

# OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

## Introduction

The body matters, because the body always wins, and this is especially true when we are stressed. It doesn't matter how sophisticated, knowledgeable, and skilled we are, when we are threatened we revert to our instincts and patterns that are housed in our body.

Even though this may resonate for many people, we act in ways that indicate there is incongruence with this thinking. This is because our education and socialization tend to actively mitigate against using our bodies as a source of wisdom. Being rational and using reason is richly rewarded in our current society, and so the tacit message is that our head should rule, often to the exclusion of our feelings and instincts.

From early childhood, in Western society particularly, we are taught to ignore the intelligence of our bodies. For example, as parents we tell our children to eat when they aren't actually hungry, to put on shoes because we are cold, to pay attention to gender by wearing dresses in the case of a girl, and by telling boys that men don't cry. Although we have made progress and are more conscious of these messages, scratch below the surface and we realize they are still largely prevalent.

Linked to this our ways of living closes down our bodies and literally shapes them in a ways that blocks our full range and innate capacity. Consider how formal learning takes place... it is largely by sitting still in a classroom or in front of a computer being fed information, particularly in the primary years of life. Schools that encourage integration and movement as an essential part of the curriculum are categorized as alternative and are very much in the minority.

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

Fortunately more and more research is being done on the role of body – chemically, anatomically, and biologically – and science is pointing to the fact that our bodies are key to living more satisfied and effective lives. Our contention is that by using our bodies as a fundamental source of learning, we can tap into a rich source of wisdom directly and immediately. In other words we can use our bodies to become more aware of our patterns and be more effective and skillful using these insights.

### **Let's talk physiology**

We are interested in physiology, because our physiological states influence how we receive, interpret, and act on information. Even if we believe something fundamentally as an ideology, when our body is in certain states (particularly stressed or overwhelmed) we are often not able to act on what we think and believe.

In Bruce Lipton's book "Biology of Belief" he states: "In a response similar to that displayed by cells, humans unavoidably restrict their growth behaviors when they shift into a protective mode. If you're running from a mountain lion, it's not a good idea to expend energy on growth. In order to survive – that is, escape the lion – you summon all your energy for your fight or flight response. Redistributing energy reserves to fuel the protection response inevitably results in a curtailment of growth." Put simply, when your system is stressed, your capacity to grow and develop is limited.

Although we don't encounter too many physical mountain lions in our daily lives, we can use this analogy nonetheless. In our own lives, and as coaches we see that many people exist in a state of almost continual overwhelm as a result of the pressures of modern life. This includes the role of technology and rarely being out of communication range, financial pressures, a lack of support from others, an expectation of more for less in the work place, to name but a few challenges that clients bring to coaching. The upshot is

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

that many people live in a state of low-grade recurrent stress.

Also the body receives information first. By way of illustration when we get a fright, our bodies react and then our minds come into the equation. This happens pre-awareness and there are physical and chemical responses that go along with the reaction. These responses become patterns we hold in the body over time that are unconscious and unexamined.

Research shows that our brain chemistry literally changes when we are stressed. The hypothalamus reacts to stress by secreting hormones from the pituitary and adrenal glands, resulting in an increase in heart rate and elevated blood pressure. Following on, the prefrontal cortex, which is the area immediately behind the forehead, shuts down. The role of the prefrontal cortex serves as the control center that mediates our highest cognitive abilities, including judgment, insight, learnt social norms and decision-making. So, being deprived of this part of our brain under stress means we lose information and big picture thinking.

A last nugget that is important is that the nervous system doesn't differentiate between real and imagined. Our brain stores information gathered from our experiences and thoughts. The stored information can be accessed through experiences and thoughts.

"In 2007, Harvard Medical School conducted a study with volunteers in a lab who were asked to learn and practice a five-finger piano exercise. A neuroscientist instructed half of the volunteers to play as fluidly as they could, trying to keep to the metronome's 60 beats per minute, two hours a day for five days. The other half were instructed to merely *think* about practicing the piano, holding their hands still while playing the music in their heads. At the end of the five days, both groups underwent a transcranial-

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

magnetic-stimulation test, which enabled scientists to infer the function of neurons.

