

## Using the Original Tuning Board™ in Somatic Experiencing®

By Darrell Sanchez, Ph.D.



One of the primary resources we tend to lose track of under traumatic stress is our ability to support our vertical orientation. A poignant illustration of this was a video I watched that depicted three soldiers leaving a combat scene. The soldier in the middle, supported by his upright comrades on either side, is crumpled into a slumped posture. The narrator comments that the soldier in the middle is noticeably traumatized and unable to walk upright (Van der Kolk, 2014). In other words, he is no longer able on his own to orient to the world from a state of verticality.

We know as Somatic Experiencing (SE™) practitioners that when confronted with threat our bodies assume certain postures in response. When we go sympathetic we tend to brace our limbs, crouch and shorten our stance as we prepare to run or fight. When we go parasympathetic we take on a posture of going down toward collapse or fetal so as to protect our vital areas and to make ourselves small. In both cases, we have relinquished the full vertical orientation of our spines and nervous systems. This is appropriate when meeting the threatening circumstance. It does not serve us when fixed and habituated postures create an orientation to the world that does not allow us to be free and balanced.



The Tuning Board is a somatic tool that addresses this problem of a non-resilient ability to return to a fluid vertical nervous system. It is increasingly known and used for this purpose in the SE community as well as among other somatic therapy practitioners. A unique balance board device, the Tuning Board gives the individual the task of relating to a comforting constant motion while the spine is in a state of vertical orientation. This movement-related task directly confronts the immobilization or fixation patterns that tend to be so characteristic of trauma, as a connected flow of movement transmits through the body from the feet and ankles upward.

### **Movement Confronting Immobility**

Beginning with this basic dichotomy of movement confronting immobility, there are multiple ways in which the Tuning Board can support the goals of SE work. The Tuning Board introduces movement as a resource in the form of a very intimate and caressing type of movement felt at the deepest levels of the central and autonomic nervous systems. This flow of movement affects both the non-conscious reflex system and voluntary motor systems. As the movement and the fixation come into direct communication, an awareness task arises: how are these fixations presenting themselves in our embodiment? What is being revealed in regards to the sensation, image, behavior, affect, and meaning (SE's SIBAM) modes of expression?

Part of the skill for the SE practitioner is to support that process of opening awareness that is happening by helping the client to track SIBAM expressions in a titrated way. With the practitioner's support, trauma-related structural fixations come into awareness in a safe context. With awareness comes transformation, as areas of the body previously less responsive to the movement inevitably begin to participate in this "dance with gravity." This meeting place of deep intimate movement with the characteristic immobilization of trauma is rich in unconscious information that can be tapped in a process of trauma resolution. SE practitioners support this process with their presence, kinesthetic resonance, micro-sensing, mirroring and titration skills.

### **Kinesthetic Resonance**



Unlike a typical SE session, the client is now standing up and faced with a movement task. That requires the practitioner to be more resonant, and to become more of a resource for the person, who is no longer just sitting in a comfortable chair. Tracking someone on the Tuning Board elicits greater presence, observation skills, self-awareness, and embodied empathy in the practitioner. I call this kinesthetic resonance.

The person is now vertically oriented as our design and nature intend. In this position the individual is able to orient fully to the 360 degrees of the environment while being supported in maintaining an internal awareness. This represents an important dimension and level of working an SE session. The time on the Tuning Board can be titrated; it doesn't have to be the whole session. The practitioner can use it for shorter or longer periods, depending on how the session evolves.

### **Building Confidence and Resiliency through Embodiment**

Along with our loss of a sense of verticality, a loss of connection with and confidence in our own "embodiment" accompanies the trauma experience. To be embodied means to be alive and to inhabit and experience our human form as fully as possible. Being alive always implies movement. Another benefit of the Tuning Board as a somatic tool is to restore confidence in embodiment. We can observe this increase in connection and confidence in the simple task of someone learning to stand on the Tuning Board and manage the constant movement through their body. Confidence in embodiment is a necessary resource in traversing traumatically stressed territory.

Part of what we're restoring in terms of confidence and embodiment is the capacity for resiliency. Resiliency is often spoken of in terms of flexibility and tone. To that, I like to add the term "elasticity." All of these terms evoke the freedom to expand and contract, and to come to a resting state. Ideally, all three of those states are available and none of them are lost to us. In trauma responses or fixations, we tend to lose one or more of them.

### **Breath and the Vagus**

A very basic example of how that works is with breathing. In healthy resourced experience, the diaphragm is free to contract, the lungs are free to expand, and the breathing body is allowed to return to a resting instant before the next inhalation. Breathing restrictions are another fundamental way in which trauma compromises coherent embodiment. Standing on the Tuning Board with this constant movement encourages resilient breathing behavior. Little by little, through titration and pendulation, the fixations blocking some aspect of the breath begin to let go restoring greater breathing tone.

The movement experienced on the Tuning Board likewise stimulates the vagus nerve in multiple ways: through the breath, through reflexes, through the vestibular system, the viscera and from the constant motion that is moving through the spinal cord. The respiratory centers of the brain, the vagus nerve and nuclei and the vestibular nuclei are all in close proximity in the medulla and the pons of the brainstem. Standing on the Tuning Board, the movement of the feet and ankles is constant. We are eventually looking for a mirroring of that motion up at the brainstem where those important nuclei are located. Freeing fixations in this area at the top of the spine where it meets the cranium supports important functions of the vagus nerve, which is continually monitoring the heart and respiration centers and overall homeostasis.



### **Supporting SIBAM Associations**

In the course of an SE session, as things progress toward integration and coherence, we witness our clients making associations between the SIBAM elements. Making associations between our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions in the process of healing and wholeness is a naturally occurring function in we humans. We know as SE practitioners that this association process is highly compromised in traumatic dissociations. Using the Tuning Board for vertical orientation in a state of natural healing movement deep in the nervous system, a practitioner can be working the somatic experiencing process and methods. This has profound implications for the meaning of coherent embodiment.



Although this tool can be used by any somatic therapist to promote vertical integration and embodiment resourcing such as grounding, centering, orienting and balance, it is especially compatible with the perspective, goals and skills of Somatic Experiencing practitioners. For more information on Somatic Experiencing, visit the SETI website at: <https://traumahealing.org/>

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For more information on the Tuning Board in general, including upcoming trainings, visit [www.tuningboard.org](http://www.tuningboard.org).

**To purchase a Tuning Board at a 10% discount, use discount code SPT2020 to reference this article.**



**Darrell Sanchez, Ph.D.** is a licensed professional counselor and trauma therapist with a background in movement therapy, somatic experiencing, dance, creativity studies, structural integration, and other somatic modalities. Dr. Sanchez has published articles on creativity, the body's memory, Rolfing structural integration, the Tuning Board, and vertical integration and resourcing. He has been practicing and teaching creativity and therapeutic modalities based on the art of integration of mind and body for forty-five years.

**Reference:**

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. (2014). *Trauma, attachment & neuroscience* [DVD]. Available from <http://www.pesi.com>



**Darrell Sanchez, Ph.D.**



*healing through embodiment*



“Because the Tuning Board will never be perfectly still, the individual is challenged to find, and quietly attune to, a relative stability, while surrendering rigidity, fragmentation, and holding patterns to motion.”

Darrell Sanchez, Ph.D., Tuning Board creator



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INFORMATION**

*“It is a brilliant invention that enriches every kind of somatic work, particularly SE. To directly learn with Darrell about the many-faceted possibilities of using the Tuning Board is an exquisite opportunity to deepen your own clinical skills.” Dr. Peter Levine, Ph.D*

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