

# WHY SOMATIC EXERCISES WORK

We often think of self-care as something we do after work. But for real nervous system regulation, it needs to happen during the day, especially as stress builds. Somatic (body-based) exercises help you shift from a reactive stress state into a regulated state by:

- Activating proprioception – your body's internal GPS
- Engaging the vagus nerve to calm your fight/flight response
- Using rhythmic or bilateral movement to create neural safety signals
- Enhancing interoception – tuning into your body's cues

These shifts allow your system to return to homeostasis, improving clarity, presence, and resilience.

## 1. Grounding Through Proprioception and Pressure

These practices use deep pressure, weight-bearing, or tactile input to reorient you in your body and environment, great for when you're overwhelmed, spacey, or scattered.

### Heel Drop Flop

Stand with your arms lifted gently above your head. On an exhale, lift your heels slightly, then let them drop to the ground with a soft thud at the same time, bend at the hips and let your arms flop forward and down, releasing your upper body.

*Why it works:* Grounds you through your feet, releases upper body tension, and cues a nervous system reset via movement and exhale.

*When to try it:* Midday tension, mental fog, or post-meeting reset.

### Arm Squeezes

Gently squeeze your upper arms or forearms with your opposite hand, alternating sides or holding for a few slow breaths on each arm. You can use light to moderate pressure, whatever feels grounding and reassuring. This can be done seated or standing, and even discreetly in public settings.

*Why it works:* Deep pressure touch calms the nervous system and helps you reconnect with your physical boundaries.

*When to try it:* When you're feeling anxious, numb, or need quiet grounding, even in public.



### **Tense Palm Push**

Push your palms together firmly, hold your breath, tense your entire body for a few seconds, then release it all with a big, deep breath out. Let the tension melt away.

*Why it works:* Mimics a natural stress cycle: tension followed by release. Helps discharge stress and regulate breath.

*When to try it:* After frustration, high-focus work, or overstimulation.

### **Whole Body Shake-Out**

Stand up, bend your knees slightly, and begin to gently shake your arms, legs, shoulders- your whole body. Let the movement be loose, unstructured, even a little silly. Keep shaking for 30-60 seconds.

*Why it works:* Discharges stress physically, resets body awareness, and interrupts tension loops.

*When to try it:* When you're agitated, wired, or need a fresh start.

### **Hand Gliding**

Place your palms together in front of your chest with gentle pressure. Slowly glide them back and forth across each other, left over right, then right over left. Paying close attention to the sensation of skin against skin. Keep your movements slow and intentional for 1-2 minutes. *Why it works:* Activates the proprioceptive system through light pressure and motion, helping the body feel safe and regulated.

*Why it works:* Provides tactile, calming input while anchoring your focus on a repetitive sensory cue.

*When to try it:* During transitions or scattered moments.

### **Forehead & Neck Cradle**

Gently cradle your forehead with one hand and the back of your neck with the other. Apply light, steady pressure not pushing, just holding. Stay with it for 1-2 minutes. Notice the warmth of your hands and the sensation of being held and supported. *Why it works:* Activates proprioceptive input and creates a sense of physical containment and safety.

*Why it works:* Offers containment and comfort; calms primitive parts of the brain and supports down-regulation.

*When to try it:* When overwhelmed or emotionally flooded.



## 2. Bilateral and Rhythmic Movement for Regulation

These movements engage both sides of the body and brain, helping to calm your system and bring mental/emotional balance.

### Whole Body Sway

Stand with your feet hip-width apart, knees soft. Begin to gently sway your torso from side to side, allowing your arms to swing freely, crossing your body and lightly tapping your upper arms, ribs, or lower back as they swing.

*Why it works:* Rhythmic, bilateral motion integrates brain activity and signals calm.

*When to try it:* During a reset between tasks or after emotional stress.

