

LAW AND THE BODY: BODY AWARENESS TRAINING FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT¹

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Legal procedures are by their very nature stressful. Courtroom and conference room confrontations over issues of life, death, property and liberty are the modern, urban equivalents of fighting off wolves in the forest. The body awareness method I use for teaching stress management and performance enhancement would be especially useful for lawyers and their clients.

I am a specialist in mind/body awareness training with a background in movement education and the martial arts. The training I have developed is based on the fact that emotions are fundamentally physical processes in the body and can therefore be controlled physically. By identifying and changing the muscular, breathing, postural and movement elements of an emotional pattern, the emotion itself can be changed. By creating a physical state of relaxation, power, sensitivity and balance, it is possible to stop doing such actions as fear, anger and confusion and instead create a mental state of calm alertness, assertiveness, sensitivity and poise.

This state of calm alertness allows people to have more confidence, think more clearly, and express themselves better. It allows lawyers to present themselves and their arguments better, and it allows clients to stay focused on the practical steps they need to take to help their cases.

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As an example of the training process, I had a client come to me for instruction because she wanted my help in learning how to stay calm and unflustered during her testimony at a particularly acrimonious divorce and child custody proceeding.

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The client — we can call her Mary — had been physically and verbally abused as a child and was in a battering marriage. The abuse she had experienced as a child taught her that she didn't have the strength to withstand either verbal or physical attacks. The marriage had confirmed her belief in her own weakness, and she was facing the prospect of being ripped apart in the divorce proceedings. She knew that in order to present her case well and gain custody of her children she would have to present herself calmly and clearly, and she also knew she didn't know how to do that.

In six one-hour sessions over the course of one month, I taught Mary how to monitor her breathing, muscle tone and posture and utilize physical methods to construct a mind/body state of calm, assertive clarity and poise that would serve as a foundation for effective presentation of her case. (It should be noted that Mary was especially determined and achieved in six lessons what individuals with her traumatic background often need much more time to learn.) After the court appearance, she told me that because of the lessons we had done, she had managed to stay in control of her feelings and give the best possible answers under pressure.

DEVELOPING CALMNESS AND STRENGTH

What gets in the way of effective performance in stressful situations? Emotional states such as fear, anger, dissociation, shock, vengefulness and so on make people incapable of thinking, speaking or acting clearly and effectively.

The first step in learning to act effectively is to develop awareness of what one is feeling, thinking and doing in the stressful situation being faced. I use movement experiments to give students an opportunity to examine their habitual responses to their challenges. Movement experiments are small scale, laboratory versions of the real threats students are facing in their lives. They are realistic enough to provoke some feelings of being disturbed, but minimal enough to be safe and easy for students to work with. Movement experiments can be as simple as talking about the problem they are facing, or they may involve complex role playing. It is in watching how students handle these tasks that we discover what they usually do in real life and how to improve that.

When I ask people to notice or describe what they do and feel as they respond in the movement experiment, they usually talk in mentalistic language, language that focuses on feelings, desires, thoughts and beliefs. I teach them how to instead report their feelings in body-based language, language which focuses on body sensations, breathing, muscle actions, and postural changes. Using body-based language in self-observation and self-reporting helps students focus on the concrete details of what they are doing and feeling.

As a general rule, people's responses to stress include restricting and tensing their breath, tensing their muscles, and stiffening and compressing their postures. This is part of the fear-startle response. Some students, instead of tensing up, respond to threats by

becoming limp and dissociated. These people have generally experienced some form of trauma and learned that their best course was to passively wait for the end of the threat.

Whether the movement experiment we are using is pitching pennies into a cup or role playing talking to an abusive spouse, students quickly realize that both tensing or getting limp are actually ineffective. They experience that they can't perceive, think, talk or act effectively when they are tense or limp. When they are tense, they waste energy in poorly controlled speech and movement. When they are limp, they are too passive for effective action. By softening, opening and balancing their bodies, students can create stronger, clearer more efficient ways of functioning. This relaxed, empowered state serves as a clear contrast to the state of tension or limpness. Breathing more fully, relaxing and energizing the muscles, balancing the posture, moving more fluidly -- this is the foundation for effective action, and this can be taught.

