

## EXPLORING YOUR MIND-BODY CONNECTION

Adapted excerpts from  
*The Mindful Body*

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Our bodies are a living expression of our minds. From the communication of emotions through facial expressions and posture to the possibility for psychological issues to manifest physically and play into our injuries and illness, the body constantly signals the presence of the mind.

Being mindful of how we carry life experience in our bodies can be a valuable life skill. It can help us manage stress, build emotional resilience and generally become healthier and happier. It complements other ways we focus on the health of our bodies through diet and physical exercise. This kind of focus on the mind-body relationship is growing in scientific validation through the field of neuroscience. It is clearer than ever before that cultivating awareness of how life experience affects us physically provides an exciting opportunity to improve physical, mental and emotional health.

There are many practical, personalised opportunities offered in the book, *The Mindful Body*, for getting to know and optimize our mind-body relationship. It all hinges on pausing for a few conscious moments in the course of the day and applying body awareness in particular ways. In *The Mindful Body* these pauses are referred to as Mindful Body Moments. They can be as short as 30 seconds and used at any time. The power of these short pauses to rewire our brains and help us shift even age-old emotional patterns is explained in *The Mindful Body*. For now you are invited to try out the following Mindful Body Moments for a sense of what this approach can offer to you.

### **1. Ground yourself in your body with touch.**

When you first meet someone you might shake hands in greeting. To enter the journey of getting to know your body, you are invited to extend a similar kind of tactile kind of greeting to yourself. This is as if to say, 'Hello, here you are and here I am with you'. From there the relationship can begin to develop.

For a start, try out placing your hands on your head. Find the place for each hand that feels best, such as front and back, or top and bottom, where the back of your neck meets your head. Or you can hold both sides of your head. Go with what feels right and breathe naturally as you do so. Hold this position for a few moments, observing the effect on your thoughts and on your body as you do so. Then when you feel ready, lower your hands.

Touch is an effective connector of mind and body and this connection can be

experienced in an instant. Your skin might feel alive as your body senses awaken and you might notice that the stress of a busy day's 'to do' list slips from your mind.

Touch is proven to decrease the physiological effects of stress and anxiety, lowering levels of stress hormones like cortisol, lowering blood pressure, and slowing heart rate. It is also found to strengthen the immune system. Added to this, nurturing touch can stimulate the release of oxytocin, the 'cuddle' or 'love' hormone, which relaxes your body, clears your mind and helps you engage with people more harmoniously. So, pausing now and again to use touch as a Mindful Body Moment, can result in your body being calmer, your mind clearer and your heart perhaps more open to proceed with the task at hand.

To follow are some more self-holding options for your exploration. They guide you to give attention to different parts of your body and provide you with constantly available ways to self-support. You could use any of them for stress relief, to provide comfort, or simply to connect with yourself at any time of day or night. Try them out to find the ones that you like best.

### **How and how long to hold**

It is recommended that you steadily hold each position for a few seconds initially, to get a feel for it. If the position resonates with you, hold for as long as feels nourishing, breathing naturally as you do so. Some positions might feel amazing. Others not right for today. Hold with a firmness or gentleness that feels just right. As you hold, imagine feeling warmth and support from your hands. Once you discover your favorite holds, use them regularly, even as short pauses that you can take at any time. Doing so regularly can reduce your stress levels in a sustainable way, resetting your brain to function more clearly and your heart to be more open towards yourself and others.

### **The holds**

- One hand holds the base of your skull (where the back of your head meets the top of your neck). Place your other hand either on the top of your head or over your forehead, whichever feels better for you.  
MESSAGE: 'It's all going to be OK.'  
EFFECT: Almost instantly reduces stress, especially where there is mental agitation. Can clear your mind and open you to new insight into a given situation.
- One hand gives the opposite trapezius muscle a squeeze. Hold this squeeze for a few breaths. (Your trapezius muscle is between your neck and shoulder and is a common area of tension.) Repeat on the other side. To end, you can use both hands to rub up and down the back of your neck and over your trapezius area a few times.  
EFFECT: Can release your breathing and relieve a sense of carrying the world on your shoulders.
- Rub your upper arms.  
EFFECT: Raises oxytocin or 'cuddle hormone' levels. Can help you sense your personal boundaries.

