

Body Awareness for Trauma Recovery & Conflict Resolution

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When we are challenged, threatened or hurt, we contract or collapse our posture, breathing, and attention. This is the Distress Response—the fight/flight/freeze/collapse pattern, and it is experienced as fear, anger, shock, resignation, or dissociation.

In conflict situations, these powerful physical response patterns undermine our ability to think rationally, interact empathically, and act peacefully. They constrain us to think and behave in tense, oppositional, ineffective ways, which perpetuate conflict. When the contraction/collapse persists in the body, that is the trauma state. Staying in the distress response binds us to the trauma in a perpetual state of victimhood.

The opposite of and antidote to the physical state of smallness is a state of relaxed muscles, soft breathing, stable posture, and expansive attention. This is experienced as calm alertness and compassionate power. This handout describes a series of simple exercises for beginning the task of bringing the body out of the conflict/trauma state and into a state of peace and empowerment.

RELAXED CORE

Let your tongue hang softly in your mouth. Feel how that will help you let the muscles around your neck and shoulders relax.

Let your shoulders and your armpits hang loose and notice the effect on the rest of your body. Let your belly plop loose. When you breathe, where is the movement in your body? Up into your chest perhaps? That is fear/startle breathing. As you inhale, let your belly expand. Your chest should also expand as you inhale, but the focus of the breathing movement will be on relaxing/expanding the belly.

SMILING HEART

A further opening of the body is possible when you can approach the conflict or trauma in a spirit of love. I certainly don't mean that you should love being hurt—just that if you can create a feeling of love in your body, you can think and act with freedom. Everyone has something or someone—perhaps a friend, a lover, a child, a flower, a piece of music—something that when they think of it makes their heart smile. Stand with your eyes closed, and spend a few moments thinking about whatever it is that makes your heart smile. What happens in your body? How is your chest affected? What happens to your breathing? What sensations do you feel flowing through you? Most people experience a softening and warmth in their chests, and a freeing up over their whole bodies.

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Can you let your body stay in the smiling heart state even as you speak about your trauma? That would alter your relationship to your past and allow you to break free of the chains to the trauma.

SIX DIRECTIONS REACHING

A further opening is possible through directing the body to widen. Stand up with your feet about shoulder width apart and your hands down by your side. Notice that you are standing on the soles of your feet. With the soles of your feet, reach down into the earth. It is important that you not strain to reach down. Also, don't just visualize or merely think about reaching down, but actually sense in your feet and legs a reaching into the earth. Stay with that sensation/action for a moment.

Let go of reaching down. Now, with the top of your head and shoulders reach upward to feel the sky. And let go of that.

Now try reaching your awareness forward with the front of your body. And then reach backward with the back of your body. Reach to the right with the right side of your body. And reach to the left.

Now, do all the directions together. Reach down and up, left and right, and forward and back. How does that feel? Most people experience this as spacious and invigorating.

You can practice the Six Directions Reaching exercise as you walk around during your daily activities. That will help you practice being more present and more alive. You can also use the Six Directions Reaching to help you maintain your inner spaciousness when you think about the conflict or trauma you experienced. That will help you respond with more clarity and power to whatever challenge you are facing.

You can do all of these exercises simultaneously and build an integrated sense of awareness, freedom, love and openness as a foundation for your healing and your life. I have developed a large number of body awareness exercises, and what you have experienced so far is just the tip of the iceberg. In particular, we have just barely brushed up against the topic of power and how developing power in the present is necessary element in letting go of past instances of powerlessness.

AHHH

Stand up, feel your breathing. Imagine somebody presenting you with a plate of rat guts. Try saying "Rat guts, ick!" And notice what parts of your body are affected by this image. Notice how they feel.

And for contrast say "Ice cream, ahh!" (If you don't like ice cream, think of something else that you like, and say that instead.)

Say "ick" and "ahh." Feel how your throat and mouth tense when you say "ick" and how they get softer and smoother when you say "ahh." The expressions "ick" and "ahh" are very interesting. They simultaneously create and reflect the body processes of repulsion and enjoyment. The sound "ick" has sharp edges and creates constriction in the throat and breathing. The sound "ahhh" has round edges and creates softness and openness in the body.

How do you talk when you talk about the conflict or trauma you experienced? Is it more like ick or more like ahh? Is your throat tense? Are you tense, perhaps angry or fearful? Find a word or phrase that summarizes some aspect of the conflict or trauma. Maybe the word "rape" or the word "fire." Try saying that word followed by ahhhhh. If the word is too intense, find another word with less intensity. You can take time to work up to saying the more intense word.

Can you let your body stay in the open ahhh state even as you speak about your trauma or

conflict? If you can, how does that feel? Most people find that the stress is greatly reduced when they meet the difficult situation with an open body. In addition, they are more flexible mentally, and they can think more freely and find new solutions to their difficulties.

PAUL LINDEN is a body awareness educator, a martial artist, and an author. He is the developer of Being In Movement® mindbody education, and co-founder of Aikido of Columbus / Columbus Center for Movement Studies. He holds a Ph.D. in Physical Education, a B.A. in Philosophy, a sixth degree black belt in Aikido and a first degree black belt in Karate, and a certificate in the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education. He has extensive experience teaching people such as musicians, athletes, computer users, pregnant women, adult survivors of child abuse, and children with attention disorders.

He is the author of a number of e- books, among them:

- *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*
- *Embodied Peacemaking: Body Awareness, Self-Regulation and Conflict Resolution*
 - *Reach Out: Body Awareness Training for Peacemaking – Five Easy Lessons* (A free download. Also available in German, Spanish & Portuguese.)
- *Breakfast Essays: Brief Writings on Body Awareness and Life*

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