

## TIPS AND GUIDELINES FOR A SUCCESSFUL GENTLE SOMATIC YOGA® PRACTICE

All of the Somatic Movement Flows® (SMFs) are inherently safe for all ages and abilities. As such, they are designed to reeducate and strengthen the body's (Soma) brain-to-muscle memory. However, as with all new exercise routines, if you have physical challenges or concerns please consult your health care professional.

The long-term benefits derived from these movement sequences are cumulative. In order to support you in your practice, you are strongly encouraged to follow these tips and guidelines.

### 1. INTENTION

Energy follows consciousness, and intention leads the way. Setting an intention before each practice will energize your process and enhance the benefits you derive from your commitment to wholeness.

The word *Yoga* (from the Sanskrit *yuj*, "union") means union of the individual soul or self with Spirit; also, the methods by which this goal is attained. Thus the main intention for practicing Gentle Somatic Yoga is to embrace and unite with our Whole Self (Soma). This includes accepting our body's perceived limitations, and suspending all judgment of it.

It also means loving ourselves unconditionally and letting go of that which no longer serves us. As we release old habits and patterns of holding stress in our body, more space is created to awaken what is possible for ourselves on every level.

Our natural state is peace and wellbeing. It is our birthright. It's also one of the many benefits of Gentle Somatic Yoga.

*"Make the impossible possible,  
Make the possible easy,  
Make the easy elegant."*

### 2. MOVE WITH PLEASURE

Be mindful of your body's feedback as you explore the Somatic Movement Flows (SMFs). While exploring a sequence, if you find particular pleasure in the movement then keep doing it. While some SMFs may be challenging at first, they are not meant to cause strain or pain.



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Never endure discomfort. Trust what your body is telling you and adjust accordingly. Honor the process of discovery, ease and mobility will come over time.

In Gentle Somatic Yoga there is a “Three Second Rule” for avoiding the Stretch Reflex. The Stretch Reflex is an involuntary reflex of a muscle group recoiling from overextension (potentially resulting in muscle spasm). Basically, this is a means by which the body protects itself from danger. As an example, if someone were to unexpectedly yank your arm, you would instinctively pull back in response out of self-protection. Imagine a muscle group doing the same.

### **3. FEATHERING TECHNIQUE**

If you discover tightness or soreness within a movement sequence, identify your “edge” of discomfort and then back off slightly. Holding an attitude of curiosity, gracefully explore the ways in which to move in and out of an area by:

- Varying the direction of the angle/vector
- Varying the speed and/or range of motion
- Exploring micro-movements by breaking the movements up into smaller parts and pieces
- Change-up the instructions slightly each time you practice (e.g. pausing in the middle of a movement; reversing direction in the middle of a movement)

### **4. SLOW AND SMOOTH**

The way to reverse old habitual patterns of holding stress in the body is by building internal awareness. Slow and smooth movements stimulate the part of your brain that brings you greater freedom of movement. Think of the Somatic Movement Flows as a process of discovery, and not something to rush through. The brain learns best when in a relaxed state.

If your smooth movements are interrupted by skipping or jerking, it most likely means you are experiencing sensory motor amnesia (SMA). This is actually a positive indication of opportunities in which your muscles can be repatterned.

In any event, moving mindfully and slowly will reinforce the engagement of your brain’s sensory motor cortex. By doing so, you will regain control of the particular muscle group and experience greater freedom of movement.



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## 5. PROCESS OF DISCOVERY

Sorting out the instructions is an aspect of the science behind Gentle Somatic Yoga. The process of figuring out the complexity and detail of any given movement assists a participant in coming out of sensory motor amnesia (SMA).

## 6. PERFORM MOVEMENT WITH EYES CLOSED

Gentle Somatic Yoga is a process of neuromuscular reeducation that refines your body awareness from the inside out. Think of GSY as a moving meditation.

During your movement practice, it is optimal to keep your eyes closed and focus on the feelings within your body. If your eyes remain open, you may be distracted and miss the subtleties of sensation.

The less external stimuli, the more effective your brain-to-muscle repatterning will be. Mellow music (no TV!) and soft lighting can provide a calming effect that invites more internal sensing.

