

A photograph of a sunset over a mountain range. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright lens flare effect. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and grey. The mountains are silhouetted against the bright sky.

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Crossing the Threshold

© Linda Graham, MFT

Whenever we're about to venture into something new - moving across country, getting married again, taking on a new job, finally fixing the leaky shower head - we often feel a hesitancy, a pull-back within. An unconscious somatic marker of "Uh oh! Strange territory! Don't know if I should be doing this!" even though, consciously, we might very well want to do this.

We can get ourselves over the somatic threshold between the comfort of the familiar and the discomfort of the new and uncertain by the effects of oxytocin - someone holding our hand or evoking the sense that someone "has our back" as we step forward into the unknown. The resonance of "calm and connect" down-regulates the cortisol of the fight-flight-freeze response to trust and ease again.

Dopamine - the neurotransmitter of pleasure and reward - is another powerful gatekeeper of crossing that threshold in our brains. Dopamine is released

Greetings

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whenever we experience something pleasurable or rewarding, triggering our wanting more of what has brought us pleasure and reward before. Dopamine is released even in anticipation of a reward, when the memory circuits “trained” by dopamine expect a reward before one has even happened. The disruption of what’s predicted, i.e., something “new”, not what we expected, switches off the dopamine and generates a slight un-ease in the body, which we can readily interpret as anxiety in the face of something foreign.

We need to know how to work skillfully with our dopamine system so that we are not stopped in our tracks every time we need to venture into new territory.

“You’re probably 99.9% unaware of dopamine release, but you’re probably 99.9% driven by the information and emotions it conveys to other parts of the brain.”

- Read Montague, Baylor University

Dopamine is fundamental to learning. Neurons that release dopamine act as prediction neurons – they release dopamine when what is expected match what actually happens. This predictability is part of what is pleasurable or rewarding to our brains. When what we expect and what actually happens match, dopamine levels stay steady; the sense of pleasure of reward is uninterrupted. We know what’s coming, we know what to expect, so our brain can relax its vigilance about what’s going to happen – good or bad. Predictability creates a sense of ease or safety in the brain, thus in our psyches, and when we enjoy that safety; we remain open and undefended.

Dopamine neurons also function as error detectors. Because dopamine neurons create memory circuits of what's expected, when something unexpected happens – anything new or different, no matter how benign - the dopamine neurons in the ventral tegmental area of the brainstem “notice” the difference and signal, through the amygdala and the thalamus of the limbic system, the neurons in the anterior cingulate cortex to pay attention. A “mistake” has been detected. (The ACC is the brain's primary structure for focusing attention and is also densely populated with dopamine neurons.) The detection of error, and the ACC's immediate focusing of attention on that error, temporarily inhibits the release of dopamine. No more goodies until we can figure out what's going on. No more moving forward until we determine it's OK to move forward. The ACC is also densely populated with spindle cells that very quickly communicate any emotional valence – including this instant unease of “error” - to all parts of the brain. According to Jonah Lehrer in *How We Decide*, neuroscientists call this capacity of our brain the “Oh, shit!” circuit.



We can so easily interpret that unease as anxiety that can automatically lead to “no” or “later”. It feels like a risk to try something new. Bill Bowen, developer of psycho-physical psychotherapy, has studied the creative process for 30 years. He suggests that our body-brains move on a continuum in the face of any new from the survival responses of fight-flight-freeze that would de-rail any positive activation completely, all the way to adaptive activation and the free flowing expression of creativity. Somewhere on that continuum there is a somatic threshold that we feel viscerally in our body, where the body-brain stops us from going forward even though consciously – mentally, emotionally, spiritually - we are ready to dive in. I.e., writer’s block; cold feet the morning of the wedding; the last-minute justification “I don’t know anybody at the party and I’m too tired anyway.” This somatic marker is the disruption of the dopamine which is letting us know, “Uh oh, this is not what was expected.” It’s not; it’s new.

In order to work skillfully with our dopamine system and get ourselves across that somatic threshold, we have to notice the marker, too. We have to recognize that it’s our somatic marker of the new, not necessarily a mistake, not necessarily dangerous. We do assess the situation with all the wise discernment of our Wise Self. Then, when the new really is about wholesome wise effort, we can consciously, deliberately choose to override the un-ease we experience when the dopamine cycle is disrupted. And we have to override the unease long enough to get us to the next experience of pleasure and reward that can then become the new predictable.

