, there's no need for athletic gear. You're not supposed to work up a sweat doing Somatic Exercises.

4. Always move slowly.

Moving slowly, you give your brain the chance to notice all that is happening in your body as you move. Slow-motion films are essential in sports training because they allow athletes to study the details of a movement or play. The same goes for focusing attention on the internal sensations of your own movements: The slower you go, the more you perceive.

5. Always move gently and with the least possible effort.

This again, is so that your brain can receive precise and uncluttered sensory feedback from the exercises. When you experience excessive effort and strain—as is usually the case in doing calisthenics—then your brain is cluttered by sensory feedback that is irrelevant to what you are relearning to control. I

is better for you to feel that you are doing "too little" than to risk doing too much and undermining the somatic learning process.

6. Do not force any movement. Somatic Exercises help you maintain sensitivity and control, but, until your brain learns how to move your muscles, no amount of force and effort will release the involuntary contractions in your body. Pushing against your muscles is from the old tradition of physical training, which always fails to release the hold of sensory-motor amnesia. If you attempt to voluntarily force a muscle that is involuntarily contracted, you will cause an equal and opposite resistance of that muscle. It will contract even tighter, finally to the point of spasm.

Remember: If you want to untie a knot, you must look at the cord carefully then gently undo the tangle. Yanking on the cord will only make the knot tighter.

7. Somatic Exercises are not painful. The movement patterns of these exercises are the normal movements of the musculoskeletal system. If you perform them slowly and gently, they are completely harmless. Hurting yourself while exercising is unnecessary, harmful, and, of course, no fun at all.

People who are already suffering from sensory-motor amnesia, especially those with severely contracted lower back muscles, will sometimes feel soreness when these muscles first begin to lengthen. This is to be expected; and once their muscles lengthen, the soreness will disappear. Even very painful lower back muscles become comfortable after about three days of Somatic Exercises, once they have relaxed to their natural length and blood has circulated through the muscle fibers. Thus, if you feel some pain doing the exercises, move gently and slowly, never forcing your movements, and keep in mind that this is the normal direction of movement that you are trying to reestablish.

There are always unusual situations where normal musculoskeletal movement patterns are impossible because of an observable obstacle. In such cases, you should seek medical advice and follow it. Physicians usually agree that Somatic Exercises are anatomically harmless when done properly.

8. Be persistent, patient, and positive.

Somatic Exercises change your body by teaching your brain. Your learning grows steadily and solidly. You must be persistent—determined in your practice of these movement patterns. You must be patient—looking not for a "quick fix" on your body, but for a genuine, lasting change in your comfort, range of movement, posture, and general functioning. Most importantly, you must be positive in your expectations, envisaging and aiming for the improvement you know your somatic system is capable of.

Adapted from Somatics, Dr. Thomas Hanna, pages 95-97.