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There are many exercises that I use to teach this more effective mind/body state.² The exercises have profound effects on how people function, but they involve only very simple movements. As an example, one exercise involves experimenting with sitting posture. I have people move back and forth between slumping and sitting upright. Most people believe that straightening up is done by elevating the chest, throwing the shoulders back or straightening the back, and practically no one notices that straightening up is really a function of pelvic rotation. When the pelvis rotates backward, the stack of vertebrae has no foundation on which to rest and it curves and slumps down. When the pelvis rolls forward, when deep core muscles rather than superficial back muscles are used to accomplish this rotation, and when the extraneous actions of tensing the chest, shoulders and back are not added to the basic pelvic rotation -- the spinal column moves forward and up into a relaxed, stable upright sitting position. (The actual instruction in how to do this is more complex than can be conveyed in the brief space available here.)

This new sitting posture produces a surprising experience of effortless physical strength and stability. For many people, this is the first time in their lives they have ever experienced themselves as truly powerful physically. This form of body organization also produces a psychological feeling of personal power and strength of will, and this sensation of psychological power is crucial in developing a state of inner and outer ability to handle challenges.

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How would I use this kind of a movement training in preparing people to handle stressful situations? It is a process of what I call double tracking -- paying attention to both the external challenge and the internal bodily responses in a movement experiment,

² For detailed instructions on how to do the basic breathing, body awareness, and centering exercises I teach, see the file *A Downloadable Script for the Eight Core BIM Exercises* on my website, www.being-in-movement.com.

modifying the internal responses, and then on that basis dealing effectively with the external challenge.

As an example of this process, in one of Mary's lessons we worked on how she could keep calm while being verbally assaulted. I yelled at her that she was a bitch, as her husband often had done. She instantly pulled her shoulders back and together, tensed and arched her back, and held her breath. She was frozen into the fear-startle response, and it looked as though she were waiting to be hit, which her husband often did after yelling at her. We focused on mapping out her physical responses, and she was quickly able to detail what she did when I yelled at her. Then I suggested she force herself to use the methods that she had learned for relaxing and stabilizing her breathing and posture, and she did that. Once she undid the fear responses and deliberately substituted more powerful responses, she discovered she could stay relaxed, alert, and functional when I yelled at her again. She then practiced delivering appropriate assertive verbal responses to my attack until she felt confident that if she were ever yelled at again she could respond effectively.

Since she had experienced physical as well as verbal assaults, in another lesson we repeated the same process with a slap as a physical attack. I taught her enough self-defense that she was able to experience her ability to protect herself against the kind of physical abuse her husband had delivered. I wasn't teaching her a full self-defense course. I simply wanted her to experience, very concretely, that she was not helpless. In order to overcome the habit of freezing in fear, Mary had to experience in the situation of the verbal and physical assault her ability to use relaxed power for effective self-protection. That experience enabled Mary to go into court prepared and confident, and she phoned me right after her court appearance to tell me that she had succeeded in staying focused and calm.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to present themselves effectively in court or other adversarial interactions, people have to be able to discern what they are feeling and thinking. They have to discover a form of power which is relaxed, sensitive, and alert. They have to learn how to stay focused on effective action in the present rather than getting distracted by their memories of the past and their fears about what might happen in the future. All of this and more can be taught through movement experiments. By learning to pay attention to body processes, people can learn to act calmly, alertly and effectively under pressure.

Lawyers would find that undertaking body awareness lessons themselves would be helpful. They would be better able to handle contact and communication with their clients and also with judges, hostile counsel, and other hostile parties. In addition, body awareness training would help lawyers reduce the negative effects of long term stress on their mental and physical health.

Lawyers would also find that referring clients for body awareness training would be helpful. By maintaining a relaxed and focused state of mind, clients would be able to

express themselves more clearly, stay focused on their cases, and cooperate more constructively with their lawyers. The training would also enable clients to do better on the stand and better handle contacts with hostile parties. Looking at the lawyer-client relationship in a different light, lawyers are front line health care givers helping people deal with overwhelmingly stressful life situations, and body awareness training would be valuable in helping people manage stress more healthfully and ease their turmoil.

Body awareness training allows people to function in more relaxed, effective and healthful ways during their legal adventures, and it would be an invaluable addition to the resources lawyers can draw upon for their practice.

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