The test results showed that in both groups, the stretch of motor cortex devoted to these finger movements took over surrounding areas. The finding was in line with a growing number of discoveries showing that greater use of a particular muscle causes the brain to devote more cortical growth to it. Practice rewires the brain. More startling, however, was that the same region of the brain had expanded in the volunteers who merely *thought* about playing in a disciplined way.

There are two big implications here: 1.) that mental training may have the power to change the physical structure of the brain, and 2.) that the brain doesn't distinguish between a real or imagined exercise.<sup>1</sup> This physiological ability enables us to develop resourceful patterns of behavior that we can access in stressful/threatening situations so that we can respond more effectively and skillfully.

Of course, this is all the hard data and it only describes what happens, but not what can be done with what happens. Through working directly with the body and using it as a learning instrument by doing practices, we can develop skillful ways of being that allow us to access more of our potential and capacity and increase our emotional range.

### **How our physiology becomes embodied, the implications of this, and alternatives**

Our need to belong is imperative. Our survival actually depends on it, given our dependence on the people who care for us in our formative years. Babies are continuously attuning to the people who care for them, and have basic strategies to encourage that care, from smiling, mimicking, crying, etc. So socialization is a crucial and necessary part of our development, and it is a critical element that enables

---

1

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

belonging.

As time goes by, the actions that we take in relation to others and our environment become ingrained, unconscious habits and patterns. In other words we embody our history based on our individual experience with significant others, our community, our culture, and the environment we live in.

This embodiment is effectively a patterned response which comes from our experiences and need to create stability and security for our survival. These patterns run in the background of our lives and often go unexamined. For example, we may notice that when someone disagrees with us, that they tilt their chin up and push their head forward a little, and don't actually say anything. In poker, this would be called a tell. They, on the other hand, may remain blissfully unaware of it, unless someone points it out.

Also, studies now show that our posture has a role in the chemicals we produce. By changing our posture, we can actually change the way we think and feel. Amy Cuddy in a TED talk shared her research that open, expansive gestures stimulate the production of testosterone, which promotes confidence, whereas constricted and contracted bodies produce cortisol, a chemical that creates anxiety.

The implication is that we can use our bodies as a shortcut to positively influence our emotions, moods and thoughts. We use the lens of a type of work, Leadership Embodiment, to do this. In Leadership Embodiment we call our socialized, patterned responses "Personality". It is the part of us that references off people and tries to manage the "stuff of life". It is a valid and necessary part of us, and it can also trip us up, especially when we are under stress. When we experience pressure, as we have explored before, a part of our brain shuts down and we lose access to big picture

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

thinking, morality and innovation. We become triggered and reactive, and even though we might want to act in a measured, thoughtful way, we aren't able to do so. Our bodies are also affected. This can be seen through how and where we hold tension, our posture, etc. In a nutshell our "Personality" holds our patterns, and under stress becomes our entrenched default that limits possibilities and isn't skillful. The common denominator is that under pressure we constrict and put up boundaries. This can be as much an internal boundary as one in relationship. So the intersection of Cuddy's research and how we hold our bodies can be seen explicitly.

There is another part of us that we can activate, which in Leadership Embodiment we call "Center". "Center" is the part of us that recognizes we are interconnected with everything and that we don't need to manufacture connections and therefore try and make things okay for ourselves or other people. When we are in the zone or flow state we are accessing "Center" and we are able to do things effortlessly and without attachment, often much more than we thought we could ever do. In flow we are totally immersed in what we are doing and there is a unification within us and with the task at hand. As children "Center" was readily available to us and Joseph Chilton-Pearse in his book "Magical Parent, Magical Child" asserts that when children play they are in the zone state. The habitual patterns held in "Personality" can be equated with conventional levels of maturity while "Centre" provides a gateway to post conventional levels of maturity. Access to this gateway requires utilizing multiple intelligences (ie including the body) and practice.