Another alternative to achieve a similar result and increase a sense of self-nurturing or self-love, is to hug yourself. You can either follow your natural inclination to wrap your arms around your upper body, or you can slip your hands under your armpits to hold the sides of your ribcage. Relax your elbows at your sides as you hold the sides of your chest in your preferred way.

- Place one or both of your hands over your heart and hold for a few moments.  
EFFECT: Can inspire self-nurturing. Placing a hand on your heart while speaking can also display sincerity and can positively influence how others respond to you.
- Rub your lower back. Then sweep both hands down your legs a few times for a grounding and possibly energizing effect. Or for a steady hold while sitting that can have a similar effect, you could place one hand on your lower back, let's say placing your left hand behind your left hipbone. Then you would place your right hand in the crease of your left knee. Or if you prefer you could support your right side with your right hand behind your right hip and your left hand on the inside of your right knee.  
EFFECT: Grounding and possibly energizing as it can encourage a feeling of 'get up and go'.
- Place your hands in a prayer pose.  
EFFECT: Centres, can help you gather your thoughts and might remind of prayer so, if you wish, you might say a little prayer for yourself or others while holding.
- End by holding your favourite position and notice how you feel now compared to before you started.

## **2. Change your posture, change your mind**

Stating the obvious: When you feel down, your posture slumps and your head hangs low. Even if you fight it, when you are feeling low your impulse is to stoop your body in a downward direction. What might not be as obvious is that your posture can also perpetuate, or cause you to feel, a certain way and that changing your posture can change your mood and mind. Richard Petty, Professor of Psychology at Ohio State University, explains that the brain has areas that reflect feelings such as confidence, and when the specific area is triggered it is difficult to tell the difference between natural confidence and temporary confidence as a result of standing up straight. The brain responds in the same way to both. So your confidence can make you stand upright and standing upright can create confidence. The same applies to smiling. You can feel happy and smile naturally and you can smile to make you feel happier. Choosing to smile is seen to yield the same warm effects as smiling naturally, such as increasing 'feel-good' hormones like endorphins, serotonin and dopamine, reducing the stress hormone cortisol, increasing relaxation and increasing the sense of pleasure in doing a task.

Try it out for yourself. First try smiling for its own sake, and track how your body responds. Stay with this awareness for a few moments and absorb the feelings. Then, releasing your smile, stand or sit in a slouched position and look downwards.

How do you feel now, and what kinds of thoughts spring to mind? Notice the effects for a few slouching moments. Finally, try standing or sitting in an upright position with your chest open and your chin up. How might this shift your feelings, thoughts and outlook? Experimenting with your body in these ways can give you a sense of how changing your body can change your mind, mood and outlook. Different postures also change you physiologically, influencing things like muscle tension, quality of breathing, blood flow, heart rate and digestion, which all contribute to the shifts in how you feel.

Another researcher in this area is Harvard University researcher Amy Cuddy. She suggests that adopting 'high power' body positions for just two minutes at a time significantly boosts testosterone levels and lowers cortisol levels. The result is increased sense of confidence with reduced sense of stress or anxiety, which can be really helpful at times, such as before an important meeting, a presentation or an interview. A 'high power' pose is an upright, open body position (such as standing with hands on hips and head held high like a superhero).

Discovering how quickly and easily we can influence how we feel and think, simply by changing our posture or moving differently, can be empowering. In *The Mindful Body*, many suggestions are included to inspire and equip you in the art of changing your body to change your mind. This includes broadening your ability to access personality traits, such as confidence, loving kindness, reflectiveness and enthusiasm that might not come naturally to you but that you might benefit from in different circumstances.

### **3. Boost self-esteem through creative visualisation**

Visualisation is another helpful tool that can shift how we feel and think. Here is an example of applying visualization to boost self-esteem. It can be used any time our self-esteem needs a lift, turning it into a Mindful Body Moment as will be described.