A caution here about overriding the disruption of the dopamine. Neuroscientists have identified dopamine as the neurotransmitter that makes us vulnerable to addiction. We do more and more of what has brought our brains pleasure in the past, even when it is catastrophically not good for us. Breaking an addiction means breaking the dopamine pleasure reward cycle, often by substituting the pleasure of a natural opioid (endorphins from exercise) or the sense of ease and

safety generated by oxytocin (the hormone of feeling loved and lovable).

According to neuropsychologist Gerald Huther, we can so easily get stuck in a rut, doing what we already feel competent doing, because that's what feels pleasurable and rewarding. We do want to take advantage of the dopamine system rewarding expectations being met. We learn and become very competent at more than several things. But if we can tolerate the unease of the new, we can also learn by taking advantage of the error detection capacities of the dopamine system. Learning depends just as much on our dopamine system updating the memory system of our higher brain, adjusting our expectations in light of real events.

“Unless you experience the unpleasant symptoms of being wrong, your brain will never revise its models. Learning is rooted in the predictions of highly flexible (dopamine) brain cells which are constantly adjusting their connections to reality. Every time you make a mistake or encounter something new, your brain cells are busy changing themselves.



Dopamine turns a negative feeling into a teachable moment. Over time, the brain's flexible cells become the source of expertise."

- Jonah Lehrer, How We Decide

Stable is good. Predictability and reliability are very good. Resourcing ourselves by remembering where we already feel competent is very, very good. Developing the resilience to recover our stability and competence when the new goes awry is extremely good. And, honestly, sometimes we know we don't have the energy to do one more new thing today, or this week, or in this direction. We're saturated and really need respite and renewal before we move forward again. We can be mindful and self-compassionate in choosing the timing for crossing a threshold.

But sometimes we can talk ourselves out of trying a new entrée at a new restaurant in a new city, or visiting a foreign country, or venturing into the "foreign-ness" of a new career or the intimacy of a new relationship. Sometimes we have to talk ourselves into moving forward. Previous experiences of moving into something new and feeling the reward of succeeding in that new can help us "trick" our brains into anticipating that this next new experience will feel good, too. Role models who show us the positives of the new possibilities can help us get across that threshold. Louis Cozolino lists "52 Ways to Avoid Hardening of the Categories" in his *Healthy Aging Brain*. We deliberately seek the new to stimulate the growth of new neurons in our brains as we age, and become comfortable in that practice.

Exercises to Practice

Jack Kornfield, clinical psychologist, co-founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, and author of *Wise Heart*, teaches that any time we mindfully notice anxiety, we can whisper to ourselves, "About to grow!" May these exercises help you learn to find ease in risk and move reliably cross the threshold into the new.

1. Noticing the error message as a teachable moment.

Dopamine sends its signals of both reward and error rapidly, outside of our awareness, 24/7. With mindfulness practice, we become more and more adept at catching those signals and bringing them to consciousness. Indeed, research has demonstrated that mindfulness practice specifically strengthens the functioning of the anterior cingulate cortex, which is how we can focus attention on anything. And the ACC is saturated with dopamine neurons – the locus of the “Oh, shit!” circuit.



Mindfulness allows us to notice the “feeling” of error, the unease of “what’s wrong?” and to hold that moment of unease without reactivity, without impulsively doing something to “fix it.” Mindfulness allows us to tolerate the sensation of the error without having to believe the story of the error. This noticing and holding is what slows down the processing of the error long enough to allow it to become a teachable moment.

There are no mistakes when there is learning.

- Julia Butterfly Hill

2. Assessing

We then have time to consciously assess – is this unease that I’m experiencing on the brink of this new a valid warning of danger? Or am I actually experiencing excitement, passion, enthusiasm which I could interpret as trepidation if I’m not accustomed to it? (When our sympathetic nervous system revs us up to take action, either through fear or through excitement, the feeling of both in the body can be remarkably similar and we need to cultivate our capacity to discern which is which.) Now that the moment has my attention, what am I noticing? Am I mobilized here to act from fear or from purpose? To survive or to thrive? Is it safe, appropriate, growthful to move forward and cross this threshold? (Frankly, the more resourced we are, with people who believe in us, with role models to show us possibilities, with a track record of previously successful crossings, the easier it is for our body to let our mind cross any threshold, especially high-stakes thresholds.)

