

RELEASING TENSION NATURALLY

Somatic exercises that you can do at home and on the road

By Stuart Moody

The human body was made to move in a multitude of ways. The lifestyle and demands of industrial society, however, put even little children in chairs for hours at a time, with relatively little movement to relieve tension and stimulate circulation. Adults, who must spend similar hours in work and study, often have the added burden of sitting at a desk at home as well, not to mention too-long commutes and other forms of forced inactivity.

While not taking the place of regular exercise and recreational activities, the following exercises provide a welcome break in short time and space. Adapted from Thomas Hanna's *Cat Stretch* (1988), these moves can be done standing in a hotel room or office, or sitting in a chair by your desk. As you perform these exercises, remember to:

- Move slowly, smoothly, and steadily
- Let your breath initiate each movement
- Breathe slowly and deeply
- Lengthen your exhalation in a natural manner
- Notice the effects of your movements
- Relax after each exercise to pay special attention to your sensations
- Do only what is comfortable

Repeat each exercise 3-4 times; more repetitions are fine if you like and if you stay mindful of your actions.

1. *Breathing tall*

Sit or stand comfortably upright, with your feet flat on the floor. As you breathe in, imagine that you are growing taller. Stretch your spine upward and feel the top of your head lift up to the sky. Feel your chest expand and your low back slightly arch. As you breathe out, gently let your stomach sink inward, and the curve in your low back flatten.

2. *Breathing wide*

Place your hands behind your head. As you breathe in, think again of lifting the spine upward and pull the elbows away from each other. As you breathe out, slowly curl the upper body inward as the elbows approach each other, relaxing the low back too. If you are standing, you may bend your knees as you exhale and curve inward.

3. *Breathing across*

Place your left hand behind your head. As you breathe in, expand your chest, gently arching the lower back (if you are sitting, you will rock slightly forward on your pelvic

sit bones. As you breathe out, slowly bend forward, using the right hand to draw the right knee up toward the left elbow. (If you are standing, this move presents a good balancing challenge.) Breathing in, return to the starting position and replace the right foot on the ground. *Repeat 3-4 times on this side, then 3-4 on the other.*

4. Breathing side

Place your left hand on top of your head. On the in-breath, lengthen your spine as before. Breathing out, tilt your head to the side, as if your left ear were going down to meet your left hip. Feel the muscles contracting along your left waist, and the muscles lengthening on the right side. Breathing in, return to the upright position. *Repeat 3-4 times on this side, then 3-4 on the other.*

5. Upward reach and down

Starting with your hands at your sides, breathe in and reach up to the sky. Breathing out, slowly bend forward from the hips. *If you are sitting:* slide your hands down your knees, your calves, even to your ankles or the floor if comfortable. Let your neck relax and your head gently hang forward. *If you are standing:* bend your knees as you slide your hands down your thighs all the way to your knees, possibly to your calves or further. Draw your tummy in and tuck your chin toward your chest. Breathing in, turn your tail under and unfurl upward, slowly lifting your arms again to the sky. (**Caution:** If you have high blood pressure, glaucoma, detached retina, or a history of stroke, please check with your doctor before placing your head below your heart. In the meantime, bend only far enough to keep your head level with, or above, your heart. Similarly, if you have a stuffed nose or other respiratory congestion, do not bend too far forward.)

6. Breathing around

Put your left hand on your abdomen and your right hand comfortably behind your back, resting on your sacrum or lumbar area. Breathing in, gently turn your head and torso to the left. Breathing out, gently turn to the right. If you are standing, you may take a lunging straddle position, with left foot in front, knee bent, and right leg extended behind. *Repeat 3-4 times on this side, then 3-4 on the other.*

Pause. Close your eyes and notice the sensations created by your actions. When it's time to come out, take a few moments before you open your eyes. Take a deep breath before moving somatically (smoothly and with awareness) into the next activity. Notice the difference in your energy and alertness.

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Reference

Hanna, Thomas (1988). *Somatics*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison Wesley.