

**BODY AWARENESS AND EMPOWERMENT TRAINING
FOR ABUSE/ASSAULT SURVIVORS¹**
An Adjunct to Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT: Combining psychotherapy, somatic education, and martial art training is effective in helping survivors of abuse or assault. *Somatic education* focuses on teaching body awareness as a foundation for improving efficiency and effectiveness in action. An element that is a particular focus of my work is the *distress response*. When people are abused or assaulted, they typically contract or collapse their breathing, posture, movement and attention. This distress response starts as a natural result of shock and often becomes a coping strategy to reduce awareness of physical and emotional pain and of the environment. The contraction/collapse usually stays stuck in the body until it is deliberately unlearned and replaced. Through opening and stabilizing the body, clients can develop a state of calm alertness and compassionate power. *Self-defense* training provides abuse survivors the opportunity to practice utilizing this new state as a foundation for managing stress and pain, staying present under pressure, maintaining good boundaries, and developing assertiveness and self-protection. This kind of work requires the skills of a psychotherapist, a somatic educator, and a martial artist and most likely a team of three individuals.

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As a somatic educator and martial artist, I teach a broad variety of clients, from musicians and athletes, to computer users, to children with ADHD, to sexual abuse and assault survivors. In all my work, I focus on body processes for developing body awareness, calm alertness, and compassionate power as a foundation for effective action. The two modalities I use most are **Being In Movement®** mindbody education and **Aikido**, a non-violent martial art related to jujitsu.

A key element in every area of my work is helping people overcome the body's **distress response**. When people feel threatened or challenged in any way, they typically make their breathing, posture, movement, and attention small. This can take a number of forms. It may take the form of tensing and bracing as a preparation for strength and effort. It may take the similar form of tensing and hardening in anger. It may show up as stiffening and constricting in fear. It may take the form of collapsing and becoming limp in defeat and resignation. It may manifest in numbing of specific areas of the body or in an overall state of dissociation. Or elements of these can combine. All this could be summarized as the fight/flight/freeze/collapse response.

This body contraction can be seen in situations ranging from sports to job interviews to abuse or assault. However, contracting or collapsing the body reduces ease and effectiveness. People cannot function effectively, and this ineffectiveness reinforces their feelings that the challenges or threats they are facing are indeed difficult or overwhelming. Action is much more efficient and effective when the body is free and expansive, and how to develop this new body state and apply it in daily life is the focus of my teaching.

One particular area of my work concerns abuse and assault. I look at such trauma as having two intertwined elements. The first is the persistence in the body of the distress response. The distress response predisposes people to respond to many events in daily life as distressing, and this reinforces and maintains the distress response.

The second element is a learning process. People who are victims of abuse learn that they are powerless to control their environment and create safety. Since they lack the reality of safety, trauma survivors often develop coping strategies based on ways of creating the *feeling* of safety by deflecting or reducing awareness of the self and/or the environment. A key part of this reduction of awareness is the contraction of the body, which involves cutting oneself off from the body itself and from the environment. So, in the end, the distress response can become maintained as a coping strategy.

I often compare abuse with drowning. Imagine someone who fell into the water and nearly drowned. She or he is left with a tremendous fear of the water. Psychotherapy is certainly a crucial first step in the healing process. However, complete empowerment must (in this example) include the ability to swim. If the person does not learn to swim, then they are still powerless and will still feel anxious around water. Without learning to swim, the trauma cannot be healed completely. And learning to swim with gritted teeth and suppressed fear will not be enough. Learning to swim with joy is crucial. Learning to experience joy and mastery in the situation of the previously overwhelming threat—that is what will finish the recovery.

In the same way, body and action must be included in trauma recovery. An abuse survivor who has talked about the emotions involved in the abuse has begun but not finished her/his recovery. Dealing with the effects of trauma on the body is also necessary, and beyond that it is also crucial to learn to protect oneself effectively against the abusive assaults that were experienced.

I begin the process of empowerment with body awareness training. From my perspective, emotions are constellations of physical events in the body, and feelings are what those physical events feel like to the person who is experiencing them. Without being able to notice and sense the physical underpinnings of feelings, survivors will not be able to easily detect or understand what their feelings are. Without being able to sense the physical underpinnings of feelings, survivors will not be able to easily regulate them and will be subject to being triggered into waves of uncontrolled fear, anger, dissociation, and so on.

The foundation for practical empowerment is an expansive, radiant, free manner of being in the body. Widening and opening posture, breath and attention is the beginning of mastery. A concrete example will make it clearer how I work with this somatic process and how this work functions as an adjunct to psychotherapy.

One feeling/behavior that comes up very frequently in work with abuse or assault is *defensiveness*. Along with that, people often maintain a state of *hypervigilance*. Defensiveness is the emotional stance of readiness to see things as invasive and hurtful and to push back against them. Hypervigilance is the emotional/perceptual stance

of constant, anxious scanning of the world based on the expectation of threats and dangers.

When I ask a client to show me a defensive stance, the usual posture is to cross the arms and hold them against the chest or stomach, while stiffening the breathing and tensing muscles throughout the body. One of my somatic teaching strategies is to examine movements as expressive of beliefs, and this allows students to evaluate their actions in a new manner. Reframing the action as an hypothesis, we would get the statement: Creating a physical barrier is an effective way to keep from being penetrated by danger. And that makes it obvious how to evaluate or test that strategy. I simply have people stand with their arms crossed over their belly to prevent me from poking them in the belly. When they rely on stiffness, it makes them so immobile that they are unable to block a poke, and so of course I can poke them easily.

The common hypervigilant posture is one of anxious glancing in all different directions, and it's easy for people to experience that this is stiff and relatively immobile. It's a focused and narrow direction of attention, constantly shifting to take in a broad view of the surroundings. Reframing the action as an hypothesis, we would get the statement: Narrow, sharp focus is the most effective way of perceiving incoming threats. When people rely on narrow attention, it makes them so disconnected from their surroundings that again I can poke them easily.

To provide an alternative response as a comparison for both defensiveness and hypervigilance, I have people stand with their arms held up about shoulder height and wide open, while relaxing and paying almost casual attention in all directions. (Needless to say, learning how to be relaxed and at ease requires specific teaching and practice.) Then from that position, I have them try to block me when I attempt to poke them in the belly. It always comes as a great surprise to them that when their arms are relaxed and held wide and their attention is wide open, they can move swiftly and effectively to block me when I try to poke them.

As it turns out, the hypothesis that being wide open allows one to prevent being penetrated can be confirmed with tests involving a number of varied threats, anything from an actual physical punch to an insult. The commonality in all aspects of self-regulation and boundary management is that being open is necessary for effective decision-making about what to let in.

Even more counterintuitive, it is easy to demonstrate that kindness and considerate regard for the opponent sharpen perception and increase physical stability and create the physiological state which is most conducive to effectively keeping people out—or letting them in.

Once abuse survivors have learned to be aware of their bodies and how to generate effective power, they are able to open up to and make much better use of the healing methods which are part of psychotherapy. By reclaiming their bodies and their power, abuse survivors become ready and able to work on their emotional issues.

I should comment on a major difference between psychotherapy on the one hand and somatics or self-defense on the other hand: the two body disciplines make extensive use of touch. Work with touch and self-defense is not inherently unsafe or retraumatizing. It is not being touched which is traumatizing, but through inappropriate touch being made to feel powerless. Experiencing one's capacity for effective action is healing. Done in a gradual, stepwise manner, paced to the individual's learning requirements, alongside appropriate psychotherapy, such work is strengthening. Because the outcome of work with touch and self-defense is an enhanced sense of personal boundaries and efficacy, work with these modalities contributes to trauma recovery.

Somatic work is appropriate at different stages of recovery. For example, trauma survivors may be so out of touch with their feelings as to make psychotherapy difficult, and body awareness training may be necessary as a means of giving felt content to the verbal work of psychotherapy. On the other hand, trauma survivors are often not ready for the immediacy of body-centered sensory work and for the power of self-protection study. Psychotherapy would be necessary as a means of building strength for somatic work, and then the somatic work will ready survivors for their next steps in psychotherapy.

Somatic education, martial arts, and psychotherapy address different areas of human functioning and use different tools. The use of touch methods and self-defense instruction require extensive, specific training which is very different from that of psychotherapists. A team approach is usually necessary, and including both body education and self-defense alongside psychotherapy is very effective in recovery from abuse or assault.

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Most of his articles and books are downloadable at **www.being-in-movement.com**. Among them are the e-books:

- *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*

- *Winning is Healing—Basics: An Introduction to Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors.* Also available in German as *Das Lächeln der Freiheit*
- *Embodied Peacemaking: Body Awareness, Self-Regulation and Conflict Resolution*
- *Teaching Children 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.)