3. Choosing

In order to keep growing, we have to keep overcoming the anxiety that precedes crossing a threshold, quicken our courage, and choose to cross. If we can trust

our dopamine system to continue to detect errors and course correct, if we remain open to that course correction and allow new adjustments to new realities every step of the way, we can transform every moment into a teachable moment. Developing that capacity often brings its own reward, and keeps our brains flexible and growing, too. We can learn that skillfully crossing a threshold,

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venturing into the new, does bring reliable reward and pleasure. We can learn to trust the crossing of the threshold. We can expand our horizons and fulfill the potential of our lives. We can become comfortable with the unknown; we can learn to find ease in risk.

*To exist is to change; to change is to mature; to mature is to go on creating one's self
endlessly.*

- Henri Bergson

Poetry and Quotes to Inspire

*Not where you have already attained mastery should you exert yourself further, but there
where such mastery has still yet to appear.*

- Chinese proverb

*You can judge your age by the amount of pain you feel when you come in contact with a
new idea.*

- Pearl S. Buck



It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.

- Alan Cohen

Take the whole kit with the caboodle.

Experience life; don't deplore it.

Shake hands with time; don't kill it.

Open a lookout; dance on a brink;

Run with your wildfire.

You are closer to your glory

leaping an abyss

than upholstering a rut.

- James Broughton

Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death.

- Anais Nin

New ideas stir from every corner. They show up disguised innocently as interruptions, contradictions, and embarrassing dilemmas. Beware of total strangers and friends alike who shower you with comfortable sameness, and remain open to those who make you uneasy, for they are the true messengers of the future.

- Rob Lebow

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Mindfulness and the Body: An Introduction to Psoma Yoga

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For almost twenty years I worked closely with the late Ron Kurtz who created the Hakomi Method . For twenty years before that I was practicing and teaching yoga as mindfulness-based self discovery, what I originally called Remembering Wholeness.

My approach is now called psoma yoga, and is the integration of yoga and Hakomi.

Ron Kurtz worked for awhile with Moshe Feldenkrais, whose approach to “awareness through movement” inspired and informed Kurtz’ development of Hakomi. The idea of a learning approach and freedom through self awareness rather than a diagnosis and treatment model, the principle of non-forcing and non violence, the idea of being experimental and paying attention with mindful awareness, these are all characteristics of both Feldenkrais and Hakomi.

I recently came across the book, *Move into Life*, by Anat Baniel who trained with Moshe Feldenkrais and subsequently developed her own approach based on her extensive experience. In her book, she identifies nine “essentials” for vitality. They are:

1. Movement with attention
2. The Learning Switch
3. Subtlety
4. Variation

5. Slow
6. Enthusiasm
7. Flexible goals
8. Imagination and dreams
9. Awareness

Baniel writes brilliantly in *Move into Life* about her unique approach and the significance of these nine essentials. I highly recommend reading it for her interpretation of these essentials in her own work. I won't try to explain her approach here, but rather I will refer to these same "essentials" as some of the key ingredients in my approach to psoma yoga therapy.

1. Moving with Attention

Recent studies in neuroscience make a strong case for this. The amazing plasticity of the brain and its capacity to change throughout our life supports the argument



for paying attention to what we're doing. Physical changes occur in the nervous system when experience is coupled with attention (Merzenich). PET scans show that repetition with attention of a particular movement causes measurable changes in the brain. New sensory motor maps are created as are new connections between brain cells. More geography of the brain is assigned to the movement (an example being the size of the fingertips area in the brains of Braille readers.) Amazing results with paralysis from stroke are proving that the brain changes and recovers muscle and movement function following a stroke if the person pays attention to the sensations of the movements done in rehab. Without attention, the results are minimal.

In psoma yoga we not only want to pay attention. We want to practice a certain quality of attention in all we do, whether it is traditional yoga asanas, or ordinary experiences, like walking, listening, eating, or sitting still. The attention we practice (mindfulness in Hakomi) is a curious, nonjudgmental, non-striving quality of attention, full of what is called maitri in Buddhism, a kind of unconditional friendliness toward oneself and others.

Ron Kurtz recognized a particular quality of attention he called "loving presence" which is essential for therapists but also a powerful practice in any relationship. This state of mind moves us out of a paradigm of right and wrong, self improvement, fixing or correcting, forcing or even desiring change. Pema Chodron points out that even our desire to change is a subtle form of violence toward ourselves. As therapists, we play with the paradox of accepting things as they are and participating creatively in change, which is inevitable.