### Butterfly Taps

Cross your arms over your chest so that each hand rests on the opposite collarbone or upper chest. Gently tap back and forth, alternating hands in a steady, calming rhythm. Eyes can be open or closed. Breathe slowly.

*Why it works:* Soothes the nervous system through rhythmic bilateral stimulation and grounding touch.

*When to try it:* Before or after high-stress moments.

### Heart Circles

Place one hand over your heart and begin to make slow, gentle circles with your palm. Keep your breath steady and your movement soft. Stay with the motion for 1-2 minutes, allowing your attention to settle into the rhythm. *Why it works:* Provides soothing tactile input that activates the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting calm and safety.

*Why it works:* Tactile, repetitive movement fosters calm and reconnection with emotional self.

*When to try it:* When you need comfort or self-compassion.

**Hand Gliding** (see above)

### 3. Breath and Vagus Nerve Activation

These practices use intentional breath and subtle vagal input to down-regulate and re-centre.

#### Alternate Nostril Breathing

Using your right hand, gently close your right nostril with your thumb and inhale slowly through the left nostril. Then close the left nostril with your ring finger, release the right nostril, and exhale through the right. Inhale through the right, close it, and exhale through the left. Continue for 1-2 minutes. *Why it works:* Balances activity in both hemispheres of the brain, supporting mental clarity and emotional regulation.

*Why it works:* Balances the nervous system, lowers arousal, and calms emotional centres.

*When to try it:* Before a difficult task, or when you feel scattered.

#### Physiological Sigh

Take a deep breath in through your nose. Then, just before you exhale take a second shorter inhale. Slowly exhale through your mouth. Repeat 1-3 times. *Why it works:* This technique mimics the body's natural sigh reflex, which helps reset the nervous system.

*Why it works:* A research-backed tool for calming the nervous system rapidly by lowering CO<sub>2</sub> and engaging rest-state reflexes.

*When to try it:* In moments of acute anxiety or overstimulation.

#### Tense Palm Push (see above)

#### Sternum Tapping

Use your fingertips or a loose fist to gently tap or knock on the centre of your chest (the sternum). Keep the rhythm steady and your breath relaxed. Continue for 30 seconds to 1 minute. *Why it works:* Stimulates the vagus nerve, helping to regulate your nervous system and support a shift into a calmer state.

*Why it works:* Stimulates vagal tone and releases tension through vibration and rhythm.

*When to try it:* After difficult conversations or when feeling unsettled.

#### Ear Rub (Sound Focus)

Gently rub your fingertips together just next to your ears, slow and steady. Tune in to the soft sound this makes. Stay with it for 30-60 seconds, noticing how your body responds.

*Why it works:* Subtly stimulates the vagus nerve and shifts focus to gentle auditory input.

*When to try it:* When overstimulated or racing mentally.



#### **4. Sensory Reorientation / Interoceptive Focus**

These techniques shift your attention toward internal or external cues, supporting present-moment awareness and body connection.

##### **Eye Nervous System Reset**

This practice involves staring as far as you can to the right and holding your gaze there for 30 seconds, then repeating on the left. It may feel subtle, but it's powerful.

*Why it works:* Activates a calming vagal reflex and interrupts stress patterns in the brain.

*When to try it:* When your mind is racing or after emotional spikes.

##### **Go for a Walk Outside**

Even a short walk, especially in nature, can regulate your nervous system and offer a reset during the day. Focus on your feet hitting the ground, your breath, and the sights/sounds around you. *Why it works:* Activates the proprioceptive system, which supports grounding and body awareness.

*Why it works:* Reorients your sensory system, regulates mood, and promotes mental clarity.

*When to try it:* Midday slump, post-task, or after emotional overwhelm.

**Forehead & Neck Cradle** (see above)

**Ear Rub** (see above)

##### **Final Note**

Each of these practices doesn't fix your stress, it invites your body into a new experience. One that says: you are safe.

They're small, repeatable ways to return to yourself throughout the day. Try them. Notice what feels good. Let your body lead.

