

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2016 Edition

Ask the Expert

Somatic Movement: Improve Your Performance and Balance at Work

The art of pandiculation

Q: As part of our Workplace Wellness Program, we are investigating options that can be done by employees at their desks or in a group setting. We heard about somatic movement. What is this all about?

A: *What is Somatic Movement?*

Somatic movement is an alignment-based practice that involves gentle movement and a concept called pandiculation. Pandiculation teaches our brain how to contract and relax our muscles in a functional way. As such, we learn healthier ways to move and be in our bodies. As we gain greater control of our muscles, we restore balance to our bodies.

What are the benefits of Somatic Movement?

Somatic movement creates a new pattern of muscle memory which allows us to sit, stand and walk with our posture aligned. Somatic movement is especially helpful for people who suffer from back, hip or neck pain and other chronic discomfort. Somatic exercises release unconscious holding patterns and unwanted tension which cause pain.

In addition to releasing tension that might be interfering with intended muscle movement, having relaxed muscles brings greater sensory awareness to our bodies. That means we are more aware of what our muscles and bodies are doing.

All somatic movement is done deliberately and without force. Because it is both deliberate and slow, we are able to soothe our nervous system and regulate our breath.

How long does it take to see or feel a difference?

You will feel a difference after each exercise. For example, after you've done Somatic movement on your right side, you will feel a difference between that side of your body and your left. The right side of your body may feel longer, flatter, softer or more relaxed.

In the beginning, the effects of Somatic movement may not last very long. Our brains revert to established patterns of movement. The important thing to remember is that Somatic work is a process; the effects of the exercises are cumulative. As we repeat the movements regularly and over time, our brain re-patterns healthy movement for longer periods of time. With repetition, our brains also become more efficient and effective in retaining healthy movement patterns.

Who can do Somatic movement?

Anyone can do Somatic movement. The exercises are not strenuous or physically difficult to do. There are also modifications that can be done if someone is physically limited. Somatic movement can be done standing, sitting in a chair or lying on the ground.



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Somatic movement is also beneficial for athletes. They can exercise with greater effort and strength because their muscles "fire" more fluidly and effectively. Imagine running like a gazelle or having a pain free golf swing!

Does a person need special clothing or equipment?

Though Somatic movement is best done in loose, comfortable clothing, many exercises can be done wearing a business suit or dress/skirt. Take your shoes and jewelry off and you're ready to go. Obviously if you are wearing a dress or skirt, you would do Somatic movement standing or sitting in a chair. The only equipment you need is a mat if you are on the floor or your office chair if you're sitting. Some exercises are done standing up, so just make sure you have a bit of space to move.

How often should we do Somatic exercises?

Someone who sits in a chair all day should do Somatic exercises a couple of times throughout the day. In the morning and at night are best because our brains can retain more information.

Can you give us an example of somatic exercise that can be done sitting on a chair?

Begin by centering yourself. Sitting comfortably in a chair, place your hand on your belly and breathe using your diaphragm. Do this for about one minute to get your diaphragm moving.

Turtle: Gently drop your chin toward your chest. Inhale and slowly lift your head and raise your shoulders. Bring your head to neutral and your shoulder a little higher. Exhale and relax your shoulders, letting them drop down. Repeat 8 times. Close your eyes and notice how your neck and shoulders feel.

Pelvic Tilt: Make sure when you sit in a chair you always sit on your sitz* bones and can feel them under you. They are your neutral reference point for keeping your posture properly aligned. Sit comfortably on a chair and feel your sitz bones on the seat. Inhale & as you exhale, tip the pelvis backwards, letting your head roll forward and shoulders roll in toward your chest. Inhale and roll the pelvis back up; when you feel your sitz bones on the chair stop. That is your reference point. Continue to exhale and roll off your sitz bones and inhale up to the reference point. Do this sequence six to eight times, then stop and notice how you are sitting in your chair. How do you feel? Be sure to use your pelvis to come up. Don't arch your back to come up.

Are there any cautions or precautions?

The adage in Somatic movement is "stay within your range of comfort". You never go beyond what feels comfortable. The key point to remember is we are teaching the brain how to move our muscles in a new way and that requires us to be gentle and slow. If your doctor has advised you not to perform a certain movement, then don't.

The best precaution is to learn how to do the exercises properly. Attend a class in your area, contact a Somatic Movement Educator or get a DVD showing you how to do the exercises. Let me know if you need assistance in finding the right resources.

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