In a psoma yoga practice, we might begin by paying this kind of attention to how our body is organized in one of the four "noble actions" - the four positions that the Buddha identified as meditation postures: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. We start with a body scan, perhaps lying on our back, and notice the relationship of our body to the ground, how the right side seems different from the left, where we can feel our breath moving, whether one arm or leg seems longer or shorter than the other, heavier or lighter, more or less dense. We are simply paying

attention with gentle curiosity, and without judging or trying to change anything. After this, we move into an asana or a movement sequence, and then lie down again to just notice what - if anything - seems different.

The point is to turn mindful attention to whatever is happening. The teacher or therapist's role is to draw our attention to aspects of our present experience that we might not otherwise notice. Experience is organized by habits which are inevitably limiting. Since even the way we pay attention is organized by habits, the psoma yoga therapist or teacher points out something that is outside of our habitual awareness and helps to expand the possibilities of what we can be aware of. It's not about doing it right but simply about opening to more possibilities.



2. *The Learning Switch*

Having a learning model, rather than a model of fixing or correcting, is essential to the practice of psoma yoga and to the positive changes we can produce in our brain and nervous system. We want to cultivate a quality of attention based on simple beginner's mind curiosity. Motivated by a desire to be more aware of our habits, we turn a kind of friendly attention toward the way we do things in order to discover the automatic behaviors and underlying assumptions that

limit us. This way of paying attention has a gentle kind quality; we are curious without judging, genuinely interested but not attached to what we discover. We know that this practice brings choice and freedom through consciousness.

This practice is a learning journey and we stay open to the mystery of wholeness as it unfolds, confident that whatever we discover might hold the key to possibilities that we cannot predict. The wonderful discoveries in neuroscience about neurogenesis - the plasticity of the brain and its capacity to learn and grow throughout life - support the power of this learning model at any age.

By the end of his life, Kurtz, who was trained as a scientist, was calling Hakomi: mindfulness-based assisted self discovery. To the degree that we are on automatic, organized by old habits and beliefs that are non conscious, we are not free. As Moshe Feldenkrais used to say, we cannot do what we want until we know what we are already doing.

3. Subtlety

A key principle in Hakomi is non-violence, or ahimsa in yoga. In psoma yoga we practice not trying to make something happen. We participate in the unfolding process without trying to control it, and stay curious about two things. What's happening now and what wants to happen...?

There is a law in physics called the Weber-Fechner law. It talks about the kind of sensitivity that can take in information even when it is very very subtle. This is what is called the signal to noise ratio. Ron Kurtz used to describe it, in his typically brilliant and funny way, like this: you are talking to your grandmother on the phone. But there is a lot of static. You can barely hear your grandmother. So you call the telephone repair man (Ron grew up in a different era!) So the phone man comes over and tries to listen to the static. When you were talking to your grandmother, her voice was the signal and the static was the noise, but the phone man wants to hear the static so for him the noise is your grandmother...

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

(Then, after a pause, Ron would add: it just goes to show you...one man's noise is another man's grandmother!)

When we are paying attention to our body, the signals may be very subtle,

unless we have ignored them for so long they have become pain. When the signals are subtle we need a high level of sensitivity in how we pay attention. Then we can use very small changes to gather information. Changing one thing very slightly when we are paying attention with mindful awareness can evoke a strong reaction and generate a lot of information about our habits.

Only with this kind of sensitive attention, and a curiosity about what happens, are we able to notice, in the practice of psoma yoga, the subtlest signals that carry the most information about how we are organized in ways that are so implicit that they are usually outside of conscious awareness.

4. Variations

Psoma yoga therapy, like Hakomi, involves experimenting in mindfulness. There is an important distinction between changing something about posture or how we move as a correction, on the one hand, or making a change as an experiment in mindfulness for self discovery on the other. In the first we are inevitably setting up a struggle between an old habit and a new pattern. The result is usually resistance. Old habits want to persist and will react to attempts to force a change by holding on even more tightly.

