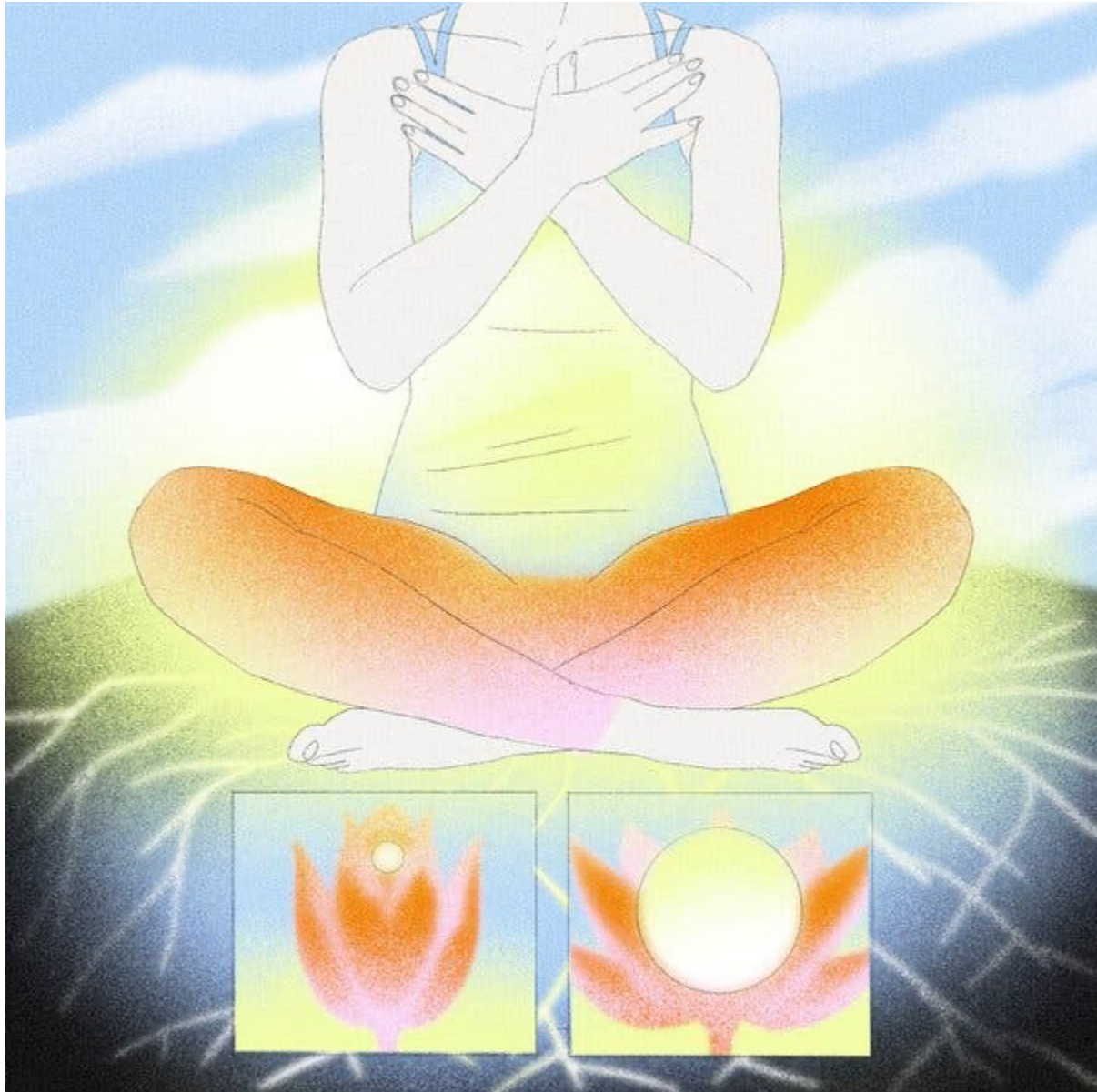


How Some People Are Incorporating Movement in Their Therapy Sessions

Many different techniques fall under the umbrella of “somatic therapy,” which is gaining popularity.