The table below illustrates some of the differences between "Personality" and "Center":

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

Personality	Centre
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attached / Invested</li> <li>• One Dimensional - Either / Or</li> <li>• Separate and separates out</li> <li>• Narrow Perspective</li> <li>• Right or Wrong</li>   <li>• Head - Control</li> <li>• Heart - Approval</li> <li>• Core - Safety</li>   <li>• Valid and overdeveloped</li>   <li>• Likes concepts, models and knowledge</li> <li>• References and stabilizes on people, things and situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unattached</li> <li>• Multi-Dimensional - Yes, And</li> <li>• Connected and integrated</li> <li>• Big picture thinking</li> <li>• Intensity of Energy instead of right / wrong, good or bad</li> <li>• Head - Perception / Wisdom</li> <li>• Heart - Compassion</li> <li>• Core - Confidence</li> <li>• Valid and under developed</li> <li>• Works with what is</li>   <li>• References on space</li> </ul>

In Leadership Embodiment we use practices to cultivate the capacity to access “Center” in a deliberate and focused manner, while the body experiences pressure. By doing so, we have access to better performance, more options and a greater sense of wellbeing. It is our contention that great leaders have practices that enable them to access “Center”. Indeed if you look at Nelson Mandela’s time in prison, much of that time was spent doing exercise and practices that resulted in him developing wisdom and compassion, very much aspects of “Center”.

Lastly the way we think we are and the way we actually are is often different. Our bodies can give us rich insight because we can study our bodies and the accompanying energetics without content. This can provide us with additional information that may not always be conscious. We can then use the body as a mechanism to shift our usual embodied pattern which changes our perception and therefore our choices and

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

possibilities. Essentially, we can shift from a reactive to responsive state. In partner centering, one of the core practices in Leadership Embodiment, we work with another person and they apply pressure to our body, which activates our reactive pattern. All of us have a reactive pattern, which broadly will manifest as fight, flight or being stuck. We can then examine our pattern and while under pressure shift to a more centered state, developing new neural pathways while experiencing stress. This can then become a valid option in our daily lives.

### **The relationship between Leadership Embodiment and the Enneagram**

As you will have read, the Enneagram has nine basic personality styles and multiple combinations of wings, lines of integration and disintegration, and sub-types. We hope that you have realized that you are so much more than your style, and that the Enneagram can be a useful tool for personal growth and development.

In relation to the Enneagram and Leadership Embodiment, we would be loathe to make assertions about how any style / type would react under stress, given that the Enneagram is a lens and not the full picture. At the same time we have some assessments that may offer some additional information that can be of value.

In Leadership Embodiment there are multiple patterns that will show up when we place each other under pressure to establish what our base line “Personality” pattern is. In addition to constricting and putting up a boundary in some way or another, which happens with everyone, there are a few other aspects that we see. These link loosely to Karen Horney’s work, which has been integrated into the Enneagram.

Horney was a psychiatrist who posited that there are three fundamental ways people try to solve inner conflicts. There is an assertive style (Enneagram 3, 7 and 8), a withdrawn style (Enneagram 4, 5 and 9), and a compliant style (Enneagram 1, 2 and 6).



## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

These are patterns that show up in the body too. Some people when pushed will over-engage with a quick reaction and push back (assertive), some will move away from the pressure and under-engage (withdraw) and others will get stuck which means they hold their ground and use a lot of energy to do so (compliant). And there are multiple combinations within that. While we haven't done scientific research, we are familiar with the Enneagram, as are many people who have done Leadership Embodiment and there is a correlation between Enneagram style and how we respond in the body. We do however want to reiterate that the correlation is not absolute.

More important is that we become aware of our patterns when triggered and under stress. This gives us more insight into ourselves and therefore alternatives and ways of working with oneself and the situation that were not available before.

