



# Soothe Your Lifestyle: Building Inner Safety

Sara Hendrix

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Noticing our body signals of safety and comfort is the key to coming down from stress. It's the internal compass that lets you forge your own path through the wilderness, to find the best ways to soothe yourself. It's about re-connecting our conscious thinking minds with our instinctive capabilities, the instincts we would use to survive in nature without modern technology.

Those capabilities are still built in to our systems, but because of modern culture and early life conditioning, we often learn to ignore our non-verbal feelings and subtle felt senses. Sometimes we aren't tuned into that primal "safety vs. danger" radar which is based on a complete awareness of our present-moment body and environment. That's when our stress responses can get out of control even when we aren't in any real imminent danger.

To build instinct, we need indicators of what our WHOLE self feels right now. Not just the conscious part of the brain we use to "think", but the whole nervous system, the embodied awareness.

The autonomic nervous system is a survival machine. It is constantly assessing multiple streams of internal and external sensory input and processing it in brain areas that are not generally in our conscious awareness. This results in a determination of the current safety or danger level. There is a physical stress response if danger is sensed, or a calmer, more restful physical state if things feel safe.

This whole process is automatic and physiological. It happens unconsciously, and it can easily remain unconscious, unless we choose to pay attention.

The key here is the physiological sense of safety. More physiological safety means less stress, less pain, less fear and anger. To achieve it, make the intention to help yourself (your whole self, particularly your body) feel safe.

In order to do that, you need a habit of checking in and responding to subtle perceptions of relative danger and safety. This habit, over time, will slowly shift your default set point to a more safe, relaxed, and secure state of being.

Mindfulness or awareness of the body, of the emotions, and of the thoughts (or mind's eye) is necessary, but must be applied with the intention of building safety. Below is a simple process for exploring this within yourself.

Everyone is different and it's a highly individual thing, so please use this as a jumping-off point rather than an exact recipe.

(Important side note: When starting out, it's much easier to practice when you're feeling relatively relaxed and comfortable. Otherwise it may be too difficult to sense safety and neutral-to-positive feelings in the body and emotions. Get yourself as comfortable as you can before you try this for the first time.)

Imagine yourself in a clearly dangerous situation. Say, a growling tiger about to pounce on you. Really pretend it's there, imagine a few visual details or how its growl would sound.

Now notice how you feel - your autonomic nervous system will respond as if it were real, though of course much more mildly.

Tension or constriction? (Where?) Fear? Anger? Silent inner scream? A mental image or memory?

As you begin to notice the feelings, try to get as specific about the precise physical sensations or feelings as you can (and remember the tiger is imaginary!) For example, instead of just feeling generally scared, as you pay closer attention you may notice a clenched jaw and tight shoulders, or tension in the belly and leg muscles.

Note it all down and relax for a minute, clear your mind.

Then, do another visualization, but this time imagine a clearly safe and serene situation. A happy place. Say, lounging on a tropical beach.

Relaxed muscles? (Where?) Sighing? Inner humming? A different mental image or memory?

Note that down too.

Try other visualizations and notice how the body reactions change with different safe or dangerous scenarios, whatever you are curious about. This is an open-ended exploration of how fear and safety feel in your body, and how your body responds to your imagination.

Once you've played around enough, see if a pattern emerges, especially a physical signal common to the most safe and most dangerous scenarios - like a certain muscle that is either tense or relaxed, a body area feeling contracted or open, or changes in the heart rhythm or breathing. (You can even take your own pulse if you want to!)

It's very useful to have an indicator that has a wide spectrum of response – from danger, to neutral, to safety – so you can make more subtle distinctions. It is also ideal to have at least one marker that is purely somatic, or body sensation-based. Somatic markers are the most direct indicators of our autonomic nervous system state. But it's good to have more than one indicator, and some people have very reliable emotions or mental experiences that reflect their body state faithfully, so notice what feels right for you.

The patterns you notice are your indicators or guides that can clue you in to your whole body's sense of safety at any given moment.

Keep noticing and refining your awareness over time and the indicators will become second nature, like checking the battery icon on your phone or the fuel gauge on your car. Just an inner glance at yourself and “oh yeah, this feels fine” or “oh wow, this is actually really stressing me out right now! I need to take a break or change this situation somehow.”

Noticing your responses unfold in real life situations can be a little bit tricky.

We can get too distracted to check in. Try to remind yourself!

Also, expectations can get in the way. “This feels like a danger response right now, but that doesn't make sense, I'm just at the doctor's office.” But guess what... your body actually doesn't feel safe there right now. It's not under conscious control. It doesn't always make sense. But it is what it is. We have to look honestly at what is actually happening at a nervous system level.

Some people might have nothing that ever feels that great; they never feel totally safe. In this case, it might be about less danger versus more danger.

That's fine too. Sometimes getting closer to neutral is the best goal. In this case it may be less like “tense or relaxed?” and more like “very tense or a little less tense?”. Just focus on moving in the general direction of less danger and more safety. It's a spectrum.

Additionally, sometimes we actually KNOW our signals already on some level; we just need permission to pay attention to them, and moreover, to follow them whenever possible. Some people have a really hard time getting in touch with their instincts, but some people don't.

Now what do you do with this instinctive information?

A surprising amount of stress can be reduced simply by following our subtle safety instincts for everyday choices. We make choices all day long. What to wear today, what to eat and drink (also when, where, and how much), how and when to move our bodies, hobbies and downtime activities, who we talk to and how, routes to take to and from places we go, and more.

Check in with yourself about these choices. Notice the subtle feelings of greater safety after following your instincts with each choice, and see how that affects your well-being over time (days to weeks).

How to check in? The most obvious way is to notice any safety or danger markers or signs while in the actual experience (e.g. while talking to the person, eating the food, etc). But if you have a decision to make, just notice how you feel while thinking about each choice. Imagine being in the place, or doing the thing. If it feels safe and good, then go for it. If it feels wrong or dangerous, don't do it (unless you really truly have to do it). The human imagination is a powerful thing.

Sometimes you might "get a feeling" (an urge or impulse) to do something a little irrational or unusual: try a new restaurant for lunch today, take a different route to work, send a message to an old friend, or walk around the block right now for no reason. Assuming it's not impossible or insane: Just do it! Just follow the instinct. See how it feels. Be curious, experiment!

Of course the rational mind has some veto power. Don't go off on a junk food binge on a whim because "my instincts told me to!" Remember we need to be honest here about what really truly feels safest for the whole body. It can take practice and willingness to make mistakes during the learning process to figure out what was a true physiological signal and what was just a fantasy. If you keep checking in with your body and exploring your safety signals, over time things will become more clear.

Also, there will always be occasions where we don't have a choice, but our danger signals are going off anyway. That's fine too - noticing those signals will help us know that once the situation is over, we need to give ourselves some extra self-care and take the time to get back to feeling safe.

Some people find it very difficult to follow their instincts even once they are good at noticing them. Perhaps there are some ongoing situations where you feel like you have to do the expected thing, the rational thing, but your instincts are telling you to do something different. For example, staying in a relationship or job that really stresses you out. It may be tempting to override your instincts by tuning them out entirely, but if you really intend to improve your well-being, you can't tune yourself out.

Keep checking in. Imagine new possibilities, and take all the baby steps to feel better that you possibly can. Over time, a solution may evolve.

Listening to the unconscious, nonverbal instincts and being curious and creative about new ways to follow them is empowering. It builds a sense of safety as a solid base and foundation of a regulated nervous system. Following the inner compass towards safety is the way to naturally soothe your nerves during everyday life.