We can learn something from Hakomi about old patterns, whether they are

movement patterns or postural habits or even relational styles. When a habitual pattern is connected with a belief, it is unlikely to change unless the belief is brought into consciousness. We have beliefs, for example about the person we think we are, or need to be to get our needs met. We have beliefs about the kind of world or reality we imagine we are living in, and what to expect or not expect from it. We have beliefs about how to behave and how to relate and what to expect or not expect from others. Since our brain is shaped by experience, our past tends to keep us living in a kind of virtual reality that sometimes has very little to do with present conditions.

Beliefs are over generalized and usually outside of conscious awareness. By

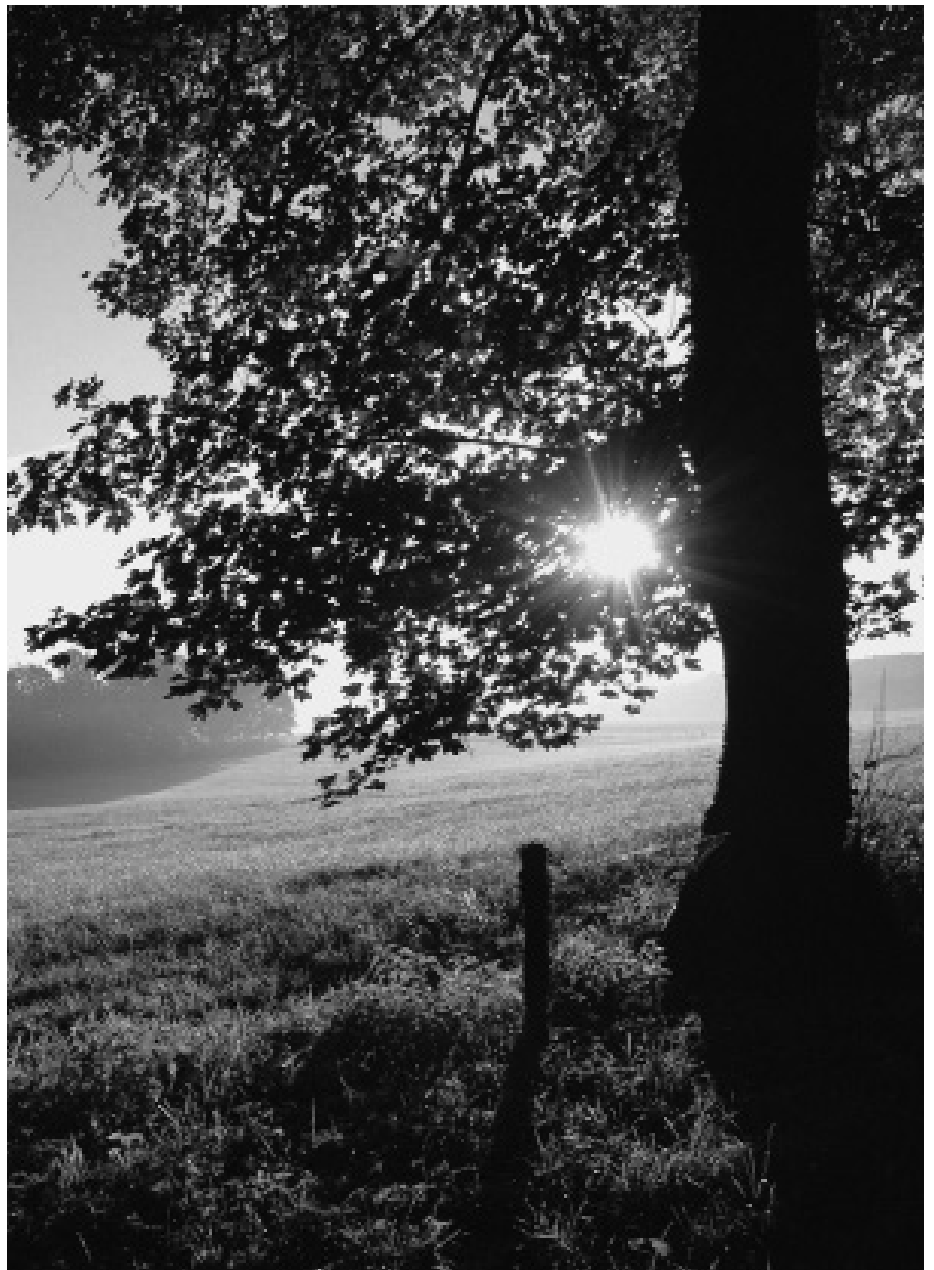
suggesting something, verbally and nonverbally, that contradicts an old belief, we can bring them into consciousness.