In terms of the range of reactions, none of them are better or worse, and we want to recognize that they are valid responses. The significance of this is that knowing oneself, as Aristotle once said, is crucial in order for us to be on a developmental journey so that we can make a positive contribution.

### **A practice to help you with your development path**

In working with our clients, the one core practice that we have found most helpful is a basic centering practice. The reason for this is that we are working simultaneously with changing our physiology (by activating our parasympathetic nervous system), having a direct experience and returning to the present moment, taking a few seconds of recovery and rest, and activating our intuitive nature.

Centering gives us a way to let go and take a moment to find ourselves – some breathing room if you like. We move our attention away from others and back to ourselves for a moment, so that we recover our stability. Then we can meet the

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

challenge we face with more wisdom, humor, compassion and care.

Before beginning the practice, consider a quality you want to cultivate. It is a quality that if more present in your life would open up new possibilities and ways of being. Some examples are compassion, ease, fulfillment, love, confidence, wonder, graciousness, generosity, peace, creativity, etc

### **Practice**

- Starting with a long exhale imagine your breath spiraling down rooting into the earth. Then let your inhale spiral up through your body toward the sky, creating a sensation of lightness.
- On your next two or three exhalations, sense the space behind you and in front of you, to your left and right side, above your head and below your feet. You can give your personal space a color or texture, imagining being supported in this bubble.
- Gently and without any extra effort release tension in your jaw and shoulders.
- Remembering the quality you wish to cultivate, ask yourself, "What would it be like if there was a little more ease or ..... in me?" and give yourself a moment to feel the sensations, thoughts or feelings that flow through you.

Stop and center for 10 - 15 seconds as many times a day as you are able.

To hear the centering practice spoken, go to <http://embodimentinternational.com/store>. It is a great resource and having it on a phone, an iPod , or in the car is a good way to keep referencing it.

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

### Conclusion

Practices are key to developing sustainable change. We can have all the insights and knowledge in the world, and without anchoring it in the body (which is what a practice does) we are not able to maintain new ways of behaving. In Leadership Embodiment the point is not to try and be centered all the time, as that will actually create more stress and deny us the fun and adventurous aspects of personality. Rather it is about being able to recover center so that it becomes a valid option so we have greater capacity to make a difference in the world.

The inference of this work is that we are not static, and we can keep building our capacity to mature and grow. Maturity means that we don't operate in an "either / or" way and instead can see patterns and engage in a way that has a beneficial impact in the world. As we develop in maturity we are able to tolerate more ambiguity and paradox, and work with what is happening as it happens, instead of projecting, imagining or wishing. We let go of the need to be right and are able to be present to what is emerging and take action based on what is most appropriate, needed and skillful. We also recognize that it is about being authentic and real, rather than doing things perfectly.

### Other Resources

For more background information on the role of the body, go to:

Leadership Embodiment: <http://embodimentinternational.com/category/Article/>

Ted Talks:

[http://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are.html)

[http://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth\\_gilbert\\_on\\_genius.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius.html)

## OUR BODIES SPEAK OUR MINDS MORE THAN WE THINK

[http://www.ted.com/talks/jill\\_bolte\\_taylor\\_s\\_powerful\\_stroke\\_of\\_insight.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight.html)

To find out more about Leadership Embodiment programs, go to  
[www.thehumanconnection.co.za](http://www.thehumanconnection.co.za)

### Bibliography

Wikipedia: Flow (psychology); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow\\_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology))

Lipton, Bruce H. The Biology of Belief 2008 Hay House

Palmer, W. The Intuitive Body: Discovering the Wisdom of Conscious Embodiment and Aikido 3<sup>rd</sup> ed 2008 North Atlantic Books

Palmer, W. The Practice of Freedom 2002 Rodmell Press

Riso, Don R. and Hudson, R. The Wisdom of the Enneagram: The complete guide to psychological and spiritual growth for the nine personality types 1999 Bantam Books

### References

1. <http://bigthink.com/experts-corner/how-to-rewire-your-brain-for-success?page=all>