## 7. "SECRET" TENSION

Part of the science behind Gentle Somatic Yoga is to keep the rest of the body relaxed when you are choosing specific small muscle groups to repattern. To achieve the maximum benefit keep your attention focused on the specific muscle group that you are instructed to use, while keeping the rest of your body relaxed. For example, if the instruction is to lift your left shoulder only, then do the best you can to keep the rest of your body relaxed (neutral).

## 8. THE BREATH

In general, while exploring Somatic Movement Flows the focus is not on any particular breath pattern. Reason being, since most of the SMFs have complex and detailed instructions, there is already plenty to focus on. The main exceptions to this will be during particular meditations, Core Energetic techniques, and pranayama.

Being mindful of maintaining a natural breath flow will support your successful practice. If you find yourself breathing shallow, or even holding your breath, try a cleansing breath: breathe deeply through your nose on the inhale, and slowly exhale through your mouth making an audible "ahh" sound. This will help you to release any "secret tension" you may be holding, as well as to keep your body safe while learning.



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## 9. REPETITION

The average number of repetitions for each set in a Somatic Movement Flow (SMF) is between 3 – 5 times. Avoid overdoing, less is more and slow is better! Maintain focus on the muscle groups you are intending to repattern. The practice of Gentle Somatic Yoga is a reeducation for your mind/body (Soma). Therefore, your brain needs time to integrate its new learning before you move on to the next Flow. Also, the positive effects are cumulative, building upon the previous learning.

If you are recovering from chronic pain due to overuse or injury, you may consider performing SMFs several times a week.

If you are not recovering from injury, you can choose to explore any given SMF whenever and as much as needed.

## 10. PRACTICE ON A FIRM SURFACE

For best results, practice on a firm surface in order to maximize the awareness of the feedback between the brain and muscles. Lying on a carpet, blanket, or yoga mat on the floor is preferable.

Performing the movements in bed is typically not advisable. If the surface is too soft, it provides less opportunity for the brain to receive the information necessary for reeducation and repatterning. However, if you are bed-bound, then gentle, mindful movement is better than no movement. Even visualizing the movements can make significant impact (see the *Miracle Moment* SMF).

Note: most of the Somatic Movement Flows can be modified to be performed while seated in a chair.

## 11. WEAR LOOSE AND COMFORTABLE CLOTHING

During your Gentle Somatic Yoga practice your body will be moving in various directions and angles. Wearing loose, comfortable clothing such as what might be worn to a yoga class or gym will allow for freedom of movement without excessive restriction and/or distraction.

## 12. MODIFICATIONS AND PROPS

Each of the Somatic Movement Flows can be modified based on your current level of mobility. Instead of focusing on the outcome, maintain an attitude of discovery and exploration.



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Small pillows, yoga blocks, blankets, and other props can be helpful accessories that can offer just the right amount of support to give you the confidence needed for a successful practice. Avoid using them as a crutch, however.

When practitioners have chronic pain or restrictive physical conditions, even visualizing a Somatic Movement Flow can provide profound benefit. By visualizing a movement before performing it, it is possible to initiate the development of new neuropathways within the brain, thus beginning the process of regaining muscle control.

### 13. BODY SCANS

In addition to feeling peace and wellbeing, the feedback you are registering during each body scan is an important aspect of the unwinding from old habits of holding pain and stress in your body. Take time to enjoy the benefits of your effort!

After each Somatic Movement Flow, pause for at least 60 seconds in order to integrate the new learning and feel all of the new sensations arising within your body. Notice your breath while you observe how you feel. By doing so, you become aware of yourself as “witness consciousness”. Witness Consciousness is a state of **being** the Whole Self (Soma).

Also, practitioners might be surprised to feel a sensation of effervescence within their Soma, sometimes registered as a slight buzzing sensation beneath the skin. This seems to be a unique signature resulting from the practice of Gentle Somatic Yoga. This sensation is possibly the result of the increased life force energy (Prana) moving freely throughout the Soma.

Enjoy your practice, and remember to.... *“Awaken the Possible!”*

Namasté,

James Knight, E-RYT, CHSE



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