Then we can review and update them if necessary.

Old beliefs are almost always limiting and frequently cause unnecessary suffering.

Until we become aware of them, however, they persist as unconscious ways of being, and of moving through life.

We perpetuate our old reality by organizing bodily as if the old reality is still true. Until we have an awareness of



what we are doing, and of a viable and nourishing new possibility, nothing really changes.

I love the old Peanuts comic strip where Charlie Brown says, “This is my depressed stance. When you’re depressed, it makes a lot of difference how you stand. The worst thing you can do is straighten up and hold your head high because then you’ll start to feel better. If you’re going to get any joy out of being depressed, you’ve got to stand like this.”

Experimenting in mindfulness gives our brain, nervous system, and body a range of alternatives. With enough experimenting and the right kind of attention, the whole system will typically choose the most efficient and effective option. This proves to be far more successful than trying to force a change or simply repeating a new pattern over and over.

5. Slow down

Athletes know they can perform more effectively if they practice at first slowly. Musicians slow down to learn a new piece. Learning a language requires slowing down and practicing words and phrases slowly. The brain needs us to slow down in order to acquire the new information needed for learning or performing anything new.

Our mind also needs us to slow down to come more fully into the present moment. In psoma yoga, as in Hakomi, we invite the client to study a habitual gesture or movement slowly in mindfulness in order to find out more about it. What else goes with that gesture... What does your body seem to be saying... What is your body remembering...? We allow the slow mindful experience of the movement to offer us answers to these questions rather than trying to figure them out.

Here’s an example: I noticed a characteristic head position with Sam... He looked at

me with his head turned slightly to one side. I invited Sam to start with his head in this characteristic position and then very slowly turn his head to face me directly. As he did so he was amazed to feel intensely vulnerable. He appeared quite child-like. Very gently I said, as an experiment, “Sam, you can trust me.” Tears came as he suddenly realized how he’d been longing to trust someone. His habitual head position had kept him in a virtual reality where no one was trustworthy. By very slowly moving his head from that old position to a new one, he could access the significance of his posture and the underlying beliefs associated with it. Moving slowly allows us to pay attention to the fine small details of whatever we are doing and creates a space in our field of awareness where something significant can come into consciousness.

6. *Enthusiasm*

Enthusiasm is perhaps the feeling most opposite depression. It shows up as a completely different neurological state with more left than right prefrontal



activation. (Siegel). Research at the University of North Carolina has shown that people who have at least three positive experiences for every negative one are more likely to flourish in life, with more satisfying relationships and jobs.

Cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien has found four universal addictions: perfection, knowing, intensity, and focusing on what's wrong or missing. This last has become a cultural norm and is the way many of us have been conditioned to look at ourselves. The medical model training of many therapists also generates this diagnostic way of looking at clients. Research (reported in the *Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy*) now supports a more positive approach.

As psoma yoga therapists, as in Hakomi, we practice “loving presence”, a state in which we feel inspired, enthusiastic, appreciative. It arises from noticing something about the client that is a source of inspiration and nourishment for us...something that moves us. We can find this in anyone when we are looking in a particular way. Everyone has within them some kind of strength or resource or beauty.



As therapists, seeing a client this way does two things - it relaxes us with the reassurance that this person, no matter how much he is struggling or suffering, has the resources he needs to thrive. And our demeanor reflects back to the client a reminder of his own strengths. This might register consciously or unconsciously, but is perhaps the single most valuable benefit he gets from being with us.

Repeated practice of anything can cultivate a new habit to replace an old one. The practice of loving presence involves moving intentionally through four steps that tend to set up the conditions for this state of mind to arise spontaneously.

The four steps in the practice of loving presence are: first, becoming aware of what we are doing that is habitual, such as looking for what's wrong, or asking questions. The second step is to interrupt these habits and create a quiet open space where more is possible. From this open spacious mind, we look beyond the surface to the person behind the story. We search for sources of inspiration. We generate a kind of enthusiasm about what is possible, what treasures we might collaboratively discover. In the fourth step, we simply let ourselves be nourished by the whole experience of being with this person. We become receptive, relaxed and open to receiving what we call "non ego-centered nourishment".

This might seem like a radical idea for therapists or helpers generally...to allow ourselves to receive something from the person we are supposed to be helping. It turns out that this state creates the ideal context for the other person to have a healing experience.