Credit...Marine Buffard

By [Christina Caron](#)

April 6, 2026, 11:00 a.m. ET

In a YouTube video posted in January, Bianca Stephenson [grins as she raises her arms](#) in the air, jiggling her wrists and swinging her hips.

“It looks really, really silly,” Ms. Stephenson, 34, says. “But it works.”

She’s practicing something called “somatic shaking,” a way to manage stress and release “stagnant energy,” she says.

After spending five to 10 minutes shaking, she will typically sit quietly and allow deeper feelings to surface; sometimes she cries. For Ms. Stephenson, who spent years in therapy to address childhood trauma, somatic movements have provided an emotional vent that traditional psychotherapy alone did not.

The practice is “like a moving meditation,” said Ms. Stephenson, who lives in London and co-owns a coffee shop.

Somatic shaking falls under the umbrella of somatic therapy, a group of body-oriented techniques that has exploded in popularity on social media in recent years. Shaking is one variety, but [somatic movements](#) can also include grounding exercises that help your body feel rooted to the earth as well as postural changes, [breath work](#) or activities like pushing against a wall.

Despite its popularity online, a strict definition of somatic therapy, and what it accomplishes, is tricky to pin down.

What is somatic therapy?

There are many varieties of somatic therapy: People have used the phrase to describe techniques as diverse as yoga, dance and acupuncture. The most well-known modality is “somatic experiencing,” which was developed by the psychologist Peter A. Levine in the '70s.

Dr. Levine felt that talk therapy alone wasn't enough to heal trauma. What was also needed, he said, was the slow release of the “fight-or-flight energy” that had become locked in the body's nervous system after experiencing trauma.

In general, somatic therapists aim to help patients develop an awareness of their body and then zero in on the way it responds to trauma, stress and social connection.

Eventually, patients are encouraged to let go of learned behaviors like a hunched posture or shallow breathing, with the goal of improving their mental state and helping them live more fully in the present.

“There's no question that there's a lot of promise for something like this,” said Vaile Wright, the senior director for health care innovation at the American Psychological Association. “Talk therapy doesn't work for everybody.”

In fact, some somatic techniques like progressive muscle relaxation or mindfulness breathing are already incorporated within various evidence-based treatment modalities, she said. But those techniques, when grouped together and used outside of an already established therapeutic approach, have not been well studied, she added.

Some studies, including a [small randomized controlled trial](#) published in 2017, have suggested that somatic experiencing could be an effective treatment for post-traumatic

stress disorder. But the A.P.A. noted as recently as last year that there was still [insufficient evidence](#) to recommend it as a treatment for PTSD.

How does somatic therapy work?

There is not one specific protocol for something as diffuse as somatic therapy. But here's how it might play out: Imagine that someone shows up at their therapy session itching to talk about a big fight they had with their partner. Typically, a somatic therapist will "pause and slow things down," said Scott Lyons, a psychologist in New York City and the founder of the Embody Lab, which offers training in somatic therapy.

"We'll say something as simple as, 'Where do you feel that in your body?' Or 'How does that show up in you right now?'"

These bodily sensations aren't random, he said, they are the way that our subconscious is communicating the deeper feelings, needs or beliefs that are "unexpressed or unprocessed."

Eventually the therapist might invite the patient to release intense emotions through movement; encourage the patient to gently shake their body; or experiment with bigger gestures or a louder voice.

Patients may also be asked to simulate an action that they wish they could have done in the past, like jogging in place to represent running away or holding their hand out and saying "Stop!"

None of this should feel forced, Dr. Lyons said, rather the pace is dictated by what each client feels safe enough to do.

What else do patients need to know?

One of the biggest misconceptions about somatic therapy is that it's "just a set of exercises," said Arielle Schwartz, a clinical psychologist in Boulder, Colo., who has incorporated somatic methods into her practice for decades.

While somatic movements can be beneficial, they are best paired with a [therapist](#), she added. A therapist can help a patient work through some of the difficult emotions that might surface and also support the patient in learning how to move their body differently.

You may wish to look for a provider who has received formal training in a specific method like [somatic experiencing](#) or [sensorimotor psychotherapy](#), the experts said.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to addressing trauma, and somatic therapy isn't for everyone, Dr. Schwartz said. But, she added, some patients finally feel release and relief when "the body gets to finally tell the story."

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