First, here is a brief explanation about the visualization to follow. As we move through life we tend to internalize the images and voices of people who have made an impression on us. This ability is a function of mirror neurons that allow our brains and bodies to record images of key people in our lives. These mental images capture how people look, feel and sound to us. It is how a baby comes to remember that their mother still exists when she is not in the room, and it is how we learn to tell friend from foe based on past experience. As we move through life our internal community of influential people grows to include the remembered presence of many people. Pause for a moment to call to mind important people in your life to get a sense of this.

For some, however, the influence is not always positive. Many of us have had negative experiences that we have internalized based on other people's reactions to us. These memories can turn into a loud inner critic, or old, familiar and upsetting feelings that might visit us regularly and perhaps make us feel like we are not good

enough or not worthy in some way. This can detract from our self-esteem.

Luckily we have it in us to sway our internal community towards the positive, by consciously calling to mind people who make us feel good about ourselves. They are the people or perhaps spiritual figures that we feel truly love and value us and who make us feel safe. We can also add loved pets or anything that feels supportive. Consciously filling our minds with these positive influences can be a buffer against negativity, from the inside out. It can help us to feel supported even when we are on our own and can boost our self-confidence and self-worth when we need a lift.

Essentially, the more regularly we can focus on positive influences, the healthier our self-esteem tends to be. This is as opposed to when we focus on negative, critical or belittling influences that can lead to poor self-esteem.

The visualization to follow invites you to call to mind positive influences in your life and proactively hold them in mind for a few mindful moments. You can do so as often as you wish, especially when your self-esteem feels low or when life feels challenging.

### **The visualisation**

Take your time to scan through your life and recall people who absolutely warm your heart. They might include family or extended family members, or someone in your community who has helped and valued you. It might be a teacher who really saw and understood you, or a special friend or friends. It could even be a movie character who inspires you, or a spiritual figure. You could also recall a loved pet. For some, being in nature warms their hearts. It does not matter what you imagine or how many images you hold in mind (some choose just one wonderful image; others like to populate their inner world with many happy things). The only thing that matters is that the thought of it warms your heart and makes you feel special, safe and deeply accepted for who you are. Take your time to scan through people or times in your life that might fit this warm, supportive description and hold them in mind. Then, when you find your image or images, notice how you feel in their presence.

### **A Mindful Body Moment**

To turn this visualization into a Mindful Body Moment, focus in on how you feel in the presence of your chosen image and notice where in your body you might feel these feelings. Invite these feelings to spread through you to fill more of your body and being. To help with this you might imagine breathing your image into and through you as you notice the influence on your body and mind. Even if you can only allow a little bit in, let that little bit feed you. What does it give you? Perhaps it gives you some inner peace or warm joy, perhaps relief and more hope. Feel into what is true for you. Hold onto the experience for a few conscious moments to allow it to really register in your body and brain towards sustainably elevating your self-esteem. To help with this, you can also invite your posture to shift to reflect how you feel now. Take a moment to adjust your posture so that it reflects your positive feelings. How might your life be different if you felt this way more often? And how might it influence your response to a situation or decision that you face now?

To feel complete with your exploration for now, it can help to take one or two deep breaths before moving on into your day or night.

You are welcome to use this visualisation as often as you like, alongside actually spending time with supportive, caring people that of course is important too. This especially applies if your inner community has been populated by negative, critical voices. Doing so can help you make a habit of connecting with an alternative, feel-good inner community. If you are going through a difficult time you could integrate this visualisation as a short practice each day, such as into your morning routine to set a warm tone for the day. Maybe you could also place photographs of special people or things where you can see them regularly at home and work and consciously pause now and again to take in their warmth. Doing so can strengthen your loving sense of self, boost your self-esteem and offer a mental sounding board when you need one, such as asking 'What would you do?' or 'What do you suggest I do?' when you need guidance.

This article is an edited extract from *The Mindful Body*, which is a practical guide to managing stress and building emotional strength through body mindfulness. *The Mindful Body* is written by Noa Belling and published by Rockpool Publishing in 2018.