7. *Flexible goals*

The integrated mind, reports Dan Siegel, is balanced between the two extremes of rigidity and chaos. This allows for maximum responsiveness and creativity. When the body, like the mind, is chaotic, efficient function is limited. When the body is too rigid, like the mind, our range of motion is hampered. So, too, can our practice become too rigid or too chaotic, and so dis-integrate. If we are too loose,

we lose structure and nothing happens. Too much rigidity and we simply reinforce all the neuropathways and patterns that already organize our habits and keep us on automatic.

Holding loosely to our goals in yoga and in therapy allows for more possibilities of success. Buddhism teaches how attachment (rigidity) is the cause of unnecessary suffering. Holding very loosely the intention, in psoma yoga as a personal practice, to become more consciously embodied, we let go of specific goal-setting around getting stronger or more flexible, or even healthier, all of which are possible results from a yoga practice. Rather we put our attention on the journey, not the destination. We notice changes but we let go of judging them as good or better, right or wrong, success or failure. We engage whole-heartedly in the practice without trying to make anything happen. We simply observe what does happen. We will become more integrated, embodied, and connected, but we are willing to allow that to occur in ways we cannot predict or control.

In psoma yoga therapy, a similar letting go happens. We have an intention to support someone but we give up the need to control this process or know what



needs to happen. We enter into the journey with a willingness to explore rather than to reach a certain end result, open to the unfolding of what wants to happen.

It is a humbling and sacred role, as psoma yoga therapist or teacher, to be a supportive companion to others on this healing journey. Cultivating an experimental attitude is part of this shift. We enter into the sacred mystery of the journey without assumptions and attachments getting in the way of how it wants to unfold.

8. *Imagine and dream*

Our brains have the wonderfully paradoxical capacity to learn habits and develop automatic reactions, which help us function, and also to be creative and responsive, open to new untested possibilities. There is much research now that shows that the mere fantasy of doing a movement or action triggers the brain in the same way as actually performing the action. Athletes use this way of imagining to achieve measurable training benefits. Imagining and dreaming of possibilities we haven't experienced before opens us to the real possibility of something new. Researcher Pacual-Leone says that "the brain changes with anything you do, including any thought you have."

To imagine and dream is to move beyond the limitations of what we know and to travel in the dimension of the unknown. We have habits to help us function, but to the degree that we are on automatic, reacting rather than responding creatively to the present moment, we are not truly vibrantly alive or free.

Our aliveness depends on our willingness to stay open, to imagine and even dream of a life beyond what we have known. In *Buddha's Brain*, Rick Hanson states that suffering is an embodied experience. In psoma yoga therapy there is an invitation to stay open to new possibilities and to be willing to embrace mystery. We are helping others to imagine and find and experience new possibilities for positive and nourishing embodied experiences, beyond what their old realities have allowed.

We assist them to stay open, to consider something new, to turn a dream of what might be possible into a new reality.

9. *Awareness*

The human brain, unlike any other species, has the capacity to be aware of being aware. We know now that the mind and the brain are two different entities.

(Jeffrey Schwartz) Much research now indicates that mindfulness practices help the healthy functioning of our brain, our mind, our body, and our relationships (Siegel).

Mindful awareness is not simply a matter of noticing present experience. It is also noticing that we're noticing. Consciousness, according to Damasio , begins as the "feeling of what happens when we see or hear or touch". (We could add, when we move.)



In psoma yoga we are practicing paying attention in new ways and cultivating an awareness, not just of that we are moving and how we are moving, but also of how we are noticing. All of experience is organized by habits, including how we pay attention. Paying attention to our moment-to-moment experience is going to be limited to the habitual ways we have learned to observe. We are only going to be noticing what we are in the habit of noticing. The role of a psoma yoga teacher or therapist is to invite us to pay attention in new ways, and to become curious about who is noticing, not just about what we are noticing. Consciousness is choice and choice is freedom. The difference between being reactive, on the one hand, and responsive on the other is ultimately about whether or not we can be awake enough to move through life with true aliveness, creativity, and vitality.

As a yoga teacher for forty years, I found myself telling students that what they were noticing was less important than that they were noticing. Also I repeatedly heard myself say that the way we do things is the way we do things... Not very poetic, but true. When we pay attention to how we are observing ourselves and others, and begin to experiment with other ways, we open to other realms of possibilities and experiences.

Freedom from the constraints of some of our habitual reactions and unconscious beliefs can open us to the possibility of more joyful aliveness. This is liberation.

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Donna Martin has been practicing and teaching yoga since 1970. She is also an international Hakomi trainer (mindfulness-based experiential psychotherapy). For twenty years, Donna worked closely with the late Ron Kurtz, creator of the Hakomi Method. Psoma yoga therapy, which integrates Hakomi, mindfulness, and yoga, is her original approach. You can reach her at www.donnamartin.net, www.reflectivepresence.com or via email, psomadonna@gmail.com



Skillful Means

The [Skillful Means](#) Wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more. The following meditation practices can assist in centering oneself in a natural state of calm and contentment.

Grounding

Purpose / Effects

Modern life is so complex and busy that it is common for people to feel overly mental, caught up in too much thinking, “revved up,” worried, spacey, or even “disembodied.” Under such conditions, the world begins to seem flat, two dimensional, lifeless, adversarial, and painful.

Luckily there is a quick cure for this feeling, which is to get “grounded.”

Grounding means to bring awareness back into the body, back into the senses, and back into the present. These three things -- the body, the senses, and the present -- are the keys to reigniting creativity, passion, love, connection, peace, and wellbeing.

Grounding is also very easy to do.

Method

Summary

Sit still and connect with your body and your senses.

Long Version

1. Find a comfortable sitting posture. Your back should be straight and your body relaxed.
2. Close your eyes, and take ten slow, deep, full breaths. With each exhale, imagine that you are breathing out all your worries and cares.
3. Continuing to breathe deeply, concentrate on feeling your feet. Simply see if you can feel the sensations in the bottoms of your feet. Do this before moving on to the next step.
4. Now see if you can feel the sensations in your hands. Can you feel your palms tingling? Do this before moving on to the next step.



5. Keep breathing deeply. Continue to feel the sensations in your hands and feet. Do this for ten slow breaths.

6. Now see if you can feel the sensations in your whole body. Let your awareness cover your entire body at once. Feel yourself breathing. Feel your butt on the floor (or chair). Do this for ten more breaths.

7. Continue you this for as long as you like, or at least 5 minutes.

History

This grounding exercise is a combination of many similar exercises. It is a quick, basic mindfulness practice that will get you in touch with your sensory experience the present moment.

Basic Relaxation Meditation

Purpose / Effects

Stress is an extremely unhealthy condition. It causes the body to release the chemical cortisol, which has been shown to reduce brain and organ function, among many other dangerous effects. Modern society inadvertently encourages a state of almost continuous stress in people.

This is a meditation that encourages physical and mental relaxation, which can greatly reduce the effects of stress on the body and mind.

Method

Summary

Concentrate on one small area of the body and relax it. Do this with each area of

the body. Once you have covered the entire body, repeat the process.

Long Version

Take a reposed, seated posture. Your back should be straight and your body as relaxed as possible.

Now bring your attention to one small area of your body; for example, your left foot. Feel with your body any tension there may be in the foot. Say (in your mind) the word, “relax,” and allow the foot to relax. Don’t force it. Simply allow it to let go as best it can.

Next move on to another body part, for example, the right foot. Repeat the process of saying the word, “relax”, and allowing the body part to relax.

Work with each part of the body in turn. Do this very slowly, gently, and with



great openness. Do not force yourself to relax, or induce any strain. Do not get upset if a certain area will not relax all the way. Simply accept that it has relaxed as best it can, and move on.

Also, do not attempt to move around, adjusting or massaging the body parts in an attempt to relax them. This is a motionless meditation, in which the stress in the body is just let go of, rather than manipulated away.

Remember to really feel into each body part, noticing how it actually feels, and paying particular attention to any bit of it that feels like it “wants” to let go of tension.

Once you have covered the entire body, you can either repeat the process as many times as you wish, or consider yourself done for now.

History

This is a basic version of several standard Indian meditation practices for letting go of physical tension.

It can be considered to be a seated, simple variation on Indian yoga nidra practice. [Here is a full version of yoga nidra.](#)

Caution

This technique can make you very sleepy. It may be better not to operate machinery immediately after doing this meditation. Do not do it while driving.

Notes

This meditation also be done lying down or before going to bed. It is a very good way to